

The Literary London Journal

www.literarylondon.org



Matthew Beaumont, *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London, Chaucer to Dickens*, hardback, 484 pages, Verso: London and New York, 2015. ISBN: 9781781687956; £20.

Reviewed by

Andrew Whitehead
(Freelance, UK)

The Literary London Journal, Volume 12 Number 1–2 (Spring/Autumn 2015)

This is a fizzing, stimulating—at times vexing—book, a literary history of London at night which emerges from the shadows to be something much more than that. It is a discussion of gender, deviancy, policing, vagrancy, sex, public morality, psychology and social control—and literature and its practitioners of course—all wrapped into the experience of walking London's streets after dark. It engages with all the commanding writers about London—for how can anyone write of the city in its daylight hours alone?—up to and including Dickens. 'Nothing less than a grand unifying theory of the counter-enlightenment', shouts Will Self from the back cover. It's nothing of the sort. But it is grand, ambitious, interdisciplinary—and by-and-large, it works.

Matthew Beaumont is enticed by nocturnal London—indeed, Will Self's afterword relates a walk through the night with Beaumont and one other from Stockwell to the North Downs. He is a practitioner of the custom of which he writes. He stands in the long line of London writers, stretching down to Iain Sinclair (who must surely feature prominently in any successor volume), who relish the darker, seamier, less disciplined and regimented aspect of our city.

'If you do not want to live with evil-doers', counselled Richard of Devizes more than 800 years ago, 'do not live in London.' He listed the sort of villainous types then to be found in the city's streets:

Actors, jesters, smooth-skinned lads, Moors, flatterers, pretty-boys, effeminates, pederasts, singing- and dancing-girls, quacks, belly-dancers, sorceresses, extortioners, night-walkers, magicians, mimes, beggars, buffoons (15–16).

In the medieval city, to walk at night—certainly in the deep night, as opposed to the hours immediately after dusk, and in a solitary fashion—was to transgress. Whatever

your purpose, it wasn't a good one. Those with authority who ventured out at night did so with a retinue, including someone to light the way. Those in the shadows were seen as a threat to order.

Nightwalking surfaced in English literature with Chaucer, and for centuries there was an assumption that men walking the streets late at night were drunkards or thieves and women were whores. There was a gender and a class aspect to how nightwalkers were perceived, and how they were dealt with by the night watch and the courts. Over the years, shaped by the introduction of street lighting in the late seventeenth century and of gas lights and a police force in the early nineteenth, nightwalking gained a bohemian as well as criminal and vagrant aspect, and was celebrated in literary form as well as denounced by moralists and social commentators. From the 1660s, the City's curfew was 'not so much abolished as overwhelmed' (115). The space to walk the city, and the safety with which it was possible to do so, expanded—much as London itself grew large.

The roll-call of writers under Beaumont's scrutiny is daunting: Shakespeare, Ned Ward, Goldsmith, Johnson, Savage, Blake, De Quincey, Dickens. And there is a touch of mission creep. A book about nightwalking in London sometimes strays into writers' engagement with walking, with the night, with the city. A little bit like a wanderer in an unlit city in the small hours, *Nightwalking* sometimes gets lost in blind turns and dead ends. The vigour of the writing, and the energy of the argument, largely excuses such indiscipline—but not entirely.

Romping through Beaumont's book brings to mind an echo of E. P. Thompson's magisterial *The Making of the English Working Class*, published fifty years ago (and given his habit of namedropping Marxist penseurs, one suspects Beaumont would relish that comparison). They are both impassioned, unrestrained, at times loose and unconvincing but marked by democratic compassion and intellectual energy. These are works that redefine their subject and redirect academic enquiry.

It's a pity that Beaumont at times occludes his writing with words that will startle even the most erudite of readers (let me save some effort, to obnubilate is 'to darken or cover with or as if with a cloud'). And at times when dealing with the more elusive of his subjects, William Blake for instance, the writing becomes almost giddy, as if intoxicated by the literary draught being discussed. These are minor annoyances. The might and mystery of the London night has never before enjoyed such invigorating scholarship.

Note on Contributor

Dr Andrew Whitehead runs the London Fictions website <http://www.londonfictions.com/> and was with Jerry White the co-editor of *London Fictions*, published by Five Leaves in 2013. He is an honorary professor at the University of Nottingham and at Queen Mary, University of London. With Martin Plaut, he has written *Curious Kentish Town* (Five Leaves, 2014) and *Curious Camden Town* (Five Leaves, 2015)—they are turning their attention next to King's Cross.

To Cite this Article

Andrew Whitehead, 'Review of: Matthew Beaumont, *Nightwalking: a nocturnal history of London, Chaucer to Dickens*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 12, Number 1–2 (Spring/Autumn 2015): 62–64. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/springautumn2015/whitehead.pdf>.