

The Literary London Journal



Review

Robert O. Bucholz and Joseph P. Ward, *London: A Social and Cultural History, 1550-1750*, Hardback, 413 pages, 53 b/w illustrations, 4 maps, Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-521-89652-8. £16.99.

Reviewed by

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<1>Robert O. Bucholz and Joseph P. Ward's *London: A Social and Cultural History, 1550-1750* is a fantastic resource for students and scholars of London's diverse and changing communities during the early modern period. Handsomely illustrated with maps, engravings, etchings, paintings and news-sheet covers, the book takes a holistic approach to its subject. This means seeking to encapsulate 'the whole of the metropolis' (1) by looking at places, institutions and people whether rich, poor, high, low, civic, commercial, religious, licit or illicit. The holistic approach also involves aggregating the variety of historiographical responses to the city. Bucholz and Ward do a great job of making such aggregations concise, engaging and useful, as when summarising recent and on-going debates about London's socio-political stability in the period (27-9) or the effects in London of the brutal Penal Code in the 1700s (266-7). Similarly, as their subtitle demands, Bucholz and Ward synthesise the cultural and the social in compelling ways.

<2>Early on, Bucholz and Ward consider the myths and songs relating to Dick Whittington, relating his rise from migrant scullion to London mayor. Bucholz and Ward sensibly affirm that while these myths obscured the real Whittington's hardly impoverished roots, 'what matters here is not the reality, but that English children grew up being told there was endless opportunity in London if only they worked hard' (9). In other words, studying the facts of the real Whittington's ascent tells us only so much; studying mythologising representations of such ascents tells us so much more and explains why London was 'famous' (and infamous, we might add) for its 'social mobility' (8), and thus for adhering only partially to the demands of the comparably mythic Great Chain of Being.

<3>The material in Chapter 5 on print and news cultures offers similarly lively accounts of the interactions between physical and representational spaces and how these interactions amplified the porosity of the city's 'lines dividing one social or economic group from another' (164). Here, Bucholz and Ward again insist on how texts inform the construction of 'history', in a case study featuring responses to the impeachment of the High Tory preacher Reverend Henry Sacheverell in 1709. Close reading of partisan Tory and Whig reactions to Sacheverell's case leads the authors to observe wryly: 'So much for the hard news, objectively reported!' (174).

<4>In a survey as wide as this, there will be some reduction. It might have been good to learn why Bucholz and Ward think Shakespeare set 'few of his plays...in the metropolis' despite their observation that his works (some of which they dutifully, if obviously, list) 'delighted Londoners' (143): compared to Ben Jonson's and Thomas Middleton's city comedies, maybe Shakespeare's plays didn't delight Londoners enough (or enough Londoners), hence his need to collaborate with someone like George Wilkins.

<5>So while packed with details and broad in scope, the book's strengths are also a potential weakness: in aggregating others' interpretations, perhaps some innovation is lost. And while *London* is thorough, maybe not that much new is said. Given its genesis and likely audience this is to be expected. The authors dedicate the book to their students, and it certainly has the accumulated knowledge expressed with the grace and facility that excellent teachers of long standing possess. Similarly, in some areas there was innovation (or renovation), in style if nothing else.

<6>Complementing Emily Cockayne's *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England 1600-1770* (2008), Bucholz and Ward try to locate us in proximity to the city's 'sights and smells', pleasant and 'not so pleasant' (40). Accordingly, *London* begins and ends with extensive accounts of perambulating through London, as it was in the mid-1500s (thereby echoing John Stow's *Survey* from *this* end of the period), and then as it was in the mid-1700s (echoing John Strype's echo of Stow from *that* end of the period). Not only does this method evoke those (and countless other) accounts of navigating the city on foot, bridging a gap between past and present, but Bucholz and Ward seek to make the bridging experience of 'our visit' (39) to early modern London even more immediate and vivid through a constant recourse to the present tense: 'we hail a barge ... being poor scholars we must hire' (39). Sometimes this present tense address assumes an ironic tone, as when our guides describe evading Bridewell: 'Making a note to avoid incarceration in this social experiment, we head farther west along Fleet Street holding our noses – and our purses' (53). Later we are forced to endure 'our stained hose' (55).

<7>This attempt to situate the reader resonates through the book. We are repeatedly petitioned to 'imagine', whether we are imagining 'sitting down...in Button's coffeehouse' (239), or 'walking the streets...at midday' (251). Yet however readable such rhetorical devices are, one might recollect Bucholz and Ward's own comments about partisan news-sheets to query the assumed neutrality and objectivity of these perambulatory observers: who constitutes this 'we' doing the walking? Despite being invited once to imagine 'being poor' (224), 'we' are generally assumed to have privileged access to various locations and privileged cultural knowledge to deploy while there: 'In 1750 we pay our sixpence and get to walk along a grand promenade formed by trees ... or ... dart into an alcove ... and ... listen to the orchestra' (351-2).

<8>Perhaps 'we', like London's inhabitants, can be many people at different – or the same – times. Perhaps, as with any fiction, creative license is due to authors and readers. And perhaps readers of hardback history in a university library or study might well find it hard to empathise with the dispossessed of 500 years ago. But this book is history, not fiction: what happens to objectivity and neutrality when these evocations of immediacy occur in other places, or, more importantly, don't? When discussing the Bawdy House Riots of 1668, Bucholz and Ward present one of the rioters' slogans: "[W]e have been servants, but we will be masters now" (296). Riots can be terrifying, but if such affirmations are 'frightening', as Bucholz and Ward assert this one is, who is frightened by them, and why? If 'we' saw things more like the rioters, might it not be possible to perceive their claims as entirely legitimate, as much as threatening?

<9>In one memorable phrase Bucholz and Ward call London 'a shock city' (3); later they suggest 'London's streets were contested territory' (53). While time-travelling perambulations give some sense of the shocks and contests in those territories, perhaps the method has its limits or presents opportunities that are not fulfilled here.

<10>Bucholz and Ward are far from insensible to early modern London's differences to the here and now, but bias is impossible to avoid: to Bucholz and Ward Edward IV and Henry VII were 'strong, practical, and efficient monarchs' because their policies meant 'lower taxes, safer loans, and healthier trade' (20-1) – the very models of pre-modern neo-liberals, then. In like manner, during the period in question, Londoners, we're told, 'developed institutions and habits of mind that we tend to find familiar and congenial: personal liberty, equality, democracy...economic and religious freedom...cosmopolitanism...even a measure of feminism' (31-2). In other words, 'they' become 'us'.

<11>Because of the book's welcome and consistent emphasis on London's European, global and imperial connections, and on the legal and civic frameworks governing London life, one might have thought some typographical errors could have been avoided. When did Britain acquire 'Gibralter' (88) or impose 'Marshal law' (277)?

<12>But by attending to London's socio-spatial margins as well as its (often competing) centres of power, Bucholz and Ward are able to convey how 'natural' disasters like plague and fire had a disproportionate effect on certain sections of city society, for man-made reasons. There are also excellent sections here on London's crowds, and how these responded to and informed the period's political crises (all of which are depicted in clear, direct prose). As such, and perhaps necessarily, this book is as much a stimulating guide to England's (and later Britain's) changes as it is to London's.

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