

THE GENTLEMAN'S HOUSE IN THE BRITISH ATLANTIC WORLD 1680-1780.  
Stephen Hague. Pp. xvi and 233, Illus 64. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Price £60.00.  
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Elites sneered, but other eighteenth-century commentators received the compact classical houses that are analysed in this book as 'handsome', 'neat', and 'good' (p. 51). Those epithets make a handy description of the book itself, the qualities of which were recognised in its being shortlisted for the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain's Alice Davis Hitchcock award in 2016. But this in fact is a book more about people than about buildings, and not an example of that too common genre of neutron-bomb architectural history, or material culture that is all material and no culture. Hague's approach is not simply to people the buildings he has studied, something he ably does, but to study a particular type of house primarily for what it reveals about society. In the end his book is a subtle investigation of social mobility, which he finds was not 'linear and flashy', but 'most often cloaked in restrained garb' (p. 158).

Straddling the Atlantic, Hague examines 'box' houses, typically five- or seven-bay fronted and architecturally plain, rural or suburban, though neither country houses nor villas. This common type has been neglected in England, less so in America's eastern states, where he also roams. He concludes that these houses were by and large not aspirational but confirmatory of status, built by and for merchants, men who had made their pile selling cloth around Stroud, or slaves around Bristol, and in America 'genteel owners who provided much of the backbone for colonial administration and governance' (p. 150). He stresses conservatism and the limits to emulation, following Bourdieu in his take on consumption (p. 96), while also giving space to individualism and eccentricity. We become aware that people do not always necessarily live in the largest home they might afford. Gendered roles are addressed but not overplayed, the emphasis being on male dominance in the shaping of domestic spaces in what was an inescapably patriarchal society.

The book arose from empirical curiosity that grew from Hague's role as the director of Stenton, a historic house museum in Philadelphia and a brick house of the 1720s of the 'box' type. Subsequent doctoral research based in Oxford took in a sample of eighty-one houses in Gloucestershire. The study is informed by dense scholarship, a great depth and breadth of reading. The select bibliography runs to twenty-four pages, the notes take another forty-two, together more than a quarter of the book. But the other three quarters rise above the sources and are not at all turgid. Everything has been digested and distilled and the prose flows.

There is also a clear structure. A general introduction is followed by an exposition of topographical contexts before the meat of the book is addressed in five chapters about aspects of status. These start with the building of the houses, a conventional and tidily chronological architectural history, and go on less conventionally to address settings, whether rural or suburban, and interiors, which are explained as designedly flexible. In a plan typology the absence of Robert Taylor's Thames-side villa type with central top-lit staircase seems to confirm conservatism, as does a mid eighteenth-century trend towards detached kitchens, a reversion to an earlier vernacular type. Then, in a radical move in an architectural history, there is a chapter about furniture. Some wonderfully Cluedo-like illustrations refurnish houses from inventories (pp. 99, 108,

111). Moving gradually further from the roots in built fabric, the final chapters are about behaviour or comportment and power networks.

It is a pity that Hague was not able to draw fully on Roger Leech's recently published *The Town House in Medieval and Early Modern Bristol* (2014), and intriguing that he differs with Leech as to whether certain houses in Clifton were primary residences or retreats (p. 59). A couple of quibbles about the illustrations need to be registered. Historic maps are reproduced at a scale that makes them hard to read, and verticals converge disturbingly in the author's own photographs. Nevertheless, the book as a whole is a gem – coherent, balanced, fluent, incisive, and attractively produced.