

In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820-1930

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In 1872 the Reverend T. DeWitt Talmage composed an essay entitled 'After midnight' in which he put forward the notion that night-time in the city passes through four distinct phases or 'watches' (pp. 55–6). Night was not one entity that lasted from dusk until dawn, instead it moved in three hour periods commencing at 6pm. This was the end of the working day for business establishments, a time characterised by the turning out of workmen and clerks onto the streets. As clocking off time merged into the second watch the city dedicated itself to leisure amusements, whether wholesome or otherwise. Those who pursued these late into the night found themselves in 'after midnight', a time when most of those still awake were enjoying the city's seedier offerings or using the cover of darkness to break the law. Finally at around 3am revelries died down and working homes begun stirring ready for the day ahead. Each watch represents a new spatial function for the city's spaces and each invoked a different set of connotations for the urban inhabitant with a corresponding level of morality. It is the social activity and perception of these watches, and the extent to which DeWitt Talmage was right to compartmentalise the urban night, that interests Peter Baldwin and forms the subject matter of *In the Watches of the Night*.

In the Watches of the Night explores the physical development of the city's night-time infrastructure, the behaviours of those who used it and the anxieties of those who feared the insalubrious behaviours it gave cover to. Baldwin's work traces the experience of night in pre-industrial north-east American cities, where the streets were perilously dark and left to young men on drinking sprees, prostitutes, criminals, and watchmen, to that of the booming, electrified cities of the dynamic 1920s, where artificial light enabled a night-time work force to operate, where mass entertainment flourished and where young men continued to lay claim to the night. The expansion of night activity provoked social conflicts, created new customs and power inequalities, forming what Baldwin terms a 'complicated new space'. This space had its own

schedule, its own rules of access and its own codes of behaviour (p. 13). Yet, technological progress did not turn night into day. Baldwin attributes this to a persistent moral controversy which shrouded the city after sunset, something that was largely the product of danger, street crime, and the highly gendered nature of this space. Night-time in the pre-industrial city was variously a place of debauchery, fear, violence, crime, excitement, mystery and escapism and this had changed little by the first decades of the 20th century.

Baldwin's work follows on from that of D. Nasaw, Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Joachim Schlör.⁽¹⁾ In creating a social geography of light Baldwin's research shares certain characteristics with that of Lynda Nead and Richard Dennis, both of whom explore the impact of lighting on the night-time experience of London, and in Dennis' case also New York.⁽²⁾ These authors examine the inconsistent presence of street lighting, the varying quality of which 'articulated social difference'.⁽³⁾ Baldwin's work sets itself apart by addressing the social geography of lighting within a much broader context of technological change, and its cultural impact on the experience of night. In this analysis the author questions the agency of technology as a driver of historical change. He makes it clear that the use of a new invention is rarely determined by its inventor and its application to everyday life largely depends on the social position and knowledge of those who have access to it (p. 3). This is an important point of consideration for anyone interested in urban modernisation and this book offers us a good example of how to handle the dialogue between society and technology.

In the Watches of the Night tells the story of urban night through a series of well devised chronological and thematic chapters. Analysis begins with 'Making night hideous', a chapter which focuses on the advent of gas street lighting and the social geography of light and darkness. Here a connection is made between the unequal advances made by gas lighting and the growing division of the industrial city along functional and class lines. This discussion also addresses the perceived ability of light to make urban streets safer, something Baldwin deals with in conjunction with the rise of a professional police force that, between the mid and late 19th century, had to respond to a new geography of nocturnal crime as a result of zoned night-time activity.

Following on from this discussion the next three chapters address changing attitudes towards and opportunities for leisure after dark. These trace both middle- and working-class perceptions of the moral and immoral leisure activities on offer in the city and present the night-time street as a site of conflict and potential corruption. Male dominance of the city after dark is stressed here, particularly with regard to the 'third watch' which, Baldwin asserts, was characterised by social activities largely indistinguishable from those which young men had indulged in in the pre-industrial city.

The subsequent chapters, 'Nightmen' and 'Incessance', turn attention to night-time work. Here Baldwin explores the impact of privy cleaners, food traders, transport workers, and newspaper producers and sellers on the public spaces. This is where we are introduced to the children who made the night-time streets theirs, particularly newsboys whose knowledge of the city gave them the confidence to assert a right to 'adult' nocturnal spaces. Changing shift patterns also had a profound impact in the way people engaged with and used the night-time city. Incessant round-the-clock factory production claimed the night hours of an array of male workers and Baldwin examines their experience of a disrupted day and night schedule. Night shifts put more people on the streets and in public transport after dark and the following chapter, 'Mashers, owl cars, and night hawks', analyses this in relationship to the use of urban spaces by women. Narratives of sexual danger assume a prominent place in this dialogue, emphasising the unequal access men and women had to the streets and street-cars after dark.

During the 1880s American cities began introducing electric lighting and 'Night life in the electric city' is an attempt to discern the effect of this more effervescent light on the urban night. Baldwin positions the consequences of this new technology firmly within broader social and economic changes which were bringing about their own dramatic shifts in the cultural use of the night-time city. From the late 19th century to the 1920s cheap mass entertainment was on the rise and this brought about a new set of moral concerns. No longer was the night-time clearly divided into four phases and this surrounded modern entertainments with a moral ambiguity – they were far from respectable yet could hardly be condemned in the same

fashion as the gambling hall or brothel.

Attempts to navigate this changing engagement with the night are the subject of the final chapter, in which Baldwin examines campaigns and legislation for the regulation of children and women's access to the night-time city. Attention is drawn to the different attitudes held by middle class and working class families towards the urban night, attempts which often found expression in how far parents permitted their children to experience the city after dark. The regulation of female access came in the form of labour laws which limited opportunities for night-time work. Baldwin finishes by stressing how policies of regulation reinforced the old nocturnal culture of the pre-industrial city. In discouraging the presence of women and children, frequently in terms of the moral danger they faced there, the urban night remained a male-dominated space. Rather than reforming male engagement with the city and making it a safer place to be, the night streets were given over to those whose activity was potentially a physical and moral threat to more vulnerable members of the urban community.

In the Watches of the Night makes a valuable contribution to urban history, not only through the detailed and rich research which it presents, but also through its ability to encourage new ways of thinking about how past inhabitants experienced their cities. Additionally there is a lot of potential to extend Baldwin's ideas to a broader array of case studies and to post-1920 time periods, thereby deepening further our understanding of this often neglected aspect of urban living. *In the Watches of the Night* is a highly accessible work that will interest a wide range of readers from those who want to know about gendered spaces, to those keen to find out more about childhood in the 19th century, to those who study crime and deviance, to urban historians who are curious about the socio-cultural recasting of city spaces.

Notes

1. W. Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialisation of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 1988); D. Nasaw, 'Cities of light, landscapes of pleasure', in D. Ward and O. Zunz, *The Landscape of Modernity: Essay on New York City, 1900–1940* (Baltimore, MD, 1992); J. Schlör, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin and London* (London, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. L. Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth Century London*, (New Haven, CT, 2000), pp. 83–148; R. Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 129–136.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dennis, 2008, p. 130.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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