



Joolz Sparkes and Hilare, *London Undercurrents: The hidden histories of London's unsung heroines, north and south of the river* (Holland Park Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-907320-82-8, 152 pages, £10.00

Reviewed by

Fran Lock

(Birkbeck, University of London, UK)

London Undercurrents is, by turns, a necessary, illuminating, and infuriating collection. The book represents over five years of archival excavation, uncovering, as the preface claims, 'the hidden histories of London's unsung heroines' both north and south of the river: working-class women whose voices have been lost, ignored, or wilfully obscured by the passage of time and by the patriarchy's selective amnesia. To a large extent the book succeeds in this laudable aim, offering fascinating vignettes of early Huguenot asparagus planters, teenage counterfeiters, artists, and activists, among which there are some genuine revelations. The poem 'In the Ether', for example, is a meticulous and compelling portrait of life and labour at the Veritas Gas Mantle works in the year 1931:

Lift a tray of mantles off the belt.
Place it in your tank.
Wind it right down
Into that collodion stuff.
Let the hoods of knitted silk

soak a mo. Don't drift off.
Draw the tray up
ever
so
slow. (33)

'Ether' is an appropriate word here. The poem's speaker swims in a woozy microclimate that hovers somewhere between tedium and alchemy, as she works with patient and practised skill, breathing the fumes and absorbing the 'stink' of the chemical solution. The poem's frequent injunctions against falling asleep create an atmosphere of weary enchantment, as the shift-worker battles her own story's syrupy rhythms, recalling herself to wakefulness and indignation just when it seems she might slip below the surface:

By shift's end, we're numb to the stink
So hold your nose, *Mister Census Taker*,
while you tick that box. *Unskilled general labourer*.
I don't give a damn what you think. (34)

In this way the poem extends its solidarity to all those who succumb to the numbing effect of monotonous labour while fighting to preserve both identity and anger. And at its best moments this is what *London Undercurrents* revels and excels in, finding the affinities between particular, highly personal histories; weaving individual testimony into collective tapestry, a counter-narrative to the public story of London and the lives that shaped it.

This is perhaps best exemplified in 'Cat And Mouse', which is both a gruelling and a moving account of suffragette Janie Terrero, beaten and force-fed by the prison authorities at HMP Holloway in 1913. In its visceral depiction of institutional brutality – 'for gums | to bud skin torn by metal jaws' (124) – the poem evokes the dehumanising treatment of women prisoners everywhere.

What 'Cat And Mouse' does singularly well, and what, for me, is the collection's defining achievement, is to render explicit the way in which women's historical experience, whether of pleasure or pain, is tied to and mediated through the female body. In *London Undercurrents* bodies suffer and sing; they are instruments of punishment and places of imprisonment. They are also sites of survival, occasions for joy and desire. In some of the most successful poems, bodies become places of refuge and avenues of escape, wielded like weapons against the forces that wish to reduce them to faceless, sexless economic units. In 'Wickers', for example, a teenage piece-worker at Price's candle factory in Battersea escapes a summer's day so oppressive that 'heat warps wax by lunchtime' in the Latchmere baths, remaking herself 'part mermaid' (25). In 'Sacked' a feisty confectioner's assistant loses her job for dancing the Charleston on a worktop:

But my legs don't take to sitting
Hours on end. I'm shaking
the charleston on the metal topped table

showing off my donkey-kicks
when Mr Cook walks in. (29)

In other places the collection is less convincing. For example, a passage from 'Shame, shame, shame', which tells the story of a short-lived sit-in by Ugandan Asian workers at Decca's Colour TV Factory in 1975 runs:

Together we've assembled hundreds, thousands of colour TVs. Between us, we feed dozens upon dozens of dependants. Why close this factory? Why not a three-day week, like we see on our black and white TVs in our crowded borrowed homes? (41)

Invoking the inferior 'black and white TVs' of the women workers feels somewhat trite, and 'crowded borrowed homes' generic and unnatural. Would any women truly describe her living conditions this way? The note on the poem states that Decca had 'not thought it worth providing English language classes' for their workers, because in their view, when the women's English improved, they tended to leave. But this poem doesn't create that sense of a pressured encounter inside a limited lexical field. Rather, this attempt by the poets to give voice to the experiences of a marginalised, non-English-speaking group serves to reduce the sonic texture of these voices to something homogenous and bland. Precisely because language barriers were essential to and implicated in the story of these women, it's disappointing that the poem doesn't take more risks with structure and syntax.

I find this is a complaint one could raise at various strategic points throughout this collection. On the whole there is a reliance upon the lyric mode, with its series of stable first-person speakers, that begins to feel rather unvaried. 'Thames Crossing, Second Attempt' (72) is a welcome respite from this feeling, a fresh, memorable kinetic poem that inscribes on the page a Victorian tightrope walker's crossing between Battersea Bridge and Cermone Gardens. Other lyric poems – 'A 13-Year-Old Girl's To Do List' (31), for example – are rich enough and lexically unusual enough to keep their reader enthralled.

Elsewhere, the poem 'On The Way To See The Sex Pistols Play At The Hope And Anchor' (80) relies on somewhat tired tropes (ripped fishnets, black lipstick, razor blades, and safety pins) to conjure up its mood of unrepentant punkery. For a genre characterised by its hybridity and inventiveness, this somewhat staid punk-by-numbers portrait feels cliché and cursory, leaving the reader longing for a few less-obvious signifiers, something deeper, more detailed, more strange. Similarly in 'An Easy Evening's Work' (93) I longed for a bit of Romnichal embroidery, some characteristic cant expressions to enliven Charlotte Cooper's telling of her meeting with the nineteenth-century travel writer George Borrow. Borrow interviewed Romanichal families camped near Wandsworth for his study of 'Gypsy' lives and language, *Romano Lavo-Lil* (1874). The poem paints a wily and warm-hearted portrait of Cooper, but the form doesn't feel like it's doing her justice.

This is the problem, not just with *London Undercurrents*, but with any creative project claiming to 'give a voice' to historically silenced persons: whose voice, in fact, are you giving them? And how does the act of writing ethically attend to lost or elided personhood? The poems in this collection are often beautiful and interesting, but to read them all together is to become impatient with this kind of lyric beauty, tempering, as it does, historical injustice with aesthetic pleasure; it is to want more stress and rupture at the level of language, for the telling to feel fought for, hard won, straining against silence. A number of online reviews and comments have praised this book's 'accessibility'. Clair Booker, writing for *Ink, Sweat and Tears*, calls it 'fresh and accessible'.¹ Karina Magdalena tells us on her blog that it is 'evocative and accessible'.² Press for a reading from the collection at Battersea Power Station describes it as 'enjoyable, moving and accessible'.³ It is true that *London Undercurrents* is an eminently readable book, but I would personally be wary about constructing accessibility as some kind of absolute moral category. Sometimes difficulty is salutary, sometimes a little non-trivial effort retunes our attention to suffering and struggle, in a way that straightforward lyric narrative does not.

Notes

1. Claire Booker, review of 'Joolz Sparkes and Hilaire's collection "London Undercurrents"', *Ink Sweat and Tears: The Poetry and Prose Webzine* <<http://www.inksweatandtears.co.uk/pages/?p=19054>> [accessed 3 July 2019].
2. Karina Magdalena, 'Review: London Undercurrents – The Hidden Histories of London's Unsung Heroines, North and South of The River by Joolz Sparkes and Hilaire', personal blog <<https://karinamagdalena.com/2019/06/09/review-london-undercurrents-the-hidden-histories-of-londons-unsung-heroines-north-and-south-of-the-river-by-joolz-sparkes-and-hilaire/>> [accessed 3 July 2019].
3. london-undercurrents-comes-home-to-battersea, Battersea Power Station, 17 July 2019. See Eventbrite page <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/london-undercurrents-comes-home-to-battersea-tickets-63977205544>> [accessed 3 July 2019].

Note on contributor

Fran Lock is an associate poetry editor at Culture Matters, and the author of five poetry collections. Her latest collection, *Contains Mild Peril*, is due from Out Spoken Press in 2019. Fran is a post-doctoral candidate in her final year of a practice-based PhD at Birkbeck, University of London.

To Cite this Article

Lock, Fran, 'Review of: Joolz Sparkes and Hilare, *London Undercurrents: The hidden histories of London's unsung heroines, north and south of the river*'.
Online at <http://literarylondon.org/reviewfiles/lock-londonundercurrentsreview.pdf>.