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RHODE ISLAND 1720-1765.

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A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF  
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND 1720-1765

by

Sheila Skemp

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of History  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

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Thesis supervisor: Professor Sydney V. James

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS  
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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
CHAPTER I. GEORGE BERKELEY'S NEWPORT . . . . .	5
NOTES TO CHAPTER I . . . . .	37
CHAPTER II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MERCHANT CAPITALISM . . . . .	47
NOTES TO CHAPTER II . . . . .	90
CHAPTER III. NEWPORT'S LOWER CLASSES 1720-1740 . . . . .	100
NOTES TO CHAPTER III . . . . .	144
CHAPTER IV. MERCHANT SUPREMACY: THE MANIPULATION OF POWER . . . . .	153
NOTES TO CHAPTER IV . . . . .	198
CHAPTER V. EZRA STILE'S NEWPORT . . . . .	205
NOTES TO CHAPTER V. . . . .	251
CHAPTER VI. "WORLD UNCERTAIN AND STRONGLY CHECKER'D" . . . . .	264
NOTES TO CHAPTER VI . . . . .	319
CHAPTER VII. THE LOWER AND MIDDLING SORT 1740-1765 . . . . .	335
NOTES TO CHAPTER VII . . . . .	399
CHAPTER VIII. THE CHALLENGE TO MERCHANT SUPREMACY . . . . .	414
NOTES TO CHAPTER VIII . . . . .	456
CONCLUSION . . . . .	464
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	466

## INTRODUCTION

In the seventeenth century, the economy of Newport, Rhode Island was based almost entirely on landed wealth. In 1765, this was no longer the case. For as early as 1720, the more adventurous and affluent members of the seaport city were hesitantly becoming involved in commercial activity. Using the economic base they had accumulated during the War of Spanish Succession (1702--1713), these merchants made the best use possible of the essentially peaceful years between 1720 and 1720 to develop a pattern of trade within which they would operate throughout the rest of the colonial period.

Their task was not an easy one. They faced the uncertainties which beset any merchant community--bad weather, unpredictable markets, disastrous accidents at sea--as well as the peculiar difficulties created by their own geographical situation. Their severely limited hinterland made it almost impossible for them to escape the economic dominance of other, more richly endowed colonies, and they remained subserviant to Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania throughout the entire colonial period. The colony's lack of commodities which would appeal to buyers in London was responsible for the chronic specie shortage which plagued Newport's merchants throughout the period, for London

drained hard money from the colony in lieu of goods. Their lack of marketable commodities also made it impossible for commercial magnates to trade directly with London, and so they had to rely on the sugar planters in the British and French West Indies to provide them with sugar, molasses and bills of exchange with which they could pay for badly needed British manufactures.

Yet, in spite of tremendous odds, the period between 1720 and 1740 proved to be a profitable one for many Newport entrepreneurs. They used that period, not only to accumulate and expand their trading operations, but to widen their social and cultural horizons, and to strengthen their hold on the colony's political machinery. Indeed the power of the Newport merchant was unsurpassed in this period. The slave population was too small and disorganized to present him with a real threat. Indigents in the city were relatively few in number, and thus they too were a controllable force. The petite bourgeoisie had no desire to destroy the merchant class, but only desired to emulate that class, and the more audacious among them no doubt harbored desires of becoming part of it. Their values and goals were identical with those of the merchants, and those merchants used their economic and political power to reinforce that identity of interest. Secular and religious propaganda, monetary incentives, legal and political institutions were all used in a basically successful effort to secure the voluntary obedience and

respect of the lower classes for their social superiors.

At first glance, Newport's commercial leaders did not appear to have lost their power and influence in the period between 1740 and 1765. But the discerning observer of the merchant community in those years might have seen some barely visible signals of impending disaster, nevertheless. To be sure, merchants lived in a grander and more luxurious fashion than ever before. Their hold on the respect and obedience of the lower middle classes was not shaken throughout the entire colonial period. Yet the inherent weakness of the economic-- and hence the political--position of Newport entrepreneurs was revealed in this period. They were caught up in the turmoil of the War of Austrian Succession (1739--1748) and the Seven Years War (1755--1763) and were forced to deal with the economic dislocations and uncertainties which inevitably accompanied those military conflicts. They were also faced with the threat provided by the newly competitive Providence merchants whose commercial resources and native ability provided them with the means to make a strong, and ultimately successful bid for power in Rhode Island's economic and political affairs. They were faced, too, with the realization that the mother country could, if it so desired, disrupt and even destroy the basic patterns of trade which they had so carefully and painstakingly developed over the years. They were forced to admit, in other words, that their much vaunted power and influence were built on very shaky



foundations indeed. As colonial merchants, their success depended almost entirely on circumstances over which they had little or no control. As merchants they could not alter their inferior geographical position, nor could they prevent natural disaster from destroying them. As colonists, they could not hope to influence the mother country's decisions to declare war or sue for peace; they could do very little to alter the manner in which British political leaders chose to order their colonial policy.

The development of merchant capitalism in the period between 1720 and 1740 illustrates the manner in which a group of astute businessmen was able to make its fortune in spite of almost insurmountable odds, under conditions which were insecure and uncertain at best. The threat to that power in the period between 1740 and 1765, serves as a reminder that the wealth and power built upon such shaky and dependent foundations was doomed to ultimate collapse, despite the best efforts of the most astute and skillful members of the merchant community.

## CHAPTER I

## GEORGE BERKELEY'S NEWPORT

Newport, Rhode Island in the 1720's and 1730's was known simultaneously as "the garden of New England" and the "Metropolitan" of the colony.<sup>1</sup> It was indeed a town that had not yet shed the effects of its rural past, and yet anyone who visited the little community in this period could hardly help but note its growing cosmopolitanism. As seen through the eyes of George Berkeley, the town was unimpressive in appearance, yet growing in numbers and physical maturity. Its population was homogeneous; its most erudite inhabitants were provincial, the adornment of their houses and persons reflecting the self-conscious manner in which they viewed their own new-found wealth and prestige. The social life of Newport's elite was simple, basically rural in flavor, and its men in particular shared interests with their lower middle class counterparts. Intellectual and cultural life was often unsophisticated and forced. Yet the city boasted a number of intelligent and erudite native inhabitants, particularly ministers, and a sprinkling of foreign visitors and residents. Some artistic, scientific and literary achievements also existed, despite the city's relative lack of sophistication. If the social, cultural and intellectual life of Newport was somewhat rustic and

self-conscious, it displayed, nevertheless, some of those attributes which would one day make it the center of charm, culture and sophistication.

## I

The visit of George Berkeley, Dean of Derry, to Newport from 1729 to 1731 was heralded, then as well as now, as one of the high points of the city's developing cultural history. Both George Whitfield and Andrew Burnaby noted, in their short visits there, that Newport inhabitants never tired of telling stories of the Dean and his "wild and chimerical notions," even after he had been gone from their midst for over twenty years.<sup>2</sup> And this veneration of Berkeley's memory developed in spite of the fact that the calculable impact he left on the town was actually a minimal one. His house--Whitehall--lands and books were left, not to the grandees of Newport, but to Yale college.<sup>3</sup> Whitehall itself was for years, nothing but a "public house" kept by Isaac Anthony.<sup>4</sup> While Berkeley became a freeman in April, 1729, there is no evidence that he participated in town affairs, and much to indicate that he did not.<sup>5</sup> In fact the only evidence of Berkeley's regard for Newport is the organ which he purchased for Trinity Church--and it took the church three years to find an acceptable organist for that most celebrated of musical instruments.<sup>6</sup>

And yet Berkeley's residence in Newport was--and is-- a source of pride to its residents. He stayed there for three

years, at a time when the town was experiencing a twenty year period of peacetime expansion and when its more affluent members were first trying to develop the intellectual, cultural and social refinements which accompanied their economic status. Because Berkeley was not a permanent resident of Newport, he was able to evaluate the town and its achievements from a detached, and not always a flattering perspective. And while his understanding of the city's character was often colored by his distaste for the policy of freedom of religion practiced there, his comments offer a refreshing and often perceptive analysis of the manner in which Newport society functioned in the early years of the eighteenth century.

Before delineating Berkeley's reaction to Newport, however, it might be well to examine his motives for going there in the first place. For George Berkeley was not merely an Anglican Dean. He was extremely well-educated. He received his M.A. from Trinity College in 1707, and, also in that year, was given both a tutorship and a junior fellowship and ordained as a Deacon in the Church of England. He was, moreover, very well-traveled, having, by 1727, explored extensively in Rome, Sicily, Paris, Lyons, Genoa and Naples. Furthermore, he was a respected--if oft disputed--man of letters whose philosophical works were read and discussed not only in Great Britain and on the continent, but in the colonies as well.<sup>7</sup>

Why, then, did Dean Berkeley, cosmopolitan churchman and

philosopher, sail into the bay at Newport in January, 1729?<sup>8</sup> The answer to that question lies in his desire to found a college in the New World, in Bermuda to be exact, a college which would reform manners, propagate the gospel among colonists and Indians alike, and in general be an "instrument of doing good to mankind."<sup>9</sup> Berkeley's desire to settle and head a college in Bermuda must be seen as more than a simple "lust for power" and desire for notoriety. His psychological state since the autumn of 1721 must be taken into account if his obsessive devotion to the Bermuda scheme is to be understood. In that year he stayed in London for three months, this visit occurring after a full five years of extensive European travel. He was totally appalled by what he witnessed in the English capital. He saw a London filled with crazy economics and moral corruption, a corruption which was compounded when he compared it to the smaller urban centers he had been enjoying so recently. He much preferred those cities, which had not yet been touched with London's vulgar modernity. The disastrous South Sea Bubble only served to exacerbate the antipathy with which he viewed old world complexity and corruption.<sup>10</sup> As his biographers point out, "He dreamt now of an entirely new country in which religion and morality could escape all the obstacles and perils of modernity."<sup>11</sup>

Berkeley worked four long years on his Bermuda scheme as he collected and inherited money (and debts!)<sup>12</sup> received the Deanery of Derry in 1724 which was itself worth 1500 pounds per

annum,<sup>13</sup> and finally, in 1726, got his Bermuda Charter accepted by the King and passed by the Cabinet Council.<sup>14</sup> Even with this happy turn of events, however, Berkeley's plan appeared to be headed for oblivion and it was finally in sheer desperation that he began his voyage across the Atlantic, hoping to impress his reluctant backers with the sheer force of his action.

Berkeley's plans were, from the beginning, to stop briefly at Newport before sailing on to Bermuda.<sup>15</sup> He planned to buy land there which would serve as an investment for the Bermuda adventure and establish contact with New Englanders who could supply his college with necessary provisions.<sup>16</sup> His choice of Newport for the mainland base was not as arbitrary as it might appear to be at first glance. William Byrd of Virginia scoffed at Berkeley's choice. He compared the Dean rather unfavorably with Don Quixote, and claimed that the choice of Rhode Island as a base simply proved that the entire scheme was a visionary one.<sup>17</sup> Berkeley, however, selected the little port in a thoughtful and deliberate manner.

Berkeley was led to Newport by his correspondence with Henry Newman. Newman was born in England, had been educated at Harvard and had recommended the virtues of Rhode Island to the Dean from the time he first heard of the Bermuda project. Newman was the London secretary of the Society for the Promoting of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), a British missionary society devoted to work at home and in the colonies. He served as the main

London agent for the Bermuda scheme. Most of Berkeley's American business passed through Newman's hands, and his letters of introduction recommending Berkeley to the patronage of Newport notables helped make his arrival there a smooth and pleasant experience.<sup>18</sup> Berkeley could not help but be impressed with Newman's public relations effort, and he was also comforted by the fact that Newman could serve as a liason for him as long as he resided on the island.

## II

While enthusiasts have claimed that the Newport of Berkeley's era was "an established and aristocratic society"<sup>19</sup> in fact, the town was, in 1729, still very much a frontier community, a community still concerned with the major damage created by the attacks of wolves on the sheep and cattle which grazed upon the common land.<sup>20</sup> And if it was a pretty town when Berkeley first viewed it, it was probably because it was still predominantly rural in appearance. The city itself, even in 1744, was not laid out in neat geometric fashion but was still mainly one narrow street, Thames Street, "narrow but straight that standing att one end of it you may see to the other."<sup>21</sup> This main street lay parallel to the harbor, with several lanes intersecting it on both sides. And in most areas, houses were still endowed with ample lots complete with orchards, gardens and even stables--in the heart of town as well as on the outskirts.<sup>22</sup> Dogs ran the streets; wolves were a menace; and in 1734, a child playing in

the middle of a Newport street was drowned when he fell into a water-filled hollow log used for watering cattle.<sup>23</sup>

The gracious mansions for which the little city was to be famous in later years were to be found but rarely in the Newport of the 1720's and '30's. Peleg Sanford said in 1680 that the "generality of our buildinge is of timber and generally small."<sup>24</sup> And while there were in fact a few stone houses in the town in the 1720's and Godfrey Malbone's brick town house was very impressive, Sanford's description was basically as true of early eighteenth century Newport as it was of his own era.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed it is apparent that it was Newport's quiet charm which most attracted Berkeley to the city. He much preferred that "distant retreat far beyond the verge of that great whirlpool of business, faction and pleasure which is called the world" to the more hectic pace which he would have confronted at Boston.<sup>26</sup> Alciphron, written at the Hanging Rocks near Whitehall, suggests the effect that the physical beauty of Newport had upon the Dean,<sup>27</sup> and many of his letters proclaimed at great length the charm of the Rhode Island countryside:

This island is pleasantly laid out in hills and vales and rising grounds; hath plenty of excellent springs and fine rivulets, and many delightful landscapes of rocks and promontories and adjacent islands, . . . vines sprout up of themselves to an extraordinary size, and seem as natural to this soil as to any I ever saw. 28

Yet in spite of its primarily rustic appearance, Newport did show signs, as early as 1720, that it was not destined to



remain a provincial rural community forever. It was, admittedly a small town. Berkeley estimated its population sometimes at five thousand, sometimes at six thousand.<sup>29</sup> Most reliable sources place the white population somewhere just under five thousand.<sup>30</sup> But it was, wherever the figures are set, a town which was growing in astronomical proportions. As a result, its residents became increasingly conscious of the city's maturity and the central role it played in the social, political and economic development of the entire colony. As early as 1712, the town meeting declared that Newport had grown to "some Considerable degree of Maturity" and therefore decided to join other such mature towns in the "Universal and Orderly Custom" of naming the principal streets, a project which would have been unnecessary in the smaller and less populace Newport of earlier years. They justified this significant step by noting that

This town has of Late years been so far prospered as to Encrease the Number of Buildings the which is to the admiration of all their Neighbouring Townes so that it is the Metropolitan of the said Government, and also a place of considerable Commerce and Trade.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed the town was maturing. Highways in town were becoming, not only more numerous, but more passable as well. While there were still complaints about horse dung from the stables and garbage from houses being thrown out into the streets, there was not, apparently, the same fear that inhabitants had had in 1701, when they could not safely walk into the streets at night without the very real danger of being covered with dung

and filth before their journey's end!<sup>32</sup> In both 1711 and 1712 there were committees appointed to inspect the highways and to ensure that they remained properly wide, clean and clear of obstruction.<sup>33</sup> While most streets were quite well paved by 1715, in 1726 the town meeting decreed that the remaining unpaved streets in the less developed parts of town should be paved as houses were built on them, the house owners themselves, of course, footing the bill.<sup>34</sup>

Newport was also becoming more crowded. Gardens may still have graced most town lots, but it could not be denied that as more buildings were constructed, houses were beginning to be crammed closer together. Samuel Cranston complained in 1726 that "the Compact Body of the Town is so fild that it is difficult to find conveneant Space to Erect a Small Cotage."<sup>35</sup> Many families were forced to share their homes, as the population grew faster than did the town's capacity to absorb it.<sup>36</sup> As Thames Street began to take on an air of commercial solidity<sup>37</sup> many merchants escaped the congestion of the city by moving out to the point, the land around the cove at the northern end of town. This forced the town to expand the area under the jurisdiction of the town cryer, thus increasing the responsibility--and the cost!--of town government.<sup>38</sup> And if most of the city's private and public buildings continued to be made of wood, Richard Munday's handsome brick colony house, begun in 1739 and finally completed in 1741, was a well-deserved source of civic pride as well as a

solid indication that the town of Newport was gradually shedding some of the more obvious physical evidences of its provinciality.<sup>39</sup>

### III

Newport, then, was a growing albeit a provincial city.

Berkeley himself said it was "the most thriving flourishing place in all America for its bigness." In fact, he was "agreeably surprised" at his first view of the town as his ship came into the harbor.<sup>40</sup> But it would take more than a pleasant harbor, well-paved streets, and a climate "like that of Italy"<sup>41</sup> to satisfy Berkeley for the nearly three years he stayed in America. For the Dean was used to the company of learned scholars and gentlemen of wit and leisure. He wanted not only grateful beneficiaries of his charity, but companions who were sophisticated and intellectually stimulating. While it was certainly to Newport's credit that it was able to fulfill the cultural, intellectual and spiritual needs of so urbane and erudite a man as George Berkeley as well as it did, it cannot be denied that the Dean viewed most of the city's population with thinly disguised condescension.

Berkeley can hardly be faulted for his rather patronizing attitude. Newport's population, with a few notable exceptions to be discussed later, was primarily homogeneous. Its numbers increased, not from overseas immigration, but as the inhabitants of the colony smugly proclaimed, "by our own growth."<sup>42</sup> As Governor Sanford had expressed it, "We have had few or none either of English, Scots, Irish or Forreighners, onely a few blakes imported."<sup>43</sup>

Not only were Newport's inhabitants primarily of domestic origin, but their social and cultural interests were for the most part provincial, self-conscious and slightly forced. Even the merchant princes found little time in this period to engage in the delights of Europe's leisured class, and their attempts at sophistication often amused rather than impressed the Dean.

There can be no doubt, despite the lavish praise which he paid to them, that Berkeley was most aware of the rustic provinciality of even the most erudite of Newport's cultural elite. He may, as the townspeople later claimed, have flattered them, assuring them of his faith in the future of the colony, asserting that in fifty years "every foot of the land of this place will be as valuable as the land in Cheapside,"<sup>44</sup> but he was seldom quite so complimentary in his private conversations. By 1730 he was already writing his friend Tom Prior that he was anxious to return to Europe, confiding that "upon all private accounts, I should like Derry much better than New England."<sup>45</sup> He was quite aware that Newport was a second-rate economic and cultural center when it was compared with Boston, for despite Newport's oft-touted cosmopolitanism, Boston was still "the great place of pleasure and resort in these parts."<sup>46</sup>

Berkeley was always slightly amused by the sophisticated airs affected by Newport leaders in his presence. While they preferred that Berkeley himself wear his inconspicuous "strait-bodied black coat without plaits on the sides or superfluous

buttons,"<sup>47</sup>--a sign perhaps of their own insecurity when confronted with so esteemed a European as the Dean of Derry-- nevertheless they often adorned themselves in an unbecomingly lavish fashion. Two of Berkeley's traveling companions, Richard Dalton and Sir John James described the scene thus:

The men in flaming scarlet coats and waistcoats, laced and fringed with brightest glaring yellow, the sly Quakers, not venturing on these charming coats and waistcoats, yet loving finery, figured away with plate on their sideboards.<sup>48</sup>

One, to the great amusement of Berkeley, sent to England and had made a large teapot of solid gold, and asked the Dean if "Friend Berkeley had ever seen such a curious thing." Berkeley responded that he had seen silver, but not gold, an answer which delighted the Quaker host who had been determined to exhibit "something finer than anybody else."<sup>49</sup>

What James and Dalton appear to have ignored in their satirical comments on Newport's social elite, was that while the local gentlemen may have been ostentatious in the manner in which they exhibited their wealth, they were, in fact, for the first time able to use their gains in trade to purchase leisure and even luxury and to live a life of taste--as they imagined it--culture, and even magnificence. If much of this newly acquired sophistication appeared rather superficial to many, including Berkeley, it must be remembered that two short decades before his arrival there, the town had been little more than a frontier farming community, where even the wealthiest and most

respected members of the town had derived the bulk of their fortune from the ownership of land. They had, as a result, relatively little contact with other colonies and even less contact with Europe. It can hardly be surprising, then, that Berkeley noted in Newport a very strong tendency to slavishly "follow the fashions of Old England," even to the point where many were affecting atheistic notions because they had heard that this was most fashionable among the English upper classes.<sup>50</sup>

Nor was it surprising that merchants in this period rushed to adorn their bodies in an ostentatiously lavish style. Wealth was to be used, to be enjoyed, as well as to be invested. Men and women alike covered themselves with silks, laces and velvets as they anxiously sought to imitate the latest English fashion.<sup>51</sup> Wearing apparel was often custom-made outside of the home, as haberdashers, tailors and collar makers all maintained growing and thriving businesses.<sup>52</sup> John Tipson's skill as a wigmaker was so much in demand that he was forced to buy an indentured servant to aid him in his work.<sup>53</sup> The taste of Newport women for Genoa gloves was recognized in so cosmopolitan a place as Boston. John Lilly, who sent gloves by special order from Boston to be sold by Daniel Ayrault Jr., succeeded in making his merchandise a social necessity for Newport ladies by the early 1740's.<sup>54</sup>

Houses erected in this period by the city's social elite also reflected the desire for ostentatious luxury. Abraham

Redwood and Godfrey Malbone, in fact, apparently engaged in a friendly competition when they built their respective town houses. Situated on the opposite sides of Thames Street, both structures were enclosed by a brick wall with a wrought iron gate, and both harbored attractive gardens on their grounds.<sup>55</sup> If there was, indeed, a contest between the two merchants, then the laurels must have gone to Malbone. His brick residence, probably designed by Richard Munday, was remarkably similar to the colony house which would be erected ten years later. It was more ornate than most domestic buildings, complete with a cupola and balcony fitted with a wrought iron ballustrade.<sup>56</sup> The "great room" in the house was gilded with over 2500 leaves of gold, while painters were kept constantly employed on the exterior, making certain that the trim was fresh and clean.<sup>57</sup> Other Thames Street "mansions" of the early eighteenth century included those of Jahleel Brenton and William Wanton.<sup>58</sup>

All Newport merchants, even those of lesser attainments than the Malbones or the Redwoods, owned houses containing much evidence of the new prosperity so many of them were beginning to enjoy. Houses were replete with silver and even gold articles fashioned by Newport craftsmen such as Samuel Bissel and Samuel Vernon. Most of them contained silver tankards, pitchers, porringers, cups, spoons and pepper boxes all prominently exhibited and valued highly by their owners.<sup>59</sup> No residence was complete without at least one "great looking glass,"<sup>60</sup> while

furniture--bought, by the 1720's, from native craftsmen like Job Townsend and William Robinson--grew more and more distinctive. Furniture was usually custom made, the buyer often supplying his own fine mahogany to be turned into chairs, desks and tables fashioned after specific personalized instructions.<sup>61</sup> Newport furniture was of such high quality in fact, that Abraham Redwood was proud to order a desk and a book case from Christopher Townsend for his relatives in Antigua.<sup>62</sup> Some houses even contained such special items as telescopes, maps and terrestrial globes, while even a coat of arms was not an unusual sight at this time.<sup>63</sup> At least one inhabitant, Mr. John Headley, actually constructed an indoor system of running water for his home a full six years before Berkeley's arrival in Newport.<sup>64</sup> All of the houses were cared for, of course, by house servants or slaves, many of the wealthier merchants even having slaves, complete with livery, to drive their chaises for them.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV

Social life in Newport was not so sophisticated as it was in England--or even in Boston--despite the luxurious manner of living of its richer inhabitants. In fact, existing evidence suggests that in the early eighteenth century, at least, the social activity of the city's leading citizens did not vary significantly from that of artisans and craftsmen.

For the male members of the property-owning classes, for instance, social life centered around the taverns, coffeehouses