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Londinopolis: Essays in the cultural and social history of early modern London

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Paul Griffiths

Mark S. R. Jenner

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Vanessa Harding

Historians of London face many problems, not the least of which is to find a title that adequately expresses the importance of the subject, the nature of their approach, and its distinctiveness from any preceding work. It has to be obvious without being banal, and likely to attract attention; it's also helpful if it can be shortened to something that still remains striking and sufficient. Paul Griffiths and Mark Jenner, editors of *Londinopolis. Essays in the cultural and social history of early modern London* have thus done well. They borrow the memorable key word of their title from James Howell's 1657 account of *Londinopolis: an historical discourse or perlustration of the City of London, the Imperial Chamber and the Chief Emporium of Great Britain*, though they qualify it with an apparently more modest self-description (*Essays*). The allusion to Howell's book seems to acknowledge the importance to modern scholars of more textual and literary approaches to early modern London, and the primacy of the cultural is asserted by its leading position in the subtitle. The editors explain that Howell usefully stands at the midpoint of the period they consider - which therefore appears to be post-Reformation to mid-eighteenth century - and that one of their aims is to 'challenge the conventional distinction between pre-and post-Restoration London' (p. 4). Their

introduction also questions, and by implication indicts, functionalist narratives of growth and expansion, and the reification of 'London' as an object of analysis. To some extent at least they reject the notion, or pretence, that one can write generally about London at all, and certainly disclaim any idea that the essays in this volume 'constitute a comprehensive account of the early modern capital'; rather, they are 'histories about but not necessarily of London' (p. 8). This is more than semantics, in that their choice of methodological approach intends a critique of earlier work on London and urban history. They argue that 'the economic' is not 'something which is analytically separable from society or culture' (pp. 8-9), and though they are careful to concede (in a footnote) that 'we do not claim ... that these criticisms necessarily invalidate the forms of knowledge produced by positivistic economic history' (p. 21), the overall impression is one of distancing themselves from the historiographical achievements of the past in the interests of affirming the validity of their own approach.

There are a number of claims here which are worth examining, and one way of doing this is to compare the aims and offerings of this book with those of the collection of essays on early modern London published in 1986, edited by A.L. Beier and Roger Finlay and perhaps ambitiously titled *London 1500-1700. The making of the metropolis*. What is new in this new collection? How has the subject evolved over the intervening fifteen years? What new perceptions and appreciations do we gain by this 'alternative approach to urban history'?

Beier and Finlay's was in many ways a ground-breaking volume, arising from a conference in the early 1980s and appearing just in advance of the wave of substantial monographs on early modern London in the later 1980s and early 1990s. It addressed the fact that there was, at that point, a dearth of books on early modern London, and that no real attempt had been made of recent years to synthesise scattered researches or to consider London's unique identity and situation in the light of developments in urban historiography. The editors hoped to remedy this neglect, at least in part; they intended to cover major themes and questions, though their main aim was to bring together important new work and indicate possible directions for future research (p. 6). The editorial introduction, on 'The significance of the metropolis' was itself an important summary of the state of the art. The nine papers were grouped into sections on 'Population and disease', 'Commerce and manufacture', and 'Society and change'. What characterised most of the papers in the collection was indeed a kind of 'positivistic economic history', based on research, quantification, and statistical analysis. Several of them have become milestones in the historiography of early modern London, frequently cited over the intervening years. These include Margaret Pelling on Barber-surgeons, Lee Beier on occupations, and Michael Power on social topography. Paul Slack's paper on the response of metropolitan government to plague forms an essential complement, for urban historians, to his 1985 book *The Impact of Plague*. The paper by Roger Finlay and Beatrice Shearer on population growth was sadly never followed up by the latter's promised thesis or monograph; nevertheless the paper's conclusions (from which several, including this reviewer, have dissented) have taken a firm grip on our consciousness. If Brian Dietz's statistical paper on overseas trade is not more cited now, this reflects the shift in historiographical attention, not any challenge to the validity of his figures. But the collection was not exclusively quantitative, and included the socio-cultural and political as well as the economic; Slack's and Pelling's papers certainly share the sensitivity to agency and to the cultural and ideological construction of social events and problems that Griffiths and Jenner seem to imply are a more recent phenomenon. Beier and Finlay indeed acknowledged the difficulty of writing comprehensively about early modern London, but agreed that 'if we cease to regard the city as a reified totality, then the need to document all features of its life becomes less pressing' (p. 6), which certainly prefigures Griffiths and Jenner's rejection of the reification of 'something called London' (p. 8). Nor can Beier and Finlay's collection as a whole be said to suffer from 'chronological enclosure', at least at the end of the period: most of the papers extend consideration up to 1700, if not beyond, and several focus exclusively on the period after the Restoration. It is the early sixteenth century that gets short shrift, here as in Londinopolis, and indeed if there is a chronological problem it is that historians and accounts of the early to mid-sixteenth century are increasingly divorced from those of the later seventeenth.

Some coincidences and differences between the two collections are immediately apparent. There are eleven papers in Londinopolis, besides the editorial introduction, and the book is divided into four thematic

sections. As in Beier and Finlay's collection, the editors contribute a paper each. The only contributor to both collections is Margaret Pelling; and there are four female contributors to *Londinopolis*, rather than two. The real difference, though, is in the focus of the papers and the collection as a whole, and this certainly indicates the historiographical trend of recent years. The section-titles take a range of new keywords, strikingly different from the largely empirical ones of Beier and Finlay, especially when their section on 'Society and change' is seen to comprise quantitative or statistical papers on social topography, migration, and poor relief. Griffiths and Jenner's sections are entitled 'Polis and police', 'Gender and sexuality', 'Senses of space and place', and 'Material culture and consumption'. As the editors note, the sections are not watertight categories, and indeed most of the papers have something of 'Space and Place' in them. The themes thus signalled are of major importance in current historiography, not unique to London, and the collection certainly supports their contention that most of the essays 'use Londoners' experiences to ... engage in important general debates in early modern English historical studies' (p. 9). The danger that this entails, however, is that the specifically London aspect of particular issues can almost disappear - something that Margaret Hunt acknowledges, but cannot wholly compensate for, in her excellent paper on marital rights as contested in the Court of Exchequer.

The topics of individual papers range from popular politics and parish ceremony, to patterns of sexual immorality and the apprehension of thieves. The focus is on the experience of London, and the way this constituted and was constituted by Londoners. An implicit theme is the impact that the metropolitan environment had on social relations, and how the norms of a traditional society (or the expectations of historians looking for such a society) were confounded. Social relations were renegotiated under pressures and conditions that were themselves new. Londoners recruited new assistants in their personal battle with crime, by employing professional thief-takers (Tim Wales's paper); anxieties about disease undermined conventional patterns of household and residence (Pelling); London women had to chart the new geography of the streets to carry on their daily lives (Laura Gowing); people living in cramped and expensive lodgings had to eat out or table their dependants elsewhere (Sara Pennell). Faramerz Dabhoiwala reminds us of the element of barter or even commercial transaction in most marital as well as many sexual relations, and connects the sexual misdemeanours of the elite with issues of honesty and 'whoredom' across the social spectrum. In London, inequalities of wealth, geographical mobility, economic and occupational uncertainty, and social institutions such as service contributed to 'fluid relational patterns' and 'the potential insecurity of marriage' (p. 91). The growth in population and spread of early modern London led to new patterns of neighbourhood and social responsibility in the West End, where the residence of very rich, gathered in proximity to the court, attracted and to some extent supported the congregation of the very poor (Jeremy Boulton). Likewise, growing numbers of consumers stimulated diversification and discrimination in the supply of water (Jenner). The westward flow of commerce and opportunity was a decisive obstacle to the early Stuarts' campaign to restore the goldsmiths to Goldsmiths' Row in Cheapside (Griffiths), dearly-held as that ambition was. Economic and demographic change was a major element in all these issues, but Griffiths and Jenner's resistance to 'hierarchies of causation that give primacy to the economic or any other single factor' (p. 17) can leave the reader short of a satisfactory level of explanation. Though economic change could not, in itself, determine contemporaries' perception of or response to the problem (to that extent I too would agree that 'social problems ... are constituted ideologically, rhetorically, and politically' (p. 7)), I think it deserves more acknowledgement than, on the whole, it receives here.

One feature of recent London historiography that is well-reflected in this collection is an appreciation of the importance of seeing London as a whole. The City has been a strong focus in the past, as a result of its considerable activity, which included the generation and maintenance of excellent records. But by 1700 three-quarters of London's population lived outside the City; the compact, controlled city that John Stow had known had been submerged in an amorphous and challengingly varied metropolis. Pelling's paper explicitly deals with movement into and out from the urban centre; others that take court records (ecclesiastical, civil, criminal) as their source implicitly dissolve the distinction between the city and the rest. Boulton focuses on St Martin in the Fields in the West End, where population rocketed in the second half of the seventeenth century, from some 20,000 to over 100,000. Michael Berlin's stimulating examination of the evolution of parish ritual centres on city parishes but moves easily into the suburbs as well. Ian Archer does concentrate

on citizens, for his discussion of popular politics in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but he sees them as one category or configuration among many and is careful not to privilege them as typical of 'Londoners' in general.

The collection as a whole shows the way that London studies are going, and marks a distinct shift from the preoccupations of ten or fifteen years ago. If the editors are less generous than I think they might be in acknowledging the achievements of the past, no-one should conclude from this that there is no place or need for 'economistic' history in the exploration of early modern London. Although few if any historians would now endorse economic determinism, or even a simplistic cultural materialism, we cannot afford to ignore economic factors if we are aiming to study material culture. Another component of cultural change, which also receives less attention than it might, is religion. Archer and Berlin obviously take account of it in their investigations of popular politics and parish ritual, though the latter could make more of the growth of nonconformity and the gathering of congregations as a solvent of intra-parochial relationships. But internalised religious belief and the influence of the church's teaching on the moral horizons of early modern Londoners obviously helped to form their perceptions of crime, honour, sexual immorality, and poverty. This is manifest in the reformation of manners campaigns of the later seventeenth century, but a paper or two focusing on some aspect of the religious culture of an earlier date would have been a valuable marker of the importance of this topic. A particularly enjoyable feature of all the papers in this collection is the plentiful use of quotation of contemporary voices and writing; Londoners speak for themselves, through various media. The last twenty years or so have seen a huge growth in historians' exploitation of court records and other kinds of depositions and testimonies, and our understanding and use of these certainly owes much to literature scholars' analyses of narrativity, rhetoric, and textuality. Rather curiously, though, the collection is relatively silent on the alternative approaches of literary and cultural studies to early modern London, though these have had a huge impact on the field, and must constitute an important market for this book. It could have engaged more with this issue, and done more to explain the distinctiveness of cultural history as written by historians from new-historicist approaches.

Though most of the papers in *Londinopolis* are good, and some of them are very good indeed, it is hard to say which of them will become landmarks in the development of the topic. Their close focus and rich detail is rewarding, but some, in their anxiety not to make too large a claim, in their emphasis on the particular and the qualitative, can seem a bit inconclusive. The editors and authors faced a different challenge from the contributors to Beier and Finlay in 1986: no longer how to break new ground, but rather, how to position themselves productively in a field already partly marked out and cultivated. Comments and refinements, reinterpretations, even, don't strike as bold a note as new ventures. There is an obvious sense in which those who offer us new figures - as Boulton does in his study of the West End poor - are likely to be more quoted (as above), and hence more often explicitly acknowledged, than those whose approach is more interpretative. And it is in any case a characteristic of the approaches featured in this collection to resist the conclusive as well as the deterministic. But if I were to single out two or three papers that will make a difference, that will be essential reading for students and scholars of early modern London, at least until their author brings forward a larger work on the same subject, I would probably pick Archer, Dabhoiwala and Boulton. Each, I think, offers us in his paper in this collection some striking new insights into a field of enquiry with enormous potential, in which there is room for others to make a contribution. But all the papers offer us something new, stimulating, useful; the collection will be read with interest and profit in many circles.

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