

Hilliard, Christopher. *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. v+336. Hardcover, \$37.00

The notion of censorship is an issue that has been of grave concern to global citizens in the West for most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Countries that pride themselves on their foundational pieces of freedom find the overall concept of censorship rather offensive as it essentially means that individuals do not have the freedom of speech that they thought they should have in accordance with their country's founding and constitution. Americans, for example, have the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech; or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (Freedom of the Press Overview, n.d.). But, censorship continues to be something that governments ponder because not all speech is supportive or appropriate to protect the freedoms of individuals. Christopher Hilliard's new book, *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England*, traces the history of a British law called "English Obscenity law"—which, as Hilliard explains, has threads that took root in the Victorian period in England.

Many scholars note that various philosophies or themes have roots in other areas of history—particularly as people start to think about new ideas and how these new ideas may connect with something of the past. For Hilliard, the politics of censorship begins in Victorian times with the English Obscenity Law. He writes, "[It] is a book about how ideas twist across time—beneath the clearcut date ranges in the chapter titles run longer and overlapping temporal arcs—and through different spheres of human activity. It shows how offensive publications crystallized questions of culture, freedom, and order for censors and their opponents, jurists,

artists, and ordinary people” (p. 17). Hilliard writes, “English Obscenity Law bore the imprint of Victorian debates about literacy and citizenship” (p. 10)—but would also go beyond this. He adds, “Censorship has been an arena where ordinary people and officials alike wrestled with social change—from the growth of literacy and democracy to second-wave feminism and gay rights, multiculturalism, and the impact of the Internet” (p. 10). Hilliard wrote, “The question of how wisely working men used their literacy intertwined with the question of how responsible they would be as voters” (p. 10). Hilliard also explains the various pieces and influential factors—including activism—that also impacted these concepts. Thus, there were many threads that the Obscenity Law would impact Victorian England and beyond. Hilliard’s book traces these concepts from the Victorian period until the late 1970s.

Hilliard’s book “draws extensively on a wide range of archives,” including books, theater, and film censorship (p. 18). The book follows the time period of “1857 to 1979, from the first Obscene Publications Act to the Williams Report; the Conclusion surveys developments since 1979” (p. 18). The book is eight chapters, with the first half focusing on Victorian themes of censorship and citizenship, while the second half of the book emphasizes what Hilliard calls “pluralistic culture” (p. 18). Hilliard’s book includes a number of popular culture references that only add to the narrative of censorship and the obscenity law in the United Kingdom. Hilliard cleverly writes, “The social mission of public morals measures has contracted as deference and conformity have declined and as rights and freedoms have been recognized more formally. Censorship is always significant, but it no longer signifies as much as it did between Lord Campbell’s Act and the Williams Report when England’s conjecture of literacy and inequality persistently turned censorship questions into citizenship questions” (p. 226). In essence,

Hilliard's book highlights the power of political thought—and when that political thought no longer has the same power it once did.

Hillar's book is not only an important historical piece highlighting important philosophies that originated in Victorian England but also an important book for understanding various elements of philosophy. It illustrates how ideas transform and impact other areas and concepts of society. Hillard's book is an interesting read and is perfect for graduate students interested in learning more about political philosophy and how ideas take shape or students of the United Kingdom's governance system.

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References

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