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Victorian Babylon. People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London

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Pamela Pilbeam

This volume seeks to display mid-nineteenth century views on modernity as well as to investigate aspects of modernisation in Victorian London. Observers then and now could not and cannot help but note the piecemeal re-development of London in this period, compared, for instance, with Paris. British contemporaries were inclined to attribute the difference to the centralisation, and from 1851, the autocratic control, inherent in the more comprehensive re-building of Paris, compared with their own democratic institutions. Presumably they forgot that Britain had less of a democratic system of government than France, and overlooked, what this author notes, the inhibiting effects in London of the competing claims of vestries and private water and other companies. Another restraint on modernisation noted by Nead was the multi-temporality of modernity; the Victorian present could not escape from the past. Parisians seem to have been less tenderhearted in their treatment of the old, however picturesque. Both of these factors weave through the three parts of this book. First, under the heading, Mapping and Movement, the rationalisation of the supply of water and improvements in transport, above and below ground, are reviewed. Part Two deals with Gas and Light musing on the practical and poetical impact of the introduction of gas and on an aspect of London's cultural/entertainment life for which gas lighting was indispensable, the Cremorne Pleasure

Gardens. The final part, Streets and Obscenity, concentrates on Holywell Street, the centre of the 'dirty' book trade.

Nead dwells on the nineteenth-century fondness for comparing a city with a human body. Personal well being depended on unobstructed movement and circulation in vital organs. Modernisers in London argued that similar features were essential for the health of a city. This comparison would have been familiar to contemporaries. Incidentally, in Paris Saint-Simonians, eager for rationalisation in the capital, also likened their city to a human body and later in the century Emile Zola described Les Halles the central market, as the stomach of Paris. Following this analogy of a city with a person, Part One focuses on the mapping of the capital and the consequent opportunity to improve circulation within it. The early nineteenth century was, of course, obsessed with statistics and numerous 'panoramas' were displayed by eager entrepreneurs showing cities 'from the air'. Nead explores the first accurate scale maps of London streets, which revealed the absence of wide thoroughfares and the plethora of narrow alleys, snaking around in labyrinthine confusion. The first Ordnance Survey of London, mapping an area 12 miles from St. Paul's Cathedral, went on sale in 1851. This provided the vital details from which informed, comprehensive and profitable schemes for the construction sewers and railways could be launched.

In the 1850s and 1860s modernisation must have seemed to many Londoners mere destruction, that London was indeed to experience the fate of Babylon. First came the provision of clean water. Repeated cholera epidemics, particularly that of 1854, provoked the hesitant emergence of a single London authority, the Metropolitan Board of Works. Imagination ran riot at the thought of a watery world being linked together under the capital from the late 1850s. The journalist John Hollingshead described a stroll through Underground London, during which he sang the national anthem knee deep in the effluvia of Buckingham Palace.

Easier to illustrate visually was the improved circulation in the 1850s and 1860s of people, with the development of the railways and the construction of the main terminal stations. Even more disruptive was the digging of the first underground railway system in the world in the 1860s. Gripping illustrations demonstrate the chaos caused by both, particularly the underground lines. The observers, depicted in these graphic pictures in immaculate gowns, appear unmoved by the huge craters excavated in their roads and next door gardens. How indifferent were contemporaries? The railway companies were left to their own devices. Although instructed to provide for those made homeless by their efforts, the presence, by 1867 of 148 directors of railway companies in the House of Commons guaranteed inertia. Railway termini were carved out in poor districts. The uprooted workers moved into rented rooms in neighbouring streets, adding to overcrowding. This was in sharp contrast to the wholesale shipping of Parisian workers from the centre to outlying districts to make way for the railway. It would be interesting to know whether Londoners were aware of what had been done in Paris, and whether anyone protested that worker districts were being devastated. The illustrations reproduced here of the construction of the underground network from the 1860s raise even more questions for the reader. The underground routes cut through rich and poor habitats indiscriminately. Nead comments on the huge scale of the destruction. Were the well-off literate house-owners as silent and submissive as the poor?

Gas lighting caused major and lasting blight to working class areas. By 1860, from small beginnings in 1805, there were 23 works making gas and six huge gasholder plants, all polluting the poorer parts of the metropolis, with accompanying very real risks of explosions from their 'fires of hell'. Nead weighs up the practical and poetical benefits and disadvantages of this novel way of both lighting streets and houses and creating spectacular displays for special occasions. Previously householders had been obliged to set a light in their window after dark. By 1823, 215 miles of London streets were lit by gas. By mid-century 13 companies competed to supply a product that was unpredictable and subject to no government quality control; in every streets at least 2 companies were constantly digging up the road in their fight for customers (a strangely familiar tale). Gas lighting allowed West End stores to be a fairyland open to 8pm; suburban shops stayed open even later. Was family life threatened when middle class matrons shopped late, as some contemporaries suggested? By the mid-1860s an Early Closing Movement had successfully railed against the dangerously seductive window-shopping afforded by late opening, and the shop assistants' need of a half-

day rest on Saturdays.

If gas had an ambivalent appeal, the Cremorne Pleasure Garden in Chelsea was the epitome of the ambiguity of gas-lit entertainment. By day Cremorne offered London families the chance to wander through gardens similar to those of a private estate, for the not inconsiderable sum of 1/- a head. Victoria took her family to look at the flowers. At night gas lighting transformed Cremorne into a different world. A dance platform brilliantly lit by crystal glass globes could accommodate 3000 revellers. Others could relax in private boxes; but the management insisted that all recreational activity within them was totally visible. Dinner and champagne were available until midnight and beyond. There were firework displays and balloon rides. 'Swells', young City slickers and their flamboyantly dressed ladies, incensed the moralising brigade into tirades against prostitution. Perhaps the male moralisers were alarmed that numerous illustrations of Cremorne (many reproduced in colour in this book) show ladies very much in control of their amorous encounters. The painter Whistler frequently visited and painted the delights of the gardens. In 1877 the critic Ruskin dismissed one of these paintings as 'wilful imposture'. Whistler won his case with a farthing damages, but in his evidence left no doubt of the sexual, as well as artistic delights, offered by Cremorne. Whistler may have been triumphant, but the Gardens were ruined. In 1878 the vestry authorities refused to renew Cremorne's license and the gardens closed for good.

Victorians clearly found debating what was obscene almost as thrilling as participation. The final section of this book focuses this debate on Holywell Street, a narrow row of shops, some dating back to the Elizabethan period. Holywell represented ambiguity. The street was criticised because it was old-fashioned compared to the glamour of Oxford Street, yet the numerous illustrations displayed here showed that it had appealing picturesque qualities. Until the early nineteenth century its radical literature caused some flutterings. Jewish second-hand clothing merchants stimulated anti-Semitic reactions. Along with Temple Bar, which is touched on in the same chapter, Holywell was a physical obstacle to a much needed widening of the Strand. However it secured most notoriety when its shop windows began to display salacious illustrations (none of which are included, so readers will have no chance to put in their tuppence to the debate) alongside inoffensive prints. For many years the shops were apparently protected by customers within parliament. Curiously the Obscene Publications Act, finally passed in 1857 to force such illustrations under the counter, stressed the threat to public order, not private morality. It was concerned that mass-produced cheap prints of scantily clad girls would corrupt public morals, by luring innocent young women to join the window shoppers and presumably wonder what might happen if they took their clothes off.

The Victorians are portrayed here, conventionally, as obsessed with sexual morality. However, if the author had compared the two major examples in this book, Cremorne and Holywell Street, it would seem clear that another Victorian obsession, profit, was more dominant than criticism of the whoring in Cremorne and longing for it in Holywell, in their demolition. Babylon fell because the vestry could make more money selling Cremorne to property developers and a comparable killing was presumably made flattening Holywell in favour of the fat profits to be made building the Aldwych and Kingsway. As the books shops moved, presumably into the Charing Cross Road, their proprietors did not reap the benefit of modernisation.

This is a delightfully presented investigation of selected case studies that effectively illustrate the complexities and ambiguities of urban modernisation. It would be fascinating to subject the huge variety of popular culture described by Altick (*The Shows of London*, Cambridge MA, 1976) to the scrutiny afforded in this volume to Cremorne and Holywell Street. How did the transport revolution and the prudery crusade affect the heart of Victorian Babylon, the streets around Leicester Square, or the West End, the focus of modernised consumerism?

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[2]

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