Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City 1550-1660

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London does not lack histories, or historians, and the early modern metropolis in particular has been the subject of myriad scholarly works. Paul Griffiths focuses on a period that saw London change rapidly, its population exploding out of the traditional Walls and increasingly spilling into the suburbs surrounding the city. Even Londoners expressed shock at the pace of change in their city: 'London's size and shape changed speedily, and people felt that they were losing the city that they once knew' (p. 1). By 1660 London was unquestionably the most important city in Britain, and was becoming one of the largest and wealthiest in Europe. This growth ultimately depended on new arrivals from the rest of the country. From 1650–1750, perhaps one-sixth of the English population had lived in the capital at one time. London's high mortality, the result of unsanitary conditions and a poor housing stock, meant that without migration it would suffer natural decrease. The main economic advantage of migrating to London was its higher wages, not to mention the social and cultural attractions of the metropolis.[1] However, not every move to London followed the Dick Whittington model. Although many of London's migrants were elite groups, the majority were young, single and frequently marginal. London had high concentrations of two social groups especially prone to vagrancy – servants and apprentices.[2] Most servants, particularly females, made the move into service in order to find an alternative means of support to the family. Often this move came as a result of the death of the father. This made the move to London even more of a dislocation.[3] If an initial term of service did not work out, the move into vagrancy was made more likely. Similarly, apprentices could often find themselves isolated in the metropolis if their relationship with their master disintegrated. It is these vulnerable groups, adrift in the capital and far from home, that provide much of the focus of *Lost Londons*.

Rapid and sustained change is axiomatic to the history of early modern London, but in spite of the constant flux, an accompanying axiom has been London's stability, a 'keyword stretching back over more than twenty-five years' (p. 29) in the city's historiography. These arguments focus on London's social structures, civic groups, widespread office holding and effective government. In comparison, Griffiths does not see a stable society, but rather a structure that was placed under daily stress. A system where the majority of the population – women, the young and new arrivals – were excluded from most of the bodies meant to provide London's essential stability. Griffiths' London was never stable, but rather was ambiguous and constantly changing.

'This book is composed from rhetorics and records and not many, if any, should be taken at face value' (p. 8). Griffiths utilises a staggering range of original sources in this book, making effective use of the huge mass of material generated by London's parishes, wards, hospitals, livery companies and courts, as well as material from the city's leading ruling bodies, the Common Council and Court of Aldermen. For the most part evidence from these sources is used anecdotally in the form of vignettes sprinkled throughout the book. (In addition to this, Griffiths' use of the secondary literature is effective and wide-ranging, and the bibliography is extensive and extremely useful.) The courtbooks of Bridewell, the hospital charged with regulating and reforming London's vagrant poor, generates most of the 'thick detail' of *Lost Londons*, and provides the basis for most of the key points of the book, as well as the quantitative data included in the appendix (pp. 438–74). Ultimately, in spite of the range of detail from other sources, it is the records of Bridewell that are most central and fundamental to this work.

Part 1 examines the theme of 'change' – the growth of a disorderly and sprawling metropolis. Chapter 1 sets the scene of the 'Londons' examined in this book. It argues that the perception of London grew darker over time, as it became increasingly overcrowded and disorderly. Griffiths explicitly aligns his study against the proponents of stability in early modern London, such as Ian Archer's *The Pursuit of Stability* (1991), and argues that it was a city constantly changing. Chapter 2 attempts to map London's criminal worlds. There were some clearly defined and well known pockets of disorder, such as Turnmills and the suburbs in general, which after 1600 became increasingly the homes of newcomers (pp. 78–80). The data collected is divided by ward and it is considerable, but the mapping (pp. 443–8) is somewhat unclear. The ward maps show the location of arrests for various categories for the period 1604–58 but instead of showing the figures using a chloropleth map, which would make them clearer graphically, the maps have the number of arrests written in for each ward. The mapping shows that the large suburban ward of Farringdon Without was the 'crime hot-spot' (p. 84) of London – it was also the location of Bridewell, which could explain part of its prominence. Portsoken, a fairly large ward to the east of the walls of the City, which was also home to many footloose new arrivals in London and potential residents of Bridewell, has a strikingly low number of arrests (18) by ward officers. This may suggest that the Bridewell courtbook evidence was markedly skewed towards the western end of London. There are trends to be pointed out by mapping, but Griffiths correctly points out that London was 'better thought of in terms of overlapping areas and cultures' (p. 97). There were areas connected to crime and disorder, but this chapter shows that such events happened across London. The focus of chapter 3 is London's streets, which were dirty and chaotic, and where vagrants and beggars were common sights. Griffiths argues that London's streets were becoming more dangerous and disorderly over time, and as the city grew there were more places for vagrants to escape authority.

Part 2 looks at criminal 'worlds' and 'words' in London. Chapter 4 argues that London's citizens and householders attempted to create a clear 'cut' between themselves and the unsettled and rootless (pp. 142–3). Status in early modern London was tied to a job and a settled residence (p. 171). Whilst there were 'career' criminals, such as prostitutes (pp. 150–7), Griffiths argues that the borders of the criminal underworld were artificial (p. 178). Social circles overlapped between the respectable citizen and the criminal, and their worlds coexisted. Chapter 5 examines how the City leaders attempted to define crime, an imperative process that relied on questions about family, maintenance and lifestyle (pp. 180–1). Griffiths examines the process of 'labelling' crime in the Bridewell courtbooks (pp. 194–9). Unsurprisingly, 'vagrant' was the most common and long-lasting label but these changed over time, reflecting changing policies and realities. After 1600 crimes tied to London's growth became more commonplace, with newcomers identified as the cause

(p. 199). Over time, vagrancy became a greater priority than sexual crimes. As well as this, crime, and crimes connected to the growth of London, became increasingly feminised, with women becoming more stigmatized for 'lewd' lives and criminal activities (pp. 204–9).

The third, and longest, part of the book deals with the 'control' of disorderly London. Chapter 6 places the institution of Bridewell in its contemporary context – it was the most controversial of London's hospitals and, initially, the most maligned, facing challenges to its jurisdiction and power to punish. However, after c.1600 London and Londoners warmed to Bridewell as it became less concerned with sexual crimes and more focussed on dealing with the city's vagrancy problem. Chapter 7 looks at the inhabitants of Bridewell and their punishments. Bridewell could 'tap into' London's network of hospitals, and its sick and infirm inmates were often transferred to other institutions. The bodies of the inmates of Bridewell were sources of evidence, and women in particular were medically checked to confirm if they were 'cleare' or 'maides'. Whipping and hard labour had initially been the main method of punishment, but this appears to have declined by the mid 17th century (p. 290). The institution was not just a 'revolving door' either, many inmates stayed for over a week and spells of over six months were not unknown (pp. 279–80). As Bridewell matured so the number of other punishment utilised increased. After 1600, transportation, particularly to Virginia, was used as a punishment (table 9b, p. 473). Inmates of Bridewell could also be pressed into armies fighting abroad (table 9c, p. 473). These punishments were not commonplace, but they show the increasing range of punitive options open to the Bridewell.

The final four chapters deal with how London was policed. Chapter 8 examines the people who were charged with enforcing order at the local level. City policy had made policing vagrancy central to solving London's problems (p. 305), and this effort required significant funds and resources. London's constables tended to be from the higher end of the social spectrum, and rather than being the dithering incompetents of some literary sources often held office for long periods, acquiring significant knowledge of their communities and expertise in dealing with vagrants. Griffiths persuasively argues the problem with policing London was not lack of expertise, but a lack of funds to deal with a city in a 'permanent state of friction' (p. 331). London at night is the focus of chapter 9 – it has previously been shown how offences could be gender or place specific but this chapter shows how nightfall changed London. It was seen as being a dangerous time. Particularly after 1600 more nightwalkers were taken to court (p. 334). The order of night streets was charged to the watchmen, whose punitive powers made them a source of fear, as well as disrespect. It was only a cast iron occupational reason or social status that gave one the right to be nocturnal (p. 334). Everyone else was vulnerable to punishment if caught wandering the streets at night. This chapter re-enforces Griffiths' point about the gendering of crime – after 1620 nearly all those charged with night-walking were women (p. 334). Ultimately just as the growth and vagrancy problems of London at day could not be cleared up, so the perception of London's night-time streets as dangerous and disorderly could not be eliminated, just 'contained' (p. 360). Chapter 10 looks at the process of prosecution. Rather than place the process of policing in early modern England on the initiative of the private individual, Griffiths stresses the importance of public bodies such as the parish. Institutions may have used private individuals for processes such as 'crying for children' (pp. 380–1), but as far as the Bridewell committals are concerned, it was the officers who did the legwork – in particular for 'victimless' crimes such as vagrancy (p. 397). This meant that the 'scale and scope' of public bodies of prosecution were forced to grow as London, and its vagrancy problem, did. The final chapter deals with how these official bodies generated and maintained the intelligence needed to enforce order. Griffiths makes the valuable point that the modern historian's sources of raw data were the contemporaries' 'active archives' (p. 400). As London, and England, grew in the early modern period, it became increasingly imperative to quantify it as collecting and counting became routine. Parishes paid to look through other documents at Whitehall or the Exchequer, for example, to gain information about particular individuals (pp. 414–15). Bridewell was an important hub in this network of information and its officials were well placed to gain information about London's criminals and vagrants using their extensive local knowledge.

Griffiths begins his conclusion with the statement, 'make no mistake, London cannot be called stable on any day covered in this book' (p. 433). During the period considered London's population had exploded and in

the process, perceptions of the metropolis had darkened for many. However, there was no widespread, prolonged breakdown in order in early modern London. For example, even after the catastrophic shock of the Great Fire, metropolitan social structures remained remarkable stable.(4) Yet Griffiths' London was ambiguous, unsettled and always in process. Such conclusions do match the evidence presented in *Lost Londons*, but a problem is the book's large reliance on the Bridewell records. They are representative of one London, but are they representative of all 'Londons'? Very different histories have been written, presenting London as stable, using different sources. Does London's ambiguity make it impossible to draw any firm conclusions? One answer may be to extend Griffiths' methods to the suburbs, whose growth was *the* major factor in overall metropolitan population growth.(5) The Bridewell evidence is rather skewed to the western suburbs, so it would be of interest to see how similar, or dissimilar, areas such as the East End were. However, given the uniquely extensive nature of the Bridewell evidence, this may be impossible. Another answer may be to push Griffiths' extensive quantitative evidence further. The tables in the appendix could have been made more helpful by presenting the numbers in percentage form rather than in raw numbers so the relative proportional importance of the different categories considered could be more easily examined. Also, much of the data, for example, the labels recorded in the courtbooks, would have benefited from being presented graphically. The 'People in Place' project has shown the potential of extensive quantitative analysis of systematic records to illuminate the social worlds of early modern London.(6) There is also the question of scale – by the mid 17th century, London's population had risen to around 375,000, meaning many of the totals in the tables are actually quite low in terms of proportion of the city's population – especially when recidivists are taken into account. For example, the 541 vagrants prosecuted in the period 1653-7 (table 4a, p. 456) represents around 0.15 per cent of the total population of London. However, given the clear ambiguity of early modern London, the historian should beware of applying to pat or sweeping a conclusion based on purely statistically evidence without considering why and how this evidence was collected, as Griffiths clearly does. The value of the Bridewell evidence lies in its intimate stories of the tens of thousands of footloose individuals drawn to London, who whilst being damned by the city fathers, were nonetheless vital to growth of the city. *Lost Londons* is a significant portrayal of a major aspect of the social structure of the early modern metropolis, but it should be viewed alongside the proponents of stability, rather than entirely supplanting them – 'London with all its 'small worlds' has many histories' (p. 434).

Notes

1. Jeremy Boulton's study of wages in London over the 17th century reveals that London wages were higher than elsewhere in the nation, with daily rates for labourers doubling from 12 pence per day in 1600 to 24 pence by the early 18th century, well above the rate of inflation. J. P. Boulton, 'Wage labour in seventeenth-century London', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), 268–90.Back to (1)
2. A. L. Beier, 'Social problems in Elizabethan London', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 9 (1978), 214.Back to (2)
3. V. B. Elliott, 'Single women in the London marriage market: age, status and mobility 1598-1619', in *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage*, ed. R. B. Outhwaite (London, 1981), p. 99.Back to (3)
4. J. F. Field, 'Reactions and responses to the Great Fire: London and England in the later seventeenth century' (Newcastle Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2008), chapters 1 and 2.Back to (4)
5. R. A. P. Finlay and B. Shearer, 'Population growth and suburban expansion', in A. L. *London 1500-1700: the Making of the Metropolis*, ed. Beier and R. A. P. Finlay (London and New York, 1986), p. 44.Back to (5)
6. V. Harding *et al*, *People in Place: Families, Households and Housing in Early Modern London* (London, 2008).Back to (6)

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