

Middle Class Deference to the Upper Class

Paterson, Michael. *Life in Victorian Britain: A Social History of Queen Victoria's Reign*. Running Press, 2008.

When George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822 it was the first royal visit to the country for over 160 years, and there were no useful precedents to guide the public. Local newspapers received numerous letters from gentlemen asking what was the form of dress to be worn when attending public places such as roadsides to watch the King pass by. There was no such dress, and therefore no satisfactory answer. Nevertheless one member of the public, who seemed to know what he was talking about, wrote that the correct costume consisted of white denim trousers and a navy-blue swallow-tail coat. This was widely accepted, and in the event was worn by many men. Such a situation could have occurred at any time during the nineteenth century, for correct dress was as important as correct behaviour, and those who sought respectability always went in

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terror of not knowing the right thing to do. An unexplained but categorical sentence in a book on manners that states 'As a matter of course, young ladies do not eat cheese at dinner parties' would have been accepted without demur in thousands of middle-class homes.

This level of respect for conformity is difficult to understand from a modern perspective, but until the 1950s society was run from the top, with modes being created by the aristocracy (the concepts of 'street fashion' and 'street credibility' would have been unthinkable to Victorians other than as a form of fancy dress). This fortunate class, even if it was steadily losing power and influence throughout the reign, still appeared to be a keeper of secrets to which others wished to be privy.

Etiquette was not peculiar to the Victorians, who inherited a good deal of social ritual from the preceding era. In the nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, there were forms of behaviour that were practised by the 'best people' and imitated to a greater or lesser extent by those farther down the scale. Where there was no established etiquette for a particular situation, it seems to have been necessary to invent it. An authentic-sounding practice might well be thought up on the spur of the moment and become enshrined in custom.

Victorian society was obsessed with status and social advancement. The era saw the rise of a huge and wealthy middle class whose members-- pleased with their attainments but unsure how to behave - looked to the aristocracy for social guidance (the nobility responded with varying degrees of disdain). As a result, what were perceived to be the habits and practices of the traditional ruling class were imitated or adapted in thousands of bourgeois homes. The newly genteel, or the aspiringly

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genteel, needed a good deal of specific and detailed guidance on how to dress, what to eat, where to be seen and-- crucially-- how to entertain. Because this class went in fear of committing social *faux pas*, publishers provided them with a battery of books and articles to address these issues. Some were in the form of 'agony aunt' newspaper columns that advised anonymous enquirers about specific difficulties. Others were textbooks of behaviour, some with reader-friendly subject categories that were designed to be kept handy and used for reference. Often they were anonymous, or written under such pseudonyms as 'A Lady' or 'A Member of the Aristocracy', implying that some well-bred personage was willing to pass on, as a public duty, the necessary knowledge. The large number of

these produced from the middle of the century is evidence of the extent of society's preoccupation with social niceties.