

London, a Social History

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"Five million barrels of porter" (p. 140)

Early in this substantial, often informative and entertaining, but in the last resort intellectually elusive account of London, Porter describes the panorama of the metropolis sketched by Anthonis van den Wyngaerde in about 1544. He treats it as a coherent representation of the city from a vantage point in Southwark. But in truth that drawing is an amalgam of views observed from many different sites, which unites the acknowledged set-pieces of the London landscape, many of them delineated with accuracy and charm, in a single scene, but at the expense of not a little distortion, omission, and duplication. On close inspection, the sense of jarring unreality grows. Much the same can be said of this social history. Just as Wyngaerde's bold hand gave a semblance of unity to his work, so Porter's verbal style, his distinctive personal and occasionally autobiographical approach, and his attractive and straightforward political agenda, hold the chronicle together.

The text skips along, carrying the reader with it, and conveys a mass of detailed information and anecdote distilled from a wide range of texts, including a fair quantity of recent historical writing. Like many of the general histories of London produced since John Stow's "Survey" of 1598, this is a green production (signalled in the fine colour of the binding and dust-jacket) which involves much recycling. But in contrast to the general run, much of that work is impressively done, with accuracy, insight, and style. Nevertheless, the constant trickle of minor errors, inevitable in a work of this sort, in places becomes a cascade (especially in connection with the earlier periods), and misleading general statements appear which betray an unfamiliarity with context and a corresponding unwillingness to question conventional interpretations. Thus the synthesis which the author perhaps hoped for is not achieved. Moreover, the writing lacks that milky

fullness or that disingenuous forswearing of passion and bias which might have given real relish and power to this story of a city. Impasto rules the page. The art with which the gobbets and London stories are assembled is like that of a mosaicist whose skilfully-executed scenes, sometimes placed awkwardly in a ground of lesser quality, too often fail to capture the imagination. More purely literary devices are also deployed. The alliteration is almost programmatic: as the plosives plop we may be sure that a political point for our times is being made. Lists are even more luxuriant. They can be fun, and there are some startling Urquhartian moments as the parts of London are named. But not a few of the lists seem like padding, while some -- such as that of the "Wren churches" in the city -- are pedestrian and mislead as accounts of London's geography and history. Overall they reveal an author who is happier with texts, names, and stories than with fieldwork. The contrast with Stow, who made excellent use of his feet and had a keen eye for place, is striking. Despite Porter's Sunday walks, his lists, often the chosen means of evoking the landscape and growth of the metropolis, seem frequently to have been read from a street the directory or off the A to Z.

The stylistic features raise the problem of assessing the underlying purpose of the book. Are they economic in intent? Fairground glitter for the magpies of the metropolitan reading classes? Or a way of mentioning as many localities as possible in "village London", and thereby increasing sales? Or are they an attempt, brave but only in part successful, at conveying an impression of the diversity, haphazard confusion, and staccato impacts of London life, as well as of its underlying, but not readily portrayed, unity? Certainly, listing has for millennia been one of the tools with which the authorities have attempted to understand great cities and control them. Lists have resonance for private individuals too, serving as pathways for assimilation into city life, as business aids, and for the silent reinforcement, through the rehearsal of memory, of their personal identities as *cognoscenti* of the city. For Mr Sponge after all (he is sadly absent from this tale: Pooter is preferred), "Mogg's Ten Thousand Cab Fares, price one shilling" provided both entertainment and consolation, especially during his thrusting but shaky enterprises away from town. Likewise, the author's effective use of the language of numbers connects with long-established forms of metropolitan thought and language, as with the 207 inns, 447 taverns, 5875 beer houses, and 8659 brandy shops of early eighteenth-century London (not to mention the barrels of porter), or with the surreal assertion that "Ruislip-Northwood leapt from 9,112 in 1920 to 47,760 in 1939". Such approaches generate some fine passages, but whether they signal a coherent attempt to forge a link between language, sensibility and historical interpretation remains unclear.

Statistics convey what readers may expect to find in the work. Just 6 per cent of the text is devoted to the first 1,500 years of London's history, from its foundation to 1540; 38 per cent to the next three hundred years; 31 per cent to the next fifty (to 1890); and 22 per cent to the last hundred years. There's a rough justice in this distribution, which in part reflects the size of London and the likely total of Londoners in each period. Yet to devote 8 per cent to the last 60 years of the sixteenth century (witnessed by fewer than 1 per cent of all Londoners who have ever lived) reflects a romantic attachment to a view of the city's "success" in the "Elizabethan Age" which matches neither its contemporary international standing nor the realities of its daily life. Moreover, the majority of all Londoners ever alive do not seem to get their due in the coverage accorded to the most recent century. Still, the Green Belt, bypasses, arterial roads, industrial estates, cottage housing, Becontree, the Tooting Granada, J. Lyons, and the Swinging Sixties all get a mention, as do their nineteenth-century equivalents. As one would expect, the account of social life and culture in eighteenth-century London, while not the longest section in the book, is one of the most coherent and satisfying. By contrast, the slight attention paid to the formative centuries of the city's history (this is not, I hope, solely an expression of the medievalist's bias) means that some of the most important long-term forces which have moulded the lives of its inhabitants are insufficiently delineated. These include the city's position within a wider world, especially *vis a vis* Continental cities; the cyclical continuities in social function and spatial layout which are apparent from Roman times onwards; the crucial influence of London on the process of the formation of the English state, extending over five centuries up to 1300; and the powerful impact of that process on civic and other forms of local government.

Porter's recurrent themes are readily apparent. London was, and is, a chaotic, unregulated, dangerous, and at the same time spectacular, lively and stimulating place. Its fortunes have rested on trade, but the loss of its

manufactures has been one of the disasters of recent times (this could have been placed in the wider context of London's long-term role as a centre of social, intellectual and industrial innovation). It is famous for its size and for its rate of growth, especially in certain distinctive episodes when the misery of urban expansion has attracted the moral, and occasionally morbid, interest of some, while among others it has prompted intimations of future decay. (Yet London is not given its due as one of the European "shock cities" of the earlier Middle Ages). That growth is explained largely in terms of London's imperial role (with little reference to European connections). Its government has rarely, if ever, been equal to its needs. The physical disconnectedness of London may at times have inhibited incipient mass or revolutionary action, and in the "village London" trope has become embedded in the discourse of metropolitan wholesomeness, but it is also reflected in chaotic administrative structures. These in turn explain why London has displayed little coherence as an architectural expression (fuller consideration of the role of the Crown or state in this matter would have been welcome). The city fathers thus emerge as pig-headed and self-interested, except during the Elizabethan Age and possibly under the Romans. Nevertheless, the remarkable effectiveness of the City authorities in certain fields of provision for the general welfare of the metropolis during the later nineteenth century is given its due, perhaps as a lesson or even as a warning for our own times. London at present is in a bad way. The physical infrastructure decays. Porter's own students have been attacked at almost the very spot where he grew up, in the modest but ordered environment of New Cross Gate. The "cohesiveness" of the population, which with the sheer wealth brought by trade perhaps made the muddle work in the past, has now disappeared so that the city can no longer harmoniously assimilate incomers in the way that it did in the past. (Tell that to the Jews, Flemings and Italians of the medieval city, and several immigrant groups in later periods too. In any case is that really a correct observation concerning at least some social changes in inner parts of London over the last three decades, which many might find heartening?). At this point the work reaches the height of passion for which it has become famous, not least for its account of the vindictive onslaught which central government has made on Londoners. The direct parallel (for this reviewer) is perhaps to be found in King Henry III's actions against the citizens. Instead Porter obliquely signals his later onslaught on the Iron Lady and her boys in his account of the Reformation in London as "an asset-stripping exercise unleashed by a destitute and opportunist regime". At moments like these style, interpretation, and polemic combine to striking effect. In the context of late twentieth-century metropolitan politics, the book has certainly struck home.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether historical understanding is ever more influential than the recycling of myth in forming public policy, let us consider the work as an historical explanation or narrative. The problem here, as with the metropolis itself, is the incoherence of the foundations. With its episodic approach the book does not manage to transcend the established and often self-contained historiographical assumptions of its several parts. Thus in the end, despite perceptive insights in accounts of particular scenes, Porter's overview provides little new understanding of continuities and change in the life of London over its long history. He perhaps attempts to mention too much and pauses for informed reflection too seldom. Moreover, his characterisations are slightly off the mark too often - as in describing the city's street pattern as being purely haphazard in origin, or in casually identifying a city property boom as being primarily an outcome of the dissolution of the monasteries - to serve as a stimulus to creative thinking about London. Moreover, the vulgar Whiggery (he comes down hard on vulgar Marxism) which informs much of the tale, especially concerning the expansion of the city and its services, does not help. This is apparent as much as in the shaky context provided for the "continued" growth of London in the sixteenth century, as in the surprising assertions concerning the supposed origin of retail shops and shopping in the eighteenth. At such moments he implicitly takes a modernist line. Yet at others he pursues a romantic or nostalgic path which resembles Stow's conservatively selective view of changes in the city during his lifetime. As with aspects of the prose style, the purpose of that tension between seemingly opposing views is difficult to resolve. Could it be an attempt to represent the genuine confusion and paradoxes of life and thought in the metropolis? Or is it simply the outcome of following the assumptions of those historians whose work he has used? A good example is to be found in the treatment of the secular spaces of the metropolis and their social use from the seventeenth century onwards. His fine account emphasises the way in which their character as male preserves perdured to the very end of the nineteenth century. Yet in contextualizing those forms of collective life, and the culture of sociability and hedonism which

accompanied them, he contrasts their secularity with the life centred on parish, ward and guild which was supposedly a feature of pre-Reformation London. Here surely he is the prisoner of interpretations purveyed by late nineteenth- and late twentieth-century historians whose concern to explain urban society has focused on an often unselfconscious, but nonetheless highly-politicised, conservative idea of community. Certainly medieval Londoners enjoyed more churches per head than their eighteenth-century successors, yet to a large degree that reflected not a fundamental dissimilarity in religious provision, but rather the peculiarly unregulated circumstances of one of London's early phases of growth, with its somewhat Victorian proliferation of chapels and meeting houses. Moreover, the particular view of medieval London society evident in Porter's account is shaped by the survival of institutions and the records they have transmitted for historians to study. Outside those institutions and their records, there is sufficient incidental evidence to demonstrate that in London sport, street encounters, drinking places (with which the medieval city was, in proportion, as well provided as in later times), and fast-food stores defined spaces which were quite as significant for social and collective action as in New Cross Gate today.

No theoretical framework informs this *social* history of London. That need not be a bad thing, and with its emphasis on stories of people, places, perceptions and attitudes this is certainly a social history. Early on, however, the author gives a hostage to fortune by revealing that he has "sought to probe the play of built environment with inhabitants", while in almost the same breath he dismisses the *Survey of London* as all "architaves and architects", thereby revealing that he cannot have given much attention to its publications over the last thirty years. Yet while this history is lavish in naming the abundant streets, alleys, rookeries, squares, parks and suburbs of London, its treatment of buildings is restricted to their role as delimiters of space or as easy subjects for trite phrase-making. Its assessment of architecture and of the historical meanings which can be drawn from it is decidedly weak. Thus both the first Royal Exchange and Selfridges, two powerful symbols of the impact of more dynamic cities on London's commercial life, are mentioned, yet the way in which their fabrics represented and drew Londoners into the worlds of Antwerp on the one hand and Chicago and New York is not brought out. Likewise, the contrast crudely drawn between Inigo Jones's "exquisite classicism" and the "fussy, irregular vernacular of the Elizabethan era" is both unsatisfactory as description and fails to do justice to the Antwerp mannerist style which informed many buildings of sixteenth-century London. Such passages sit unhappily with judgements elsewhere in the book and leave it unclear as to whether the author is expressing a preference for the absolutist harmonies of classicism over the haphazard and humane diversity of London or whether he is trying to argue, as one well might, that the architecture of London embodies the contradictions in its social and political life between inherent confusion and the occasional desire of prescriptive regimes to impose order. The crude account of Somerset House, however, suggests that such points may not have occurred to him. Other judgements of the building of London are also weak. Thus, to describe the rebuilding of London after the Second World War as "an opportunity missed" may be an acceptable judgement, if perhaps unfair to the financial and intellectual exhaustion of those years, but to describe the rebuilding after the Great Fire in the same terms is both naive and banal, for the protagonists in that episode proved remarkably astute in their assessment of the city's essential character and needs and of the possibilities for its physical improvement. Glib misjudgement is also apparent in the "half cock modernism" attributed to the buildings of the Festival of Britain. Surely, they embodied far more complex social programmes and ideals, including as a direct model the spirit of the World's Fair of 1939?

As befits a book made up of those stories of London commonly told to and by those born during the 1940s, in its later pages Americanization, for good or ill, comes to be a key theme. It is handled in such general terms, however, that the account of the 1950s lacks the bite that it might have gained from a more direct assessment of the impact on London of the vibrant New York culture of the later '40s. We are swept straight from the 1951 Festival and the "New Elizabethans" to Carnaby Street and Liverpool pop. A more sensitive and enquiring account of the ordered, repressed, backward-looking, yet increasingly tense culture and social life of the metropolis during the '50s would have given some thought to the world of Ronnie Scott whose trans-Atlantic pilgrimages, like those of several London painters had a remarkable, if indirect, effect on the lives of many younger Londoners.

Sometimes described as an "important" book, "Porter's London" is certainly a lively and substantial entertainment. But it is too much the prisoner of the inward-looking historiographies of each period and theme tackled, and of its own frenetic pace, to be a convincing new interpretation or overview of the history of London. Rather, its importance may be political. Whichever conservative party gains power in the next election, it seems that something will be done about the "problem of London". In his concluding pages Porter propounds the view that the social and physical dysfunction of the metropolis has at last grown too great for its anomalous system of government. He may well be right, and politicians may turn to his words for guidance. They will find there a clear and affectionate appreciation of the general qualities of London and a strong condemnation of the way in which its inhabitants have been treated during recent years, but not a well-argued set of connections between London's historical experience and the problems and options which now face the metropolis and its rulers, whoever they may be. In the stories of this social history those who wield power will be able to identify precedents and interpretations capable of being deployed to support "solutions" of almost any political hue. Perhaps that risk will stimulate historians more closely to examine the tales of old London.

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