

The Literary London Journal



Review

Craig Taylor, *Londoners: The Days and Nights of London Now – As Told By Those Who Love It, Hate It, Live It, Left It and Long for It*

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Reviewed by

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Everyone who lives in London knows that there are many different types of Londoners, from the new arrivals to the old hands, as well as those lost in the middle that constitute the majority. It is a journey all those drawn to the metropolis make, and Craig Taylor documents it well in this lengthy set of interviews conducted over five years in the capital. This has clearly been a painstaking task, but a documentary archive of this size brings its own challenges. The spirit of London doesn't shine through in every fragment, and inevitably some of the testimony could be about any of the world's major cities. Even so, a shorter book would have lost the impact of the sheer breadth of the interviews, which form an interesting mosaic in their totality.

In his introduction, Taylor says he believes 'the geography, the architecture, the great mass of London facts and figures, all its history, – these felt secondary to the lives of the people here' (8). In this respect, he is at odds with Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd whose works look at the city as an integrated whole, recognising the interplay of one with the other. While Sinclair analyses the life of London through the psychogeography of its prominent features, such as the M25 in *Orbital* and the Olympic Park in *Ghost Milk*, Taylor is content to let the inhabitants speak for themselves. This unmediated access offers a different vantage point than Sinclair's or than Ackroyd's historical perspective in *London: The Biography*. Taylor acknowledges the pointlessness of trying to 'out-Sinclair Iain Sinclair or out-Ackroyd Peter Ackroyd' (8), but the result is a more superficial account of the city, one that is more entertaining than it is informative. Taylor's interviews often seem to have more in common with fiction, which perhaps is to be expected given that these are people telling their life stories.

The book maps the life cycle of a Londoner from arrival, through climbing the ladder, staying on top and the inevitable departure, whether voluntary or through death or deportation. Taylor's perspective as 'someone from a small, seaside village in western

Canada' (1) clearly informs his view of London. Much of the book is devoted to those who were not born or raised in the city, but were attracted by the promise of riches and glamour, or perhaps just an escape from poverty. Beyond this, there are revealing self-portraits by those who serve the city, either working on its infrastructure or in the service industries through whose doors Londoners inevitably pass. This takes in everyone from plumbers to an estate agent, street cleaners and the Transport for London Lost Property Clerk ('Once these two guys came in and said they had lost a swan. I think they were hallucinating' (56)).

The collection conveys a strong sense of the optimism that draws people to London and it paints a vivid picture of the dreams and disappointments of those who come to the city for a better life. At the same time, it reveals how wide the gap between the visitors and the native Londoners can be. An aspiring currency trader from Pakistan, who takes other jobs to pay the rent while he tries to break into the City, tells of his surprise and disappointment at the attitude he encounters when shares his dreams: 'Each time I was working in a fried chicken restaurant or a factory or anywhere I shared this – I always said where I was going when I had an interview. I told them this is my main profession, my passion ... After that they got really nasty towards me' (94).

The smell of London emerges most pungently when the talk turns to sex, class or money. One tale neatly encompassing all three is that of the Guardsman renting himself out for oiled-up Greco-Roman wrestling sessions with a barrister to make ends meet while in the service of the Queen ('tyking') (75). You only have to scratch the surface of traditional, respectable London a little to see the complex interactions between the social strata that lurk beneath. If there is one nagging concern, it is that Taylor doesn't dig a little more deeply. For all the diversity represented in the book, there is little testimony from the dispossessed. It would have been interesting to hear why the aspiring currency trader's colleagues felt so alienated from ambition and so resigned to their lot in life.

The city's underbelly is bigger than it looks and there are many important Londoners whose voices remain unheard in the book. Taylor brushes against it. In the introduction, he describes the intimacy engendered by a skunk dealer who addresses him as 'bruv' (5). I want to hear this man's story, too. The section devoted to 'Keeping The Peace' is a disappointment. With the exception of a protester and an innocent victim of stop and search, the interviews are with the enforcers, and we hear nothing from the other side. You're never far from a street gang in London – they hit the headlines all the time – but we don't hear from them here. The criminal fraternities from around the world that have greased the wheels of commerce for centuries are similarly silent. It is a significant omission, which makes the book less politically interesting.

At its best, *Londoners* captures the resilient but inclusive attitude that characterises its residents. Despite the daily challenges of life in the capital, there is a mutant form of the Blitz spirit that lives on. This is summed up by one of the most memorable characters, a New Spitalfields market trader. In discussing the fruit and veg market, he might as well be talking about London: 'We all need each other. You have the odd discrepancies but you've got to make up for it because my grandfather said to me, son, a proud man will starve to death, you can't afford to be too proud ... We spend a lifetime together, all of us' (211).

Taylor's book is a study of a London of a certain place and time. The fact that the interviews took place over five years means that some of the content is already dated, describing elements of the city that no longer exist. Indeed, the sense of mourning for an older London haunts some of the interviewees. The pace of change is quickening in the capital. For instance, the 2011 census shows that only 45% of Londoners describe themselves as 'white British' – a drop from 58% in 2001. *Londoners* could have been an important oral history text for those looking for a sense of how London looked at the

turn of the 21st century, but readers might wonder whether they are getting the full picture.

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