

The Literary London Journal



Review

Conference: *Literary London: Representations of London in Literature 2012*

**Holly Prescott
(University of Birmingham, UK)**

The Literary London Journal, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013)

Between 4 and 6 July 2012, the Literary London: Representations of London in Literature Conference returned to the Institute of English Studies in Bloomsbury's Senate House for its annual celebration of literature in, of and about London. A few weeks earlier than usual due to the 'Big Sports Day' due to kick off in town at the end of July, this year's conference nevertheless promised to be an intellectual event of Olympic proportions, with the theme of 'Sports, Games and Pastimes' uniting many of the increasingly diverse papers on offer. Also exciting about the 2012 conference was its status as the first Literary London event at which delegates were formally invited to join the new Literary London Society. Open to all with an interest in the literary lives and manifestations of England's capital, the Society seeks to support and solidify the annual conference and the online Literary London journal, both of which have been crucial forums for the discussion and debate of London literature since the start of the twenty-first century.

With the dynamic support of the newly fledged Literary London Society, therefore, the conference opened to a real buzz with a poetry reading from the ever-charismatic Michael Rosen. In the drama-documentary film *Under the Cranes* – Rosen's recent collaboration with director Emma-Louise Williams – the audience is invited to perceive the city as a sequence of vignettes presenting 'past in the present; present in the past'. On a similar theme were Rosen's chosen poems for the Literary London audience: family-centric pieces including 'Solomon the Cat' and 'The Torch', through which Rosen locates himself within the suburbs of the capital through a series of witty and poignant observations from his London childhood.

The rest of the conference kicked off with similar verve with Norma Clarke's plenary address 'Oliver Goldsmith and the legacy of Grub Street', setting up two days of fascinating and wide-ranging panels each bringing its own richness of interpretation to the games, pastimes and leisure theme. The wide gamut of topics ranged from 'Slums and Slumming' through 'Swordplay and Renaissance Drama' to 'Leisure and Pleasure in the 20th and 21st Centuries', with other panels exploring the salience of sport, subcultures and hedonism in the ways in which London has come to be represented through literary and artistic media. As usual, the diversity, energy and quality of the papers delivered were never in doubt.

Of particular note was one of the opening panels of the conference entitled 'Critical Hedonism', which saw a trio of papers from Rebecca Warren-Heys (Royal Holloway), independent scholar Lynsey Blandford and Mita Choudhury (Purdue University Calumet) explore the character and pursuits of Falstaff, the Elizabethan gallant, and sports and riots in the eighteenth century respectively. Especially engaging was Warren-Heys's examination of Falstaff, seeking to reclaim Shakespeare's comic character from readings which limit him to the bounds of the vulgar and lecherous to re-construct Falstaff as representative of the vitality of the city, observing the subtle deviations in Falstaff's character when he is absent from, and thus devoid of, the noise and pleasures of London's urban environment.

Also fascinating was the Childhood and History panel featuring three extraordinary papers from Holly Forsythe Paul (University of Toronto Mississauga), independent scholar Anne Harvey and Literary London regular Candy Wood (Union College, Kentucky). Forsythe Paul's paper examined the use of overtly London-esque iconography in Allan Ahlberg's definitive children's book *Peepo*, presenting the book as an observation of Blitz life from a baby's perspective. Candy Wood's talk explored the subtle ways in which children's playful re-appropriation of museum spaces features as a recurring motif in children's fiction, whilst Anne Harvey, Trustee for the Farjeon Estate, spoke movingly of the London childhoods of Eleanor, Harry, Joe and Bertie Farjeon. An emotionally engaging panel exploring the overlaps between public and private literary Londons, the Childhood and History panel summed up one of the most rewarding subtleties of the Literary London phenomenon: namely, the way in which our academic engagement with London necessarily interacts and conflicts with our own experience of and emotive attachments to the city itself.

Yet another great thing about the annual Literary London conference is the event's ability to bring delegates new knowledge about this cacaphonic and confounding metropolis. Highlights included Nandi Chinna Saraswati's engaging paper on ecological science fiction, which saw a welcome focus on Richard Jeffries's novel *After London*, a work which has yet to attract quite as much attention from Literary Londoners as it perhaps deserves. The paper made the fascinating observation that nine people died in what become known as the 'London Beer Flood of 1814'.

The Literary London Conference thus continues to showcase engaging and innovative work in the field of London Studies, and Literary London 2012 provided a wonderful forum for the exploration of how our conceptions of leisure-time and our playful and often subversive urban pursuits can help us to interrogate how we understand London, its literary representations, its pasts and its futures. The Literary London initiative therefore continues to prove that, to customise the words of Samuel Johnson, when one is tired of Literary London, one is tired of life.

To Cite This Article:

Holly Prescott, 'Literary London: Representations of London in Literature 2012 Conference Review.' *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2013/prescott2.pdf>.

About *The Literary London Journal*

The Literary London Journal is the free, online, open-access journal of the Literary London Society. Founded in 2003 by Lawrence Phillips, who edited the journal between 2003 and 2011, it is the first and only journal to provide a common forum for scholars and students engaged specifically in the study of London and literature. From the start, *The Literary London Journal* has aimed to publish the best new research relating to London and literature.

The journal is online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

The Literary London Journal is fully peer-reviewed. It is published twice a year, in spring and autumn, and is indexed by the MLA International Bibliography. For past issues and information about submissions, please visit the journal home page.

ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>
