



# Journal of European Periodical Studies

an online journal by ESPRit, European Society for Periodical Research

Review of Doris Lechner, *Histories for the Many: The Victorian Family Magazine and Popular Representations of the Past: The Leisure Hour, 1852–1870* (2017)

Samuel Saunders

*Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 3.2 (Winter 2018)

ISSN 2506-6587

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence

The *Journal of European Periodical Studies* is hosted by Ghent University

Website: [ojs.ugent.be/jeps](https://ojs.ugent.be/jeps)

---

To cite this article: Samuel Saunders, review of Doris Lechner, *Histories for the Many: The Victorian Family Magazine and Popular Representations of the Past: The Leisure Hour, 1852–1870* (2017), *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 3.2 (Winter 2018), 55–57

---

# Reviews

**Doris Lechner, *Histories for the Many: The Victorian Family Magazine and Popular Representations of the Past: The Leisure Hour, 1852–1870* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017). 340 pp. ISBN 978-3-8376-3711-3**

Doris Lechner's *Histories for the Many: The Victorian Family Magazine and Popular Representations of the Past* (2017) is, firstly and most importantly, an innovative study into an intriguing yet underexplored aspect of nineteenth-century journalism — namely periodicals' interpretation and use of the past for specific social or cultural purposes. This is an intriguing question to which surprisingly few periodical scholars have devoted critical attention. Nineteenth-century periodicals are infamous for their engagement with wider history as a means of promoting their own ideologies, yet this remains a sparsely-populated critical field with much fertile ground for systematic analysis.

'Systematic analysis' is an excellent place to begin this review of Lechner's book. It is a meticulously researched and well-organised volume, which uses the *Leisure Hour* (1852–1905) as a case study to examine the ways in which different mid-Victorian periodicals engaged with the past for specific purposes. Published by the Religious Tract Society, Lechner argues that the *Leisure Hour* made use of the past for alternative purposes to some of its competitors. The volume works through numerous examples of articles from each of the magazines it scrutinises, and accurately uses these to highlight the distinctions in purpose between the *Leisure Hour* and its journalistic contemporaries, specifically the *London Journal*, *Good Words* and the *Cornhill*.

In broad structural terms, *Histories for the Many* is organised into two distinct parts, with Part 1 focusing on the *Leisure Hour*'s position within the wider periodical marketplace of the 1850s and 1860s, and

Part 2 looking at the interplay between periodical and serialisation, as well as authorship and textual construction. This is a comprehensive, welcome new historicist approach which provides effective contextualisation of the *Leisure Hour* itself from multiple perspectives. Each individual chapter also provides a highly useful 'Overview' section, which is a brief and concise guide to the overall arguments in each chapter and provides some good scaffolding for connecting the arguments of Lechner's thesis. The overviews are easy to refer to if necessary, although their presence does lead towards some light repetition later on.

Part 1 effectively places the *Leisure Hour* in and among its contemporaries, considers it within the larger context of a rapidly-developing periodical marketplace across the 1850s and 1860s, and compares these various magazines' changing uses of the past for their own specific purposes. Lechner broadly suggests that the *Leisure Hour* acted as an intermediary between 'religious' and 'secular' writing, and that its use of the past reflected its desire to provide moral or religious instruction to readers, but to still provide the same entertainment value as popular secular periodicals which tended to produce entertaining and often sensationalised fiction designed to sell as many copies as possible. This part of the study is well-structured, arguing that the *Leisure Hour*'s use of the past, in the 1850s at least, was motivated by providing the same kind of narrative-based reading as other periodicals which simply used sensational fiction. Lechner suggests that the *Leisure Hour* used adapted renditions of history to provide religious

or moral-based narratives to readers, in the same way as other periodicals — particularly such as the *London Journal* — simply printed fiction to provide cheap entertainment. This is a convincing argument, backed up with some excellent examples of contemporary mid-Victorian correspondence and articles taken directly from the magazine itself purporting to use adapted historical narrative to provide a (sometimes concealed) religious or moral message to potential readers, whilst simultaneously appealing to their desire for popular and entertaining fiction.

The volume progresses to engage with the *Cornhill* and *Good Words* in the latter stages of Part 1. This is a strong section which highlights how the *Leisure Hour* reacted to the changing periodical landscape of the 1860s. Chapter 4 gives particular focus to the importance and presence of illustrations in the three magazines, particularly from what Lechner terms a ‘person-centred’ perspective. All three of the publications under discussion here, argues Lechner, included a significant amount of person-centred, non-fiction history which were often accompanied by illustrations. Lechner thus examines the interplay between text and visual image at work in each of these periodicals, concluding that each followed a different ‘agenda’ in their use of the past from this perspective.

Part 2 of the volume is slightly shorter than Part 1, and zooms in on the *Leisure Hour* itself by shifting its gaze away from the wider periodicals marketplace and towards a more ethereal exploration of the interplay between books, periodicals and the concept of serialisation. Chapter 5 examines the interaction between the periodical and book format, and specifically looks at series published in the *Leisure Hour* which were turned into books, or vice versa — books which informed historical series published in the magazine. This adds a helpful, second contextual dimension to the *Leisure Hour* itself, building on the work done in Part 1 and further situating the magazine in and amongst its contemporary

literary culture. The sixth and final chapter explores the ways in which academic explorations of history were produced and adapted by the magazines contributors, using John Stoughton (1807–97) as an extended case-study to examine how this was done. This is an interesting, engaging, and relatively innovative way to round off the volume, exploring the tensions between ‘academic’ and ‘popular’ history and the ways it was adapted in order to present it to a ‘family’ audience.

*Histories for the Many* makes very convincing overall arguments. The volume concludes that the *Leisure Hour* used history for a variety of interesting purposes, firstly to simultaneously reach both working-class audiences and middle-class supporters of the Religious Tract Society, secondly that periodicals’ use of the past differed depending on the medium through which it was disseminated among their audiences, and finally (and most importantly of all) that the *Leisure Hour* acted as an intermediary between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ publications.

Whilst the volume overall is very strong in terms of its structure and argument, there are a few very minor methodological issues. In Part 1, the volume’s conscious selection of titles for comparison with the *Leisure Hour* — the *London Journal*, *Good Words* and the *Cornhill* — are certainly effective and relevant, but they could have been more comprehensively justified to the reader to solidify this methodological approach. Lechner effectively highlights how each of these titles can be compared to the *Leisure Hour*, suggesting that the *London Journal* was its ‘secular opponent’, that *Good Words* was more fervently religious, and the *Cornhill* was more overtly secular, but this actual act of justification is relatively brief and could have been made slightly more convincing. This could perhaps be done by exploring contemporary connections between them, or looking at whether each magazine consciously demonstrated awareness of each other’s activities.

A second, very minor issue surrounds the volume's light treatment of wider political context. The volume's opening highlights the significant changes experienced by the periodical marketplace throughout the 1840s, 1850s and early 1860s very well, particularly with regard to the expansion of the 'family magazine' genre of periodical (see Chapter 2). Yet it largely disregards this trend's connections with wider political events which affected development of a larger periodicals marketplace, such as the progress of the Chartist movement, and the steady easing, leading to the eventual complete abolition, of the various 'taxes on knowledge' between 1855 and 1861. In most cases this is not a vastly important issue, as the political landscape of the periodicals market is plainly not Lechner's concern. However, this would have provided readers with some context and references to the popularity of some papers. For example, *Reynolds's Miscellany*, founded in 1846 by the prominent Chartist G. W. M. Reynolds (who also worked on the *London Journal*) and which frequently included political edges to its content, can at least be in part related to these political changes. Thus, the volume's omission of discussion surrounding the political influences which helped to shape the mid-century periodical marketplace feels like a slight oversight on Lechner's part.

On the other hand, *Histories for the Many* does exceptionally well to approach periodical studies in a new, interesting and original way which uses the nineteenth century press as a resource as well as an object of study in of itself. This methodological approach to periodicals is rapidly becoming a popular way of

studying the past, seemingly largely due to the advent of enormous repositories of digitised resources. In recent years these have become increasingly comprehensive and easily accessible to vast numbers of researchers, and we can now start to re-evaluate our conclusions about nineteenth century journalism and its relationship with wider aspects of Victorian society. This is something we should certainly begin doing more consciously, as it opens up new approaches to understanding and consideration of the knowledge we might already possess (or assume we possess), and thus research subjects and objects could potentially be revisited using this approach. *Histories for the Many* does precisely that, and uses the vast amount of resources available to periodical scholars to not only study particular titles, publications, circulation rates, authors and editors, but to apply this thinking to wider ideologies and cultural movements. *Histories for the Many* is, therefore, a valuable contribution to several different and distinct scholarly fields. The most obvious of these is periodical studies; however, it's also an important step in the wider study of Victorian cultural history, and from a methodological perspective it does very well to utilise periodicals as both object of study and as a wider resource. The volume also shows how further work is needed in this area, in particular the use of periodicals to study cultural history. These types of revisionist studies could potentially lead to further knowledge which would enrich our understanding of nineteenth century culture.

Samuel Saunders  
Liverpool John Moores University