



Title of Paper: **The Cannibal Club and the Origins of 19th Century Racism and Pornography**

Author: John Wallen

Affiliation: University of Nizwa

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the activities of the notorious mid-nineteenth century “Cannibal Club” and relates its activities to the particular forms of racism and pornography that developed in Victorian Britain. The aim is to highlight the particular ways in which scientific and anthropological thought developed in Victorian Britain, leading to specific forms of racism and sexism that are still sometimes operative even in today’s society.

Keywords: Cannibal club, Victorian men’s clubs, 19th century history, Richard Francis Burton, Swinburne, James Hunt, pornography, racism, postcolonialism

Author Bio:

John Wallen has taught in the Middle East for more than 15 years. He is currently an Assistant Professor at Nizwa University in Oman. Previously he worked at Bahrain University and Qatar University. He has published two books of criticism, a novel, and several books of short stories. He received his PhD from RHUL in 2011.

Author email: johnwallen79@gmail.com



This paper will examine the activities of the notorious mid-Victorian men's club known as the "Cannibal Club" with the intention of relating its activities to the specific forms of racism and sexism that grew out of the intellectual ferment of the time. It was during this critical period that "the scientific method" was established and throughout this crucial time science, ethnography and anthropology were often unable to move beyond the imperial and colonial attitudes of the men who as politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and explorers populated the British Empire. The effect of this was often to prioritize views of "the other" that emphasized his/her difference and, usually, inferiority. There was real tension in Victorian Britain between the establishment of a democratic scientific methodology for the examination and explanation of phenomena and the elitist attitudes that underpinned Anglo-Saxon dominance of the colonial space. This intrinsic inner tension was present even in the attitudes of those men and women who helped to shape the new scientific and, largely, relativist methodology that was gradually emerging in the last fifty years of Victoria's rule.

The importance of the "Cannibal Club" is as a fulcrum for the often confused and confusing attitudes of the time. Men like James Hunt, Richard Burton, Richard Monckton Milnes and Algernon Swinburne, leading lights of the "Cannibal Club", were men who, on the one hand, were representative of the new relativism which tended to pour scorn on the idea of Christianity as the one universal religion which all colonial people should convert to after assimilation into the British Empire; on the other, these men actively acted out their innate sense of racial superiority over colonial people in the private space of the "Cannibal Club". Such well-documented elitist



The Victorian

attitudes often had an effect on the particular strands of new thought which prominent Victorians propagated. For example, Burton and Hunt strongly believed in a multiple genesis of the human species because this suited their racist agenda. In addition, most of the cannibals were enthusiastic hedonists, dedicated to the perusal and collection of pornography and particularly to a fascination with the intimate sexual practices of the colonial people they ruled over. Essentially, this group of imperialists looked down from the Olympian heights of their own racial and class position onto a metaphorical stage where the colonial peoples could be carefully examined and labeled while providing sexual titillation for the imperial masters.

The Cannibal club was founded in 1863 and grew out of the split between monogenists and polygenists in the Ethnological Society which had been formed in London in 1843. The monogenists, following Darwin's lead, believed that man, in spite of certain differences, constituted a single species and they tended towards liberal politics. The polygenists, on the other hand, believed in a multiple genesis of man and were a strongly conservative group with racist tendencies. The victory of the monogenists in the Ethnological Society led James Hunt and Richard Burton to set up a rival organisation called "The Anthropological Society of London" with polygenist theories and a strong belief in the minute collection of data as a means of proving the differences between races. The Society was a supporter of such pseudo-scientific practices as phrenology and the measurement of skull size and shape with craniometers and other instruments of anatomical measurement. During the American Civil War, the Anthropological Society was a strong supporter of the Confederacy and its pro-slavery policies.



An off-shoot of the Anthropological Society was the Cannibal Club which promoted the beliefs of the Society in a more personal and Dionysian way (as with most men's clubs of the Victorian period, large quantities of alcohol were imbibed during the club's meetings). The basic idea was that a group of intelligent and intellectually advanced English gentlemen should celebrate their innate superiority over other racial and social groups through the discussion of topics that were normally off-bounds in academic circles. The topics for debate included sex, pornography, religion and race. Prominent members included Hunt, Burton, Swinburne and Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton). The style and tenor of the club's meetings can be gauged by the fact that its symbol was a mace carved to resemble an African head chewing on a thigh bone. Swinburne even wrote a *Cannibal Catechism* which was thought of as a kind of club anthem.

Preserve us from our enemies
Thou who art Lord of suns and skies
Whose meat and drink is flesh in pies
And blood in bowls!
Of thy sweet mercy, damn their eyes
And damn their souls.¹

In spite of its racism, the club was perhaps most interested in the perusal of pornography and members included several active collectors of pornography such as Sir James Plaisted Wilde, General Studholme, John Hodgson and Charles Duncan Cameron. Charles Bradlaugh, the well-known atheist, was also a member,

¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Cannibal Catechism* (London: printed for private circulation, 1913), p. 7.



emphasising its generally iconoclastic tendencies. The club used to meet at a hotel near Fleet Street, though agendas and minutes were not kept—probably at least partly due to the extremely unpalatable views propagated. In James Hunt's opening speech to the Anthropological Society (mother of the Cannibal Club) he enunciated a strong racist view:

Whatever may be the conclusion to which our scientific inquiries may lead us, we should always remember, that by whatever means the Negro, for instance, acquired his present physical, mental and moral character, whether he has risen from an ape or descended from a perfect man, we still know that the Races of Europe have now much in their mental and moral nature which the races of Africa have not got.²

From 1864 Hunt had been promoting the idea of a merger between the Royal Anthropological Society and the British Association and in 1871 the Royal Anthropological Institute was founded. The Cannibal Club seems to have faded away in the later decades of the 19th century, but the extreme views of many of its members never changed.

Three academics who have written at some length about the Cannibal Club in recent years are Dane Kennedy, Lisa Z. Sigel and Deborah Lutz. Kennedy, in his 2005 book *The Highly Civilized Man*,³ emphasises the club's iconoclasm and anti-clericalism while not shying away from its elitism and racism. His central tenet is that the club's iconoclasm posed a real threat to the English ruling class by suggesting

² James Hunt, President (February 24, 1863), *Introductory address on the study of Anthropology*, *The Anthropological Review*, 1, p. 3

³ Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).



their morality and beliefs were not self-evidently true-- and so to be automatically imposed on colonial peoples. Lisa Sigel in *Governing Pleasures. Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*⁴ relates the rise of pornography in the eighteenth century to the creation of new technology which made the mass printing of cheap images possible. Unlike Dane Kennedy, she is almost exclusively interested in the Cannibal Club from the perspective of pornography and its consumption by the British upper classes. Furthermore, she connects this to the rigid morality of the time and to the fear that the working classes would be corrupted if obscenity laws were not tightened and rigorously enforced by the ruling class. It is only a short step from this position to the belief that only the well-educated and well-connected were in a position to consume this material without being in some way morally corrupted. The Cannibal Club took advantage of this ambiguous space in British society to follow its own hedonistic agenda. Taking the Cannibals as symbolic of the British ruling class as a whole, Sigel puts forward the idea that their erotic preferences show how anthropology, science, empire and pornography developed simultaneously and how each was implicated in the discourse of the other.

Deborah Lutz's book *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism*⁵ is more problematic than the first two. On the one hand it spends much more time talking about the Cannibal Club *per se*; on the other, it has fewer original insights than either of the previously cited works. Lutz views the Cannibals in a romantic light as modern sexual animals surrounded by repression and bigotry which

⁴ Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures. Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

⁵ Deborah Lutz, *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).



they are able to circumvent due to their highly educated but still passionate natures.

There is nothing in Lutz's book of Kennedy's belief in the Cannibals' relativism posing as an active threat to the conventional morality of the time; nor of Sigel's interest to connect the consumption of pornography with social change in nineteenth century Britain. As a concluding comment on the treatment of the Cannibal Club by these three writers, it might be added that they have all made use of the same meager resources available on the Cannibal Club and given their own particular spin to the information.

Faced with this situation I decided, a few months ago, to undertake a search for more primary documents that might throw greater light on the activities of the Cannibal Club. So far, I cannot claim to have found a plenitude of new material, but some documents unearthed in the archives of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London have proved interesting. I remain hopeful that further research will be able to add new details to the story.

Perhaps the most interesting document I've discovered so far relates to a Cannibal Club dinner that took place on 19 June, 1866.⁶ There is a list of names which does not include any of the usual suspects: Burton, Swinburne and Monckton Milnes. Twelve Cannibals dined on this evening in 1866, including the President, James Hunt. It's interesting that Hunt is also listed as Honorary Fellow of the Ethnological Society of London, so we can assume that there was a fair amount of crossover between the Anthropological and Ethnological societies. Certainly, it is possible 150 years after the events involved, to assume that the antagonism between these two bodies was

⁶ List of Cannibals dining 19th June 1866, (from A5/240), Royal Anthropological Institute of London.



The Victorian

greater in theory than in reality. Some of the other Cannibals dining that evening are obscure figures, but a little research can find out some interesting facts about several of the others. Richard Stephen Charnock PhD, a fairly prominent Victorian, is listed as the Treasurer. Charnock, whose address is given as Gray's Inn, was the solicitor to whom the young George Meredith was apprenticed. Meredith didn't study much law with Charnock, but the older man did encourage the novelist in his literary ambitions. Meredith even met his wife, Mary Ellen Nicolls among Charnock's circle of friends. Charnock's literary interests seemed to lie in the direction of philology and he authored several books on English dialects and the origins of geographical names. On the whole Charnock appears as a rather disappointing Cannibal solidly respectable, a solicitor and the writer of around ten books on legal and narrowly philological matters—most of which are now available on the Internet Archive.

Among the other Cannibals dining that evening in 1866 was a clergyman, the Reverend Dunbar Isidore Heath, a recognized authority on Egyptology and an early translator of the papyri in the British Museum. Heath seems to have been ruined both financially and professionally when his 1852 book *The Future Human Kingdom of Christ*⁷ led, in 1861, to his prosecution for heresy by the Bishop of Winchester. Although this may seem a very Cannibalistic fate, the doctrine objected to by the Church of England involved Heath's ideas about "the two salvations" or the belief that the crucifixion of Jesus had, on one level, saved all men eternally, though a special and superior salvation awaited those who actively believed, through faith, in Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

⁷ Dunbar Isidore Heath, *The Future Human Kingdom of Christ*, (London: J.W. Parker, 1852).



Yet another Cannibal present at the dinner was Charles Carter Blake, anthropologist, palaeontologist, and comparative anatomist. Blake was a founding fellow of the Anthropological Society of London and in 1864 edited Paul Broca's book *On the Phenomena of Hybridity in the Genus Homo*.⁸ As well as being famous for discovering Broca's area of the brain, the renowned Frenchman also believed that the size of the brain determined intelligence and insisted on the fact that women were less intelligent than men due to the smaller size of their brains: ideas which were no doubt loudly applauded in the secretive meetings and convivial dinners of the Cannibal Club.

James Hunt, the President of the Anthropological Society and leading light of the Cannibal Club is well known for his extreme views on race. As a scientific researcher, however, he appears to have been something of a dilettante. He was the son of the famous speech therapist, Thomas Hunt and after buying a doctorate from the University of Giessen in Germany, he set himself up in practice as a speech therapist in Regent Street, London. After founding the Anthropological Society of London with Richard Burton in 1863, he became well-known for his extreme and racist views. In 1867 Hyde Clarke accused Hunt of financial irregularities in the running of the society causing his temporary resignation as president. However, he returned in 1868 after the expulsion of Clarke due to the scandal. Hunt died at the early age of thirty-three of an inflammation of the brain. Interestingly, it was only after Hunt's death that the Anthropological Society was prepared to begin negotiations with the Ethnological Society about the possibility of a merger. Presumably, with Hunt out of the way, the

⁸ Paul Broca, *On the Phenomena of Hybridity in the Genus Homo*, (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1864).



The Victorian

Anthropological Society was prepared to tone down some of its extremely intolerant views while the Ethnological Society largely gave up its humanitarian work, becoming more vigorously scientific in its outlook.

The Royal Anthropological Institute's archive has, beyond providing the names of prominent Cannibals whose letters might be researched for greater insights into the workings of this secretive organization, given some interesting information about exactly what became of the Cannibal Club. It would appear that the club was dissolved some time in 1869 through lack of interest. Apparently, Richard Burton tried to revive the club in the early eighteen-seventies, but without success. This was probably, at least in part, due to the decline of scientific racism and polygenism after the success of Darwin's *Origin of Species*⁹ and, more specifically the publication of *The Descent of Man* in 1871¹⁰ which set out a compelling argument for monogenism. At any rate, it seems the club did not continue after the amalgamation of the Anthropological Society and the Ethnological Society to form the RAI—or "Royal Anthropological Institute"—in 1871. However, a RAI dining club continued in various guises right up until 1965. In 1952 this club was reconstituted as the "Long Pig Club" which met at the Nag's Head pub in Floral Street, Covent Garden. The club's last dinner was on 3 June 1965 at the Universal Restaurant in London.¹¹ We may reasonably assume that the aggressively racist and pornographic agenda of the Cannibal Club was not perpetuated after 1869.

⁹ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, (London: John Murray, 1859).

¹⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, (London: John Murray, 1871), 2 vols.

¹¹ A60, "Dining Club, c. 1863-1865", W.B. Fagg Papers, Royal Anthropological Institute of London.



It was certainly no accident that the Cannibal Club flourished in the eighteenth-sixties as the British Empire continued its rapid growth; a mass of newly emerging information about various kinds of unusual cultural behavior and practices on the part of the expanding empire's new constituents, led some people in the educated British ruling class to ask questions about "difference" and "the other" that mostly came to reassuring answers for the colonial masters in the assertion of their own innate superiority over the millions of colonial people they controlled. Nevertheless, in the longer term, the developing relativism of Cannibal Club members like Richard Burton began to slowly turn the mirror image back on the voyeuristic observers themselves and, in the process, pose a fundamental question about how--in a world where nothing seemed clear-cut and where cultural practices had developed according to particular local needs—any one system of belief could be thought of as "true" or innately superior to another. Therefore, it might accurately be affirmed that although the Cannibal Club began its life as a purveyor of scientific racism, the intellectual honesty of some of its members eventually began to cast doubt on the idea of "civilizing" the empire's new subjects. Richard Burton, in particular, strongly objected to the Christianization of Africans and Asians and thought Islam provided a far more appropriate religious model for these people to follow. Consequently, it might be said that the Cannibal Club was also a profoundly ambiguous group which in spite of its overt racism and elitism, eventually began to question the value and efficacy of Christianizing and Europeanizing new inhabitants of the British Empire. It should be remembered that as the scientific method was gradually developed and refined throughout the course of the nineteenth-century, many ideas which had earlier been



The Victorian

popular fell out of favour as they were discredited or refuted. Polygenism, or the belief in a multiple genesis of the human species would be one idea that simply became untenable with the passage of time.

Of course, ideas of racial superiority and inferiority have never been entirely absent from the debate on race and I would suggest that the modern “justification” for such ideas by twentieth-century National Socialists and others, goes back to the formation of the scientific method in the nineteenth century when many leading thinkers and scientists of the era were reluctant to accept the Darwinian conclusion that all humanity had sprung from the same origins and, so, attempted to create doubt about these matters in order to support their own racist beliefs. Similarly, the modern tolerance for a private pornographic space is also, at least partly, dependent on the attitudes of elitist Victorians who secretly, and from an elevated and privileged position, looked down on the sexual activities of colonial people in a process of profound intellectual voyeurism. The importance of the “Cannibal Club”, in essence, was to create a secret space where racist and sexist attitudes could be confidently asserted and discussed amongst the most influential and important people of the day.



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