


Please cite the Published Version

Horner, Craig  (2018) Book review: An Artisan Intellectual: James Carter and the Rise of Modern Britain, 1792-1853. By Christopher Ferguson. *History*, 103 (355). pp. 347-348. ISSN 0018-2648

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.12598>

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Accepted Version

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Here Christopher Ferguson draws us into the world of the tailor James Carter (1792–1853). Despite his prolific reading, writing and publishing, of which more in a minute, Carter always called himself a tailor, and we learn just how the early nineteenth century was not kind to that trade. Its organisation and remuneration utterly changed in Carter's half-century. We are told of how he mastered the 'tailor's posture', that is, sitting cross-legged (pp. 20–1), which led so often to deformity and ill-health. There was an association of tailors with effeminacy, of being physically weak, 'one-ninth an Englishman'. To be called a 'tailor' was to be contemptible (pp. 23–8). Periods of underemployment in the course of the year became known as 'cucumber time', because, apparently, the ladies in Covent Garden market chanted 'Cucumbers two a penny, tailors twice as many', indicating the willingness of tailors to work for starvation wages; Carter was not immune to this (p. 40), and went from prosperous to miserably underemployed.

But this is more than the story of a tailor and his trade. Carter lived through a period over which historians wrestle as to its significance. Like us now, he experienced huge change and most of it he probably didn't like – the railways, the degrading of his value as a tailor, the reducing of his home town Colchester in significance as London drew in (and spat out) ever more migrants. As Ferguson reminds us, looking into Carter's world enables us to understand better the cultural and social dynamics of the times, here at the 'level of the individual' (p. 7). This, then, is one man's 'confrontation' with a time of transformation, and how he negotiated change, between 'country and city, naiveté and knowledge, productivity and poverty, and tradition and modernity' (pp. 12–13).

Carter reckoned that a defining feature separating Britain of the 1790s and the 1840s was the change in reading habits. We learn that over the course of his lifetime, the 'variety, quantity and quality of print media available to the average Briton changed dramatically'. There had been a parallel shift in elite and popular opinion regarding the act of reading, from a prejudice against educating the poor – and many of the poor having no wish to be educated – to a recognition by nearly all that 'the human mind needs recreation as well as instruction' (pp. 64–5). Not all agreed, and Cruickshank published in 1828 his engraving of a precocious child teaching his grandmother, in scientific terms, how to suck eggs (p. 69). 'Useful information' had become more easily available, in part due to organisations like the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Carlyle, of course, differed, believing the publishers of such cheap prints to be diffusing only 'confusion' (pp. 72–3).

Carter was never alone when he had books. They were, variously, an 'old and valued friend', a 'bosom friend', a 'shrewd companion' (p. 206). There was real peril attached to reading in bed by candlelight; Carter was nearly killed on one occasion (p. 55). But it was the confidence that the wide reading brought that enabled him to write on a diversity of subjects: physiognomy, medicine, literature, aesthetics, the sublime (p. 207). He was the (anonymous) writer of a two-volume autobiography, five more books and fifty works of poetry. It enabled him, not without the usual terrors of public address, to give a lecture on 'taste' in 1825 to the Colchester Lit and Phil (Carter's membership required him to deliver a lecture). This was so well received that he did a follow up in 1827, and when he fell on hard times in the 1830s, he published them, marking him out as a man of not just 'taste' but of 'genius' (pp. 78–9).

Carter moved from Colchester to London, and later, back again. It was a 51-mile trip and therefore within a day's walking distance – even for an asthmatic such as Carter who did the journey in a day several times in the 1810s. Migration was multi-directional, and 'no [other] city exemplified this state of affairs to a greater extent than London'. Ferguson tells us that movement between country and city was regular and done 'with remarkable ease' – few migrants arrived in towns as the "'friendless" individuals' imagined by *Penny Magazine*. And whereas the eighteenth century had seen developments in transport: canals, road improvements (leading to quicker and more frequent coaching trips to London), Carter witnessed other changes. In 1843 the London-Colchester railway line was opened, but Carter had a dim view of the new trains and it is unclear whether he ever took advantage of the new cheap fares (pp. 116, 153).

Historians will differ over interpreting the period of Carter's life – seismic change and revolution; or continuity? There was another tailor, a contemporary of Carter's and like him, one

who wrote his autobiography. Charles Hodgson Neesom (1785–1861), though, was a political radical, an atheist, a Chartist. Next to him, Carter fails to look like our nineteenth-century ‘working man’. But they had much in common. Reading was hugely important to both; both wrote; both ‘remained deeply invested in their artisanal backgrounds’, both called themselves ‘tailors’ in the 1851 census, yet the health of both had been brought low by the vicissitudes of the trade; and both were reduced to relying on the charity of others. To understand Carter, and to interpret the period of his life, we also have to understand the likes of Neesom, and countless forgotten others – the history of the coming of modernity was played out collectively in their homes, workshops, in the city and country, and the contents of the printed page. Ferguson’s contribution, with its good bibliography and index, takes us one big step nearer to this.