

George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture. By Emma Liggins. Hampshire, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. 192 pages. £45.00 (Hardcover)

Emma Liggins, of the English Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University, is a *fin-de-siècle* fiction specialist. Despite not being a Geography scholar per se, the book – a synthesis of the fictitious writings of George Gissing at the end of nineteenth century London – on the whole represents the diversity of geography as an all-embracing theoretical facet. English literature can open up a further dimension to spatial and temporal analysis. So what does ‘*George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture*’ bring to urban feminist geography?

Liggins sets the context of the book thoroughly, which is beneficial for those not totally familiar with the fiction of George Gissing. The novelist started writing in the late 1870s and garnered gradual, slow-burning success and notoriety. Importantly, Liggins sets the theoretical foundations for the writings of Gissing from naturalism to the development of gendered urbanism and, critically, how the city in its concrete form changes slowly, as opposed to the social and gendered processes of the city which, by comparison, can change relatively quickly. This thematically draws upon Neo-Marxism’s waging of the ‘urban war’ between class and capitalism, perhaps ahead of its time when thinking of the stereotypes of the feminist revolution in the 1960s. Unfortunately, his legacy did not prevail enough to offer a representative social alternative to dehumanised regimes of production in the first quarter of the twentieth century, such as Fordism, Taylorism and the gendered division of labour. The book on the whole is a chronology of Gissing’s fictitious yet representative notions of advancing yet regressive urban socialism; the key is how Liggins cleverly incorporates with theoretical analysis from contemporary scholars such as Barbara Harrison and Judith Walkowitz.

In the first of five chapters, ‘Prostitution and the Freedoms of Streetwalking,’ this shocking concept at such point in history is used as a means of pushing the buttons of the social underclass, but Gissing plays with this within an emancipatory edge. Class as an open subject is essential for the roots of (post) modern feminism to take hold. The chapter coheres the spatial to the subject, rather than ignoring the spatial existence or separating the two – *la flâneuse* – how this figure traverses through the city and “negotiates a recognised position on the streets.” Liggins brings to the fore that naturalist fiction of this kind deals its cards in many hands, from the crowded streets and its desire, to the apathy of the spatial concentration of the commercial centre. Liggins opens up more clearly her analysis in the last section of this chapter about how Gissing was somewhat cautious in representing ‘the prostitute’ as an active agent of the territories in which she thrived while also not exoticising the ‘profession.’ Critically Liggins’ analysis sets up the foundations of Gissing as a crucial component of the modern feminist thesis by showing signs of a blurring of the boundaries between masculine and feminine traits in the metropolis.

Looking at the working girl in East London factories, Emma Liggins, who is an expert in female labour history, brings the narratives from Gissing's novels alive by, at times, using present tense and third person – this gives a sense of urgency to the analysis. However, Liggins does not enamour totally to Gissing's writings and critiques in particular the confusion in Chapter Two that he encountered with idealising the "better sort of East End girl" into a lifeless caricature; this underlying critique is a continuation from Chapter One. The chapter takes a turn when examining 'childcare and marriage' – it concentrates on a large number of scholars and writers at that time such as Anna Martin, and this gives depth to the discussion although it would seem that, albeit briefly, Gissing has been relegated. The flow of the chapter becomes too sedimented for students who are new to the gender studies field with the constant switching of theories and chosen writers. However, I feel the chapter retrieves this flow once Liggins interconnects Gissing while directly contrasting his works with these other writers, giving context and an interesting comparison on themes such as social time and the boundaries and pressures between balancing work and social lives of women workers. These themes have certainly not evaporated through time for, as in all sociology, we can learn from the past; Liggins notes that these issues in particular have real contemporary relevance.

In chapter three Liggins structures the book so that it concentrates on a relatively short period of time in the late 1800s. She enlarges and dissects different issues and types of women and, beneficially, this details the analysis rather than 'glossing over' an entire century, a trap historical academic books fall into quite frequently. In this chapter we move from the marginalised woman of menial labour, to the marginalised woman of professionalism – a handy paradox. Liggins continues to examine the Gissing analysis by looking at his portrayal of the educated woman not through rose-tinted glasses but using critiques and secondary evaluation of Gissing from writers such as David Grylls. Of interest to feminist geographers is the fact that the evaluation of the home is given its own sub-section in which the frequent notions of the home and loneliness are analysed. The last sub-section of Chapter Three is, in fact, the richest part of the chapter – it digs deeper into 'womanliness' with a gradual temporal shift into what the future of the late nineteenth century woman of education would entail, but without jumping too far ahead and thus losing focus.

The penultimate chapter starts in a similar thematic fashion as in previous sections, gradually moving into breach of the twentieth century and developing a more cohesive representation of the working woman. The dualism of analysis remains at white collar versus blue collar worker and their shared struggles, yet dissimilarities slowly percolate into a more realised modernity of change and licensed democracy. Liggins interweaves Gissing's developmental and seminal novel, *The Odd Women*, with work of other writers at that time, in particular Henry James and his protagonist of choice, Millicent. A slightly futurologist approach but still not skewing from the context of Gissing in the late nineteenth century, the chapter is directed by the underlying concept of the New Woman, her struggles as well as freedom.

The final chapter starts off clearly, setting the scene of the juxtaposition of men and women in the work place and the gendered division of labour. The chapter

opens up questions of imitation of men by women and the complexities this involves. Liggins organises the chapter (as she does for all chapters) into clear and succinct sub-topics, from the demise of the 'chaperon' for women, to the *cause d'celebre* of 'married, working women.' These changes then bring about Liggins brief retrospect of the early twentieth century woman, and this well published *fin-de-siècle* scholar asserts disappointment that Gissing was not used more forcefully as a social policy instrumentalist – he was ahead of his time but sadly wasted. The final chapter is probably the most logical with a more linear format and clear sub-topics as well as synthesis at the end. In terms of integrating Gissing's fiction with an urban geographical framework, such as Chicago School theory, Urban Political Economy school of thought and so on, we cannot expect Liggins to do this for us given her field of research as an English literature scholar – she is the mediator, Gissing is the creator and we are the geographical interpreter.

Urban geographers seeking a linguistic discussion of pre-modern/first modernity urbanism will often draw on the sociological Marxist essayists, Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, but the list of writers that can be used is not exhaustive as this book shows. It may be time to embrace *English literature* more succinctly in *human geography* rather than just drawing upon brief examples from the historical vaults; this book is an ideal bridge between these two individual yet overlapping disciplines.

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