

Book Reviews

Post-1800

RUTH BARTON. *The X Club: Power and Authority in Victorian Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. 576. \$55.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2020.164

In November 1864, a London dining group known as the X Club was created by nine men of science (the gendering of the phrase was important to them, while the word “scientist” they deemed vulgar). There was the surgeon George Busk, chemist Edward Frankland, mathematician Thomas Archer Hirst, botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker, biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, naturalist John Lubbock, philosopher Herbert Spencer, mathematician William Spottiswoode, and physicist John Tyndall. Until 1892, the X Club dined monthly between October and June and socialized with their families outside of these dinners, too. These interactions helped the men coordinate their actions on how science was run in Britain, especially in the metropolis. Such cooperation—in escalating scale—took the form of gossiping; nominating each other to membership in prestigious groups like the Royal Society; running lobbying campaigns; supporting each other in public disputes; plotting to run the aforementioned prestigious societies; or—in the X Club’s highest ambitions—trying to change how ordinary people saw themselves in the universe. This last aim is called changing the public’s “cosmic imaginary,” to use Ruth Barton’s splendid phrase (31). It is this aspiration that moves Barton’s *The X Club: Power and Authority in Victorian Science* from being a “microhistory” (Barton’s own word) to a full-scale study of science and its place in Victorian culture (7).

While many of the figures’ names, such as Huxley’s, are credited nowadays with being on the side of science and intellectual progress in a battle against ignorance and superstition, Barton’s framing of these nine men is “deliberately unheroic” (8). This is in part because of concerns about anachronism and in part because these nine men were not lone figures but assisted, particularly by women whose own important contributions were revealed only later. Another reason is that Barton objects to the notion that a few people are by themselves able to change the world without the ground being prepared beforehand by larger social and cultural changes (8). Finally, any claims to heroism are undermined by concerns, held even then, that the group verged on being a secret society. Barton is too careful a scholar to directly say this, though there are some hints as to her leanings: their public downplaying of any special