

# *The Literary London Journal*



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## Review

***London: A History in Verse* edited by Mark Ford  
745 pages, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, UK:  
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. ISBN  
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London is, and has ever been, a restless place: it is a 'human hive' (Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'Song for the London Volunteers', 307) where the 'people-pestered shores' (Michael Drayton, 'Poly-Olbion', 84) of the Thames hum with activity. Today, tourists queue for the London-Eye: shoppers flock to the sales at Westfield: silent commuters jostle through station barriers: tempers snap on escalators. Such activities may assert their modernity, but they also attest to the aggressive and expressive hustle and bustle, the energy – not always beautiful or good – that has always characterised London.

Mark Ford's new anthology, *London: A History in Verse*, is a history of this energy. It does not trace the city in terms of famous or important events: instead, Ford brings together a history that is a patchwork of thoughts and passing moments. Ford does include poems that relate or refer to 'historic' events, such as Dryden's 'Annus Mirabilis' and David Kennedy's 'The Bombs, July 2005': he borrows Abraham Holland's vivid portrait of the plague-stricken city from his 1625 'London, Look Back', where the invidious disease reaches into each 'small-breathing pore' and 'crawling vein' of the city (144). He does not, however, allow such poems to take precedence over the everyday experiences of the city's inhabitants or its visitors. Consequently, his anthology does not read like a history textbook in verse. A. N. Wilson has called into question why Ford uses the term 'history' (*Evening Standard*, 21 June 2012). Surely, however, the very fact that the poems – his sources – display London in terms different from those of courtly and parliamentary documents, archives and parish registers, is what makes its history new and valuable.

I recognise the schoolboys who 'lag with satchels in their hands' in Jonathan Swift's 'A Description of the Morning' (234), and it refreshes my understanding of early eighteenth-century London to have them drawn to my attention: who knows if history might not otherwise have missed them and side-stepped their foibles? Any frequenter of

markets can hear the tone of the voices when they read the anonymous seventeenth-century 'London Cries', even if some of the services they are promoting are now sadly unattainable ('Wives, shall I mend your husbands' horns?' (181)). Other scenes engagingly illuminate the distances between our time and another: St James's Park, whose chief attractions today are its scenic lake and its pelicans, is celebrated by the seventeenth-century lothario John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, as the site of elaborate debauchery, 'of buggeries, rapes and incests' ('A Ramble in St James's Park', 284). In Alun Lewis's 'Westminster Abbey', the poem turns our attention on a girl crying. She is 'a pale swirl of human flux' (578). As she leaves, the 'flux is spun and drifted through the night': her restless tremors, a fleeting glimpse of another's isolation, become part of the texture of the city's atmosphere.

Often, the specificity and the individuality of an experience can alter a locality and a poem can communicate the local details of personal experience to others. A few lines from Jeremy Reed's 'Sainthood: Elegies for Derek Jarman' (687) display just this topographical aspect:

He's gone away,  
leaving a trail of sand down Brewer Street,

as though he'd walked in beach-shoes to his death,  
thinking the sea was on the other side,  
a blue invasion at Piccadilly.

In death and in elegy, the streets of Soho become traced with Jarman's sand-scattering footsteps. Like Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs, the sand will most likely drift away: and yet, through the poem, some trace of Jarman's presence lingers still in Brewer Street.

*London: A History in Verse* is a rich and varied work: Ford's introduction is subtle and incisive, his selection ample with poems and poets that deserve more attention than they generally receive. And yet, one feels that Ford's instinct as editor is – like that of London itself – towards a 'relentless expansion and sponge-like absorption of newcomers' (12). The tendency towards new work is not – in itself – a failing: in the twentieth-century, perhaps partly as a result of film's reliance on accurate evocations of locality, the poetry manifests an increased interest in the complexion and character of place.

It is the fact that the book's scale is so unrestrained that has less positive repercussions. Favouring a policy of inclusion rather than leaving poets or poems out, the book becomes so unwieldy that any opportunity for Ford to be creative or informative as an editor is more or less erased. Whether he had any desire to be either of these things, I do not know. Perhaps he did not want to inform the reader's reading habits too much. However, to edit such a book without including an index of boroughs, districts or street names (Chelsea, Lincoln's Inn, Whitechapel, etc.) is to deny this book a dimension that would have distinguished it from other anthologies. The lack of footnotes of any variety also strikes me as a mistake. Just so, while I agree with Ford's rationale for compiling the poems according to date-of-birth (to enable 'a sense of the successive waves of the city's history, as the eras leach into each other' (Preface, xxvii)), I see no logic behind the curious omission of dates of creation and publication. And why are the nursery rhymes all grouped together? In an anthology where doggerel and Dryden rub up against one another, what is it about nursery rhymes that means they cannot more freely be interspersed among the other verses?

Ford certainly brings together poems, which – as he says – 'reflect all strata of the culture of London' (xxvii). Consequently, the resulting volume is a valuable and

fascinating reading experience. However, while the poems might be said to mirror the diversity of inhabitants of and visitors to London, Ford's own manner as editor might be compared to the Thames in Alice Oswald's 'Another Westminster Bridge', whose water is both 'lovely' and 'inattentive' (717): his introduction may cast its brightening reflections onto some of the city's poetry, but his hands-off approach means that he casts poems and readers adrift without a guide to steer them on their way.

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