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Conclusion

The research project on which this book is based was titled ‘Do Beards Matter?’ – a deliberately provocative question which sought to draw attention to the issue of whether something as quotidian as a beard could potentially shed light on the histories of gender, masculinity, the body, medicine health and practice and even broader social, cultural and economic conditions. The short answer, as this book has argued, is ‘yes’. But as it has also shown, the question itself does not go far enough. Not only have *beards* mattered fundamentally through time, but so has facial hair in all its forms, including moustaches, whiskers and stubble, and so too has the clean-shaven face, which has proved equally culturally loaded.

Previous studies have often focused on the symbolic, theoretical or literary significance of facial hair and its respective place within prevailing constructions of masculinity. But the extent to which such theories affected the daily decisions of individual men as to whether they cultivated, shaved or styled their facial hair has remained elusive. What was it like to shave or be shaved in the past? How did men interact with barbers and how did this change over time? How did men learn to shave and what products did they use to facilitate the process? Recovering such experiences has been at the heart of this book.

The period between 1650 and 1900 saw a number of important changes in the history of facial hair. First, was the gradual ‘demedicalisation’ of facial hair as debates about its nature and origin gradually shifted the focus from the interior, to the exterior of the body. In 1650, facial hair was conceived of in humoral terms. In physiological terms, facial hair in early modern England was regarded as one of the body’s excrements – essentially an exhaust gas left over from the production of sperm deep within the body, which gradually made its way upwards and outwards, solidifying on the surface of the face. This process, at least initially, was viewed as a form of catamenia, virtually the male equivalent of female menstruation. The strong connections between facial hair and spermatoc production informed cultural ideas about the beard as a symbol of male strength and virility. The thickness, quality and colour of facial hair were important markers of inner heat, which in turn betokened generative power. Such views remained largely intact well into the first decades of the eighteenth century.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, it was clear that changes were occurring, both to concepts of the origin and nature of facial hair. The growing popularity of microscopes and enlightened interests in scientific experiment and empirical

observation more generally began to cast doubt on the veracity of links between beard hair and the production of sperm. New studies increasingly began to suggest that hair grew in, or just beneath the skin, rather than from some essential spirit deep within the body. Rather than originating deep within the body, beard hair came to be seen as a material emerging either within or just below the skin.

The second change involved the practices of shaving and the practitioners involved in the process. Between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, barbers were the main providers of shaving for the majority of men. As part of the hybrid occupation of barber-surgeons, barbers were medical practitioners, reflecting lingering ideas of shaving as a medical procedure – one that rid the body of waste material. As much as physicians might have disagreed, barber-surgeons were part of the civic fabric of early modern towns, and their guilds and companies were important institutions. As Chapter 5 explored, barbershops were common in towns and villages across the country, varying in size, status and fittings. As with other forms of medical practice, prices were tailored to suit the pockets of customers, with some barbers offering swift and cheap penny shaves, while others looked to create something more of an experience. In either case, the barbershop was an important homosocial space for men, who used it for socializing, tipping and merrymaking, as well as submitting to the razor. For elite gentlemen able to procure the services of a barber in their own home under a long-term contract arrangement, having a personal barber on call was a mark of status. Learning to shave was part of the formal training of the apprentice barber, and a variety of means were used to do this, from practice upon live customers to dead animals.

The mid-eighteenth century, however, brought fundamental changes to both the practice of shaving and the structure of the haircutting trades. The split between the barbers and surgeons in 1745, effectively relegated barbers to a sort of medical auxiliary, still linked to various forms of bodywork, including shaving, bloodletting and minor procedures, but sundered from formal structures of practice. A second effect of the split was the further sundering of the haircutting trades into barbers and hairdressers, the latter abandoning shaving in favour of ministering to the wigs and coiffeurs of the wealthy and distancing themselves from the rough and ready trade of barbering.

At the same time, with the increasing availability of high-quality razors and the social imperative for the clean-shaven face linked to expectations of polite manliness, men were beginning to shave themselves, breaking the long-held monopoly of barbers as the sole providers of shaving. Although self-shaving was initially limited to wealthy elite and middling gentlemen, who could afford the often-costly equipment, over time it began to sink lower down the social scale, becoming more popular and viewed as part of the suite of tasks expected of a man. The emergence of the ‘beard movement’ around 1853 could be seen as the final point of rupture between men and barbers, as attacks on shaving and a wealth of apparent medical evidence for the healthiness of beards rendered their trade moribund.

But it is clear that neither the split between the barbers and surgeons, the rise of hairdressers or the resurgent Victorian fashion for beards dealt anything like a coup de grace to barbers. Indeed, it could be argued that the nineteenth century was a high point, that saw barbershops busier than ever before. The continuing connection

between barbers and shaving was reinforced, as we have seen, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dictionary definitions that continued to define barbers first and foremost as 'shavers'. What had changed, though, was the customer demographic. Whereas once barbers shave the faces of men across the social scale, it appears that they now concentrated on the urban working classes, establishing small, ad hoc businesses to cater for the weekly shave of working men. The demand for their services on weekends often overwhelmed barbers, leading them to work through the nights on Saturdays to deal with the queues. There was also a lingering enmity between the old rivals and a resistance towards removing either the occupational boundaries or terminologies of the haircutting trades. By 1800, hairdressers had diminished in status and were falling on hard times. Throughout the nineteenth century, they attempted to re-establish themselves as a high-status trade, with professional associations, trade manuals and journals, along with calls for training academies and clubs ... none of which were replicated by barbers.

A third key change was that of the gradual emergence of a new market for cosmetic shaving products from the eighteenth century and, perhaps more importantly, the increasing emphasis upon individual responsibility for managing the face. As the book has argued, this represented a new category of men's personal grooming, one that was firmly linked to the consumption and use of particular goods. This was, in many respects, the prototype for the huge market in male cosmetics and shaving products in the modern age. Men have often been missing from the history of cosmetics. In the early modern period, there was virtually no commercial product available for individual men either to facilitate the act of shaving or emolliate its aftereffects. But, the large number of skin preparations in domestic remedy culture offered an opportunity for men to deal with cuts, rashes and abrasions. The mid-eighteenth century, however, saw the beginnings of what was to become a huge corner of the cosmetics market. From virtually a standing start, a whole host of shaving products began to become commercially available and advertised in the growing number of Georgian newspapers. Such advertisements are revealing of the expectations of manliness, but also of the contradictions within prevailing ideals of masculine traits and behaviours.

Fourth, the period covered by the book also saw a number of changes to beard fashions. The face of an Englishman before 1650 was likely to be bearded. The disappearance of beards and moustaches from male faces across Europe from the last decades of the seventeenth century, however, raised new questions about the nature of facial hair and its generation and introduced tensions in its place as a symbol of innate manliness. In sociocultural terms, facial hair (at least among elites and middling sorts) had become undesirable amidst a new 'polite' focus upon refining the body. Other factors contributed to the demise of facial hair, including the rise of wig-wearing, changing aesthetic preferences for smoothness and youthfulness and, perhaps, the association of facial hair with a rough, rustic manliness, set against the neat and elegant visage of the polite gentleman. Despite this, the ability to grow facial hair remained important, since 'smock faced' men unable to produce an abundant crop of whiskers, were at risk of assumptions about effeminacy. Facial hair was still therefore regarded as a key element of the male body, albeit one that required manly self-mastery to control. This predilection for the shaved face lasted virtually 150 years, until the Victorian

beard movement saw the widespread fashion for large bushy beards that has become virtually synonymous with the age. Here, amidst a new focus upon the physicality of the male body, the beard was remade into a totem of manliness; an outward symbol of inner strength as well as a natural protector against the harsh, outdoor life for which men were supposedly fitted.

But, as the book has argued, this grand narrative of facial hair, while revealing of broad trends in fashion and ideas about masculinity, fails to encapsulate the nuances and variations that could occur according to age, location, status and so on. It also ignores the agency of individual men in determining their own facial hair style. It is easy to assume, for example, that all eighteenth-century men were clean-shaven. The absence of facial hair in imagery, together with the general emphasis on neatness, elegance and smoothness, all militate towards the predominance of the shaved face. But, as Chapter 8 argued, such source material is often weighted strongly towards middle and elite men. While evidence is sparser for the lower orders, there are suggestions, for example in 'wanted' advertisements for criminals and runaways, that some types of facial hair were potentially popular among plebeian men. This should be unsurprising since there is little reason to assume that men lower down the social scale should choose to mirror elite fashions, especially given the connections of shaving with performative politeness. It is not even clear to what extent assumptions about the clean-shaven face among middling and elite men are accurate. As Chapter 6 discussed, the fact that many men only shaved once or twice a week suggests they may have spent much of the week with heavy stubble, further complicating the idea of the eighteenth century as a beardless age. A similar situation could be argued for the nineteenth century. The mass of literature in support of beards that emerged after 1850, together with the large numbers of images of hirsute Victorian men, appears to confirm the ubiquity of beards. Here again though, as the study of prisoner photographs suggests, a potentially large proportion of Victorian men may well have been clean-shaven, while others wore a variety of styles, from side whiskers to chin beards, rather than the archetypal full beard.

In each period, personal choice likely remained the key determining factor. For a variety of reasons, decisions to wear or not wear facial hair, although influenced in part by prevailing ideas about fashion, masculinity and health, were still a matter for the individual man. Even here, there was nuance, however. Men in various institutions, including prisons, workhouses and asylums, had little agency over their appearance, but instead were compelled, sometimes forcibly, to submit to the razor.

Finally, the meanings of facial hair changed dramatically across the span of this book, according to different times and contexts. In broad terms there were three key stages. First, in the early modern period, as we have discussed, facial hair was a symbol of masculine virility and an essential marker of inner heat. Notwithstanding the fact that some women clearly and obviously had facial hair, it was also a badge of distinction between the sexes. Being unable to grow a beard suggested a lack of seminal heat and, therefore, corporeal and sexual weakness and the suspicion of effeminacy. Second, the eighteenth century saw the denigration of the *display* of facial hair as representing a rough, alternative model of manly appearance. If it was not necessarily to be worn, the ability to grow facial hair was still of paramount

importance, though, with lingering ideas about the connection of facial hair to inner heat. By the mid-nineteenth century, the pendulum had swung back and the full beard was again held up as an important display of masculine power and authority. In each case, whether facial hair was in or out of fashion, the importance of being able to grow a beard remained undiminished.

But even here there were variables. The colour of facial hair, for example, complicated simple binaries between bearded and non-bearded. In the seventeenth century, as Chapter 2 suggested, close connections with the humoral body meant that the colour of hair and beard could act as a visible sign of temperament and also, according to some authors, point to more or less desirable characteristics. This allowed for a virtual hierarchy of quality and colour. Beliefs about the significant power of hair and beard colour were still prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century. Advertisements for hair and beard dyeing products promoted black and brown as 'natural' colours, set against undesirable ginger or 'red' whiskers, which potentially bore undesirable racial characteristics.

This raises a further point about the centrality of facial hair to debates about racial classification. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, facial hair was of signal importance in the ranking of *Homo sapiens*, and beards were seen as an important indicator of civilization. Climate was one factor that was argued to determine the quality, colour and thickness of facial hair. But the quantity, quality and colour of facial hair could also be proxies for physical strength, mental acuity and reproductive and sexual power. Europeans, able to grow beards, were confident in asserting their own place at the top of the hierarchy. Bearded non-European races were regarded more highly than those unable to grow facial hair, who were described in terms of weakness, inferiority and effeminacy. Even the manner of removing facial hair offered potential insight into the extent to which relative a non-European people were 'civilized'. Unsurprisingly, nations whose men shaved, and were therefore closest to European practices, were viewed more favourably.

Inevitably, in covering more than three centuries of history and surveying thousands of sources in a research project that has spanned seven years, there have been many blind alleys, shifts of emphasis and certainly much more that could have been said on many topics. Indeed, the material left out of this book could easily make another. But it is to be hoped that the evidence presented here, and questions raised, will stimulate debate, offer opportunities for further research and open up new lines of enquiry.

In 1855, towards the end of his lengthy encomium to facial hair, 'Beards and Their Bearers', in *Crayon*, the author H. W. fretted that he had perhaps 'pull[ed] the beard to a greater extent than my readers' patience will be inclined to bear'.¹ More than 150 years after H. W.'s article, facial hair is still a subject of intense interest and debate; his concern for not stretching the patience of his readers, though, also makes a fitting conclusion to this twenty-first-century book about beards.

¹ H. W., 'Beards and Their Bearers', *Crayon*, 1:24 (1855): 378.