

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Imagining London, 1770?1900

Review Number:

462

Publish date:

Thursday, 30 June, 2005

Author:

Alan Robinson

ISBN:

1403932891

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

312pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Mark Bills

The Metropolis is now before me: POUSSIN never had a more luxuriant, variegated and interesting subject for a landscape; nor had SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS finer characters for his canvas than what we have already had a sitting for their likenesses to embellish LIFE IN LONDON.⁽¹⁾

The title of Alan Robinson's *Imagining London, 1770?1900* prefigures the daunting task that the author sets himself, evoking a vast body of images and fictional accounts from the long nineteenth century that reflect upon the metropolis; works that continue to act on our imagination. The scope is potentially vast, far too vast for a single book to consider, and Robinson has had to be selective about the painters and authors that he discusses. In choosing Dickens, Trollope and James, alongside 'modern life' painting of the mid-nineteenth century and the later aesthetes, we are, for the most part, on familiar ground. Passing beyond the title and author's selection of writers and artists' responses to London in the nineteenth century, the analysis and discussion is illuminating, presenting a new and fruitful interpretation of often considered works. There is analysis too of the less generally considered body of works in 'Paintings of Modern Life'. The originality of the book, which the title merely hints at, is the uniqueness of approach. Interdisciplinary studies of works of art and fiction abound in book and exhibition, but Robinson achieves a rare balance of approaches, which

opens up stimulating and worthwhile analysis from a fresh viewpoint.

The title of the work also implies a greater fascination with the subjective 'agency' of the artist, which, as Robinson points out in his preface, has in many contemporary studies been excluded through the emphasis on social structure. As the author states:

Criticism would be required not just to place a text within the cultural materialist context of social practice, or within the ideological context of competing discourses, but also to treat it as authored by an individual with a unique personality, bearing physically, linguistically and psychologically the traces of a distinctive history, and engaged in complex perceptual interaction with his or her environment. (p.xiv)

Allowance for such subjective interpretations does not, however, lead to the discussion of works in isolation, and this interdisciplinary study places cultural works in relation to the 'actual' times and spaces within which they were created, the material contexts in which they are embedded. With an approach that combines perspectives that are often in opposition, Robinson considers works created in the long nineteenth century, with the late eighteenth providing a useful cultural background as well as introducing the two leitmotifs of the book: first, economics, or more specifically, the social relations induced by unregulated capitalism, and second, gender relations in a patriarchal society.

The book is extremely well and neatly structured, chronological, yet allowing for the expansion of recurrent and particular themes in its discussion. The first two chapters introduce the leitmotifs through representations in late Georgian London, economics in 'Unruliness and improvement,' and gender in 'Gendered London.' The third chapter, 'Capital City,' gives a socio-historical account of nineteenth-century London showing the transformations of the metropolis and the prevalent attitudes to the gulf of poverty and wealth created by *laissez-faire* capitalism. The rest of the book, using the foundations laid by these, is devoted to the discussion and analysis of representations of nineteenth-century London, beginning with Charles Dickens in the chapter 'A Tale of Two Cities'. The following two chapters consider how painting depicting the metropolis flourished from the mid to late nineteenth century, specifically focusing on two distinct approaches and considering French influence and cultural modernity, up until now the almost exclusive domain of the art historian. The works of Anthony Trollope and Henry James, considered through the book's central themes, are the subject of the final two chapters, and are shown to provide an excellent complement to the reading of the paintings discussed earlier.

Robinson's sweep is by necessity selective, yet his examples of well-known images are representative of 'high-art' forms, to the exclusion of the influence of popular culture and imagery. The illustrations of the *Illustrated London News*, the journalistic works of Augustus Sala, and the cartoons of John Leech in *Punch*, which exerted so much influence on the imagery and depictions of 'modern life' painting, are only used to make a socio-historical point and not in relation to their being an imagining of London in their own right. Where also is Gustave Doré, that great imaginer of London in Biblical terms? Who can picture Victorian London without seeing those powerful hellish, wood-engraved visions of the metropolis? Yet the reference to him is singular and in passing. The same criticism cannot be applied to the discussion of popular literature. Robinson considers popular forms and models, such as the journalistic rambles through London, for example, of Egan's *Life in London* in relation to Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*.

This brings to me to another query into Robinson's reading of paintings and fiction: the nature of imagination and its relation to the 'actual'. The idea that naturalism in fiction and naturalism in painting are fundamentally different is not really explored. They come closest, perhaps in 'modern life' painting, with their literary equivalents in Dickens and contemporaneous literary jaunts through London. Yet it would be misleading to dwell on that which is not covered by the book, for what is discussed is done so with a new and fresh light.

'Capital City' presents a fascinating history of unregulated capitalism and the gulf of wealth and poverty that it created. The landscape of London is painted as the pre-eminent heart of world capitalism and it is considered both in the moral and political dilemmas that it posed and the culture that evolved around it, particularly middle-class attitudes to poverty. This is very usefully illuminated by contemporary theory and commentaries, most interestingly through John Ruskin, giving a brilliant context for the artists that Robinson goes on to consider. The chapter 'A Tale of Two Cities', beyond the reference to Dickens, refers to two central dichotomies of London: the separated cities of wealth and poverty; and the 'actual' London and the London of Dickens's rich imagination. Within the framework of the book as a whole it represents a transition between Georgian and Victorian London. This is a very important chapter, which, despite the plethora of texts on Dickens's imaginative landscape of London, is highly rewarding and represents a significant contribution to Dickens scholarship. Using Dickens's early novels, Robinson convincingly argues that this formative period provided the food for Dickens's major themes. The novels reflect a reading of the city forming an imagined geography around the degraded developments of capitalism, inhabited by characters who derive their livings from its consequent poverty, such as Quilp in the *Old Curiosity Shop*, who is both slum landlord and moneylender. Everything is a commodity which can be bought and sold, including the detritus of the poor themselves: bones, bodies, hair and old clothes, which act as an everyday *memento mori*. Furthermore, Robinson argues that the cityscape reflects Dickens's own personal anxieties, his own degradation, his street walking, the early pawning of his possessions, all of which are projected onto his fiction. Death and resurrection are themes that have as their backdrop the London streets:

My thesis is that beneath their realistic engagement with a succession of newsworthy themes, the fundamental preoccupation of Dickens's novels is a struggle between life and death, in the form of destructive and self-destructive energies, and the yearning for a new life. As a romance motif, resurrection or rebirth figures in several novels. The theme becomes an obsession in Dickens's middle age (p.100).

In the next two chapters, the author considers Victorian painting and is fairly wide in his scope, wider than the chapter title suggests. 'Modern life' refers to paintings in the 1850s and 1860s that turned to contemporary subjects, more particularly to London cityscapes and the life of the city's people. British 'modern life' painting has not received the attention that it has deserved and it is refreshing to read Robinson's exploration of the reasons for its emergence. It is particularly intriguing to note that at the 1845 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition only two per cent of around the 1,500 paintings represented London. The author gives an outline history of mid-Victorian art and the changes in subject in relation to the emergence of a new urban audience with its accessible themes in place of 'high' art allusion. The narrative content and exploration of how these paintings were read is illustrated by contrasting John Ritchie's *Hyde Park* (Museum of London, 1858) with Monet's *Green Park, London* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, c.1871): landscape *versus* narrative; impression and mood *versus* detail and didacticism. It has to be said, however, that such a comparison does not add greatly to our understanding of modern life painting; the modernity and consequent superiority of French painting has been discussed many times before. To see Ritchie's fascinating and rich painting as a 'large-scale frieze of characters who obstruct the landscape...' (p. 135), a depiction the author finds both visibly laboured and intrinsically hierarchical in form, is to dismiss its unique achievements and to miss its central point. Robinson's argument that English critics reflect a desire for clarity of social demarcation in such art is an interesting, if exaggerated point. The failings of English art are explained in part through the tight grip of a strong capitalist market, but I wonder whether conditions were so radically different in France.

The question of the representation of gender is illustrated through Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* (1858, Tate, London) and William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853-4, Tate, London). It is important and useful that Robinson includes here Arthur Boyd Houghton as an artist whose frank depictions of an underclass emerged from his role as draughtsman to the illustrated weeklies. This leads to a discussion of social realism in the 1870s, a subject that surely deserves a separate study.

The second chapter on painting, like the first, provides a lucid introduction to contemporary images of nineteenth-century London. Robinson effectively selects the leading examples and explores them within the context of the London art market and consumer culture. In this he is original; as he states concerning the Whistler and Ruskin trial for libel in November 1878, 'significant social issues on trial have been comparatively neglected' (p.167). Considerations of the depictions of the Thames that utilise dramatic lighting effect against dense fog, lead to discussion of Robinson's central argument which surrounds modernity and the development of the 'naturalism' espoused by Ruskin to the 'impressionism' espoused by Whistler, the Impressionists and Sickert. British artists, such as Sickert, who turned their backs on Ruskin, were distinctive in their modernism which enshrined a distinctive mundanity in its urban imagery. There is much in this chapter to provoke further study.

It is refreshing to read of Anthony Trollope in relation to his representation of London. Inevitable comparisons with Dickens have undermined Trollope's importance in portraying metropolitan life. Robinson addresses this imbalance, and draws out Trollope's deep understanding of the dynamics of society in the capital and of how money shaped class and gender relations. *The Way We Live Now* (1874-5) is key in the discussion, although it is a shame that Frith's series of five narrative paintings, *The Race for Wealth* (1880), based to a great extent based on Trollope's novel, is not discussed. Through Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1875-6), Robinson brilliantly describes the manner in which the author 'conveys the transition from an obsolescent gentlemanly caste to an emergent plutocratic vulgarity through impressionistic associations' (p.198).

Henry James makes, as the author suggests, an appropriate conclusion to the study. Through James we see a transitional artist, gradually breaking with the conventions of Victorian fiction and looking forward to high modernism. As Robinson concludes, the novels of Henry James 'herald the increasing solipsism of High Modernist representations of that 'Unreal City'' (p. 249).

Gender issues, or more particularly aspects of the 'woman question' such as the marriage market, fruitfully occupy many revealing discussions through the difficult subjects that it touches upon, and James's subsequent 'stylistic tightrope walking' (p. 229). Novellas such as *An International Episode* (1878-9) and *The Siege of London* (1883) are given new readings. The wholesale commoditisation of innocence is a rewarding read, although it would have been interesting to have related this to high profile paintings of the period such as Edwin Long's *Babylonian Marriage Market* (1875, Royal Holloway Collection), highlighted by John Ruskin as a moral commentary on society. In terms of the London landscape with its ever present poverty, James, in contrast to Dickens and Trollope, offers no critique, but instead gives us an impression, a phantasmagoria of middle-class fantasies:

Bedraggled figures passed in and out, and a damp, tattered, wretched man, with a spongy face, who had been thrust suddenly across the threshold, stood and whimpered in the brutal blaze of the row of lamps. The puddles glittered roundabout, and the silent vista of the street, bordered with low black houses, stretched away, in the wintry drizzle, to right and left, losing itself in the huge tragic city??(2)

Imagining London: 1770-1900 is a fascinating study of artists' and writers' depictions of London in the long nineteenth century. No one with an interest in the subject can ignore this book, but it is a shame that it does not contain a bibliography. Although the strands of argument weave through the book, it reads as a

series of separate essays and studies, usefully brought together in one volume. The separation of painting and fiction by individual chapter does, however, limit comparative discussion of complex relationships that existed between painting and literature. Perhaps that would be a different book. What the book has achieved is to open up many new lines of enquiry, such as the economic basis of the Ruskin/Whistler debate. This is new ground and the running themes open new and pertinent analytical vistas. Alan Robinson has produced a book that makes an important contribution to scholarship on the representation of London in the nineteenth century. It is essential reading for anyone approaching the subject, serving as an introduction as well as showing a valuable new approach to the subject. It is a book that has long been needed.

Notes

1. Pierce Egan, *Life in London; or the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. And his elegant friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Sprees through the Metropolis* (1821), p. 14.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Henry James, *Novels 1886?1890*, ed. Daniel Mark Fogel (New York, 1989).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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