

A History of the French in London: Liberty, Equality, Opportunity

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What a great idea! The only wonder is why no publishing house thought of commissioning a book on the topic before. The reader's delight starts straight from looking at the cover illustration – a 'translation' of Harry Beck's celebrated London Tube Map, in which Waterloo Station becomes Gare de Napoléon. A pity there is no Trafalgar Square tube station – one wonders what alternative would have been offered, but the great naval victory / defeat is not forgotten, as the Eiffel Tower has taken the place of Nelson's Column, slightly to the West, to be centred on South Kensington, usually seen as 'the most populous French "ghetto" in London' (p. 11). Unfortunately, the image is not big enough to make it possible to decide whose head it is on 'Nelson's statue' at the top of the Tower – though there is a strong suspicion that we have Napoleon's head and hat on Nelson's body. The subtitle of the book is also a witty choice, with the last word of the Motto of the Republic becoming 'opportunity'.

The hefty tome starts with an introduction from one of the co-editors, Martyn Cornick, who explains the objectives of the fascinating, but complex task set to the Anglo-French team of contributors:

The book [...] aims to explore and provide elements toward a history of the social, cultural, political and – to some extent – economic presence of the French in London, and to examine the many ways in which this presence has contributed to the life of the British capital (p. 2).

Cornick then presents the various chapters, whose cumulative insights provide reasons which 'come together to explain the draw of London for the French' (p.12).

The narrative really starts with the Reformation, and the persecution of the Protestants in France prior to their precarious access to limited rights under Henri IV and his Edict of Nantes of 1598 ('A special case? London's French Protestants', by Elizabeth Randall). Interestingly, even after 1534 and the break with Rome, Henry VIII 'continued to regard Protestants as heretics' (p. 16), and it was not until the accession of Edward VI in 1547 that the immigration of these 'strangers', as they were then called, really started, giving rise to a movement which took substantial proportions. Randall tells us that 'an estimated 65,000 French-speaking Europeans moved into England' between 1550 and 1789 (p. 13). Readers who might be puzzled by

the phrase ‘French-speaking Europeans’ receive the explanation a few pages later: for instance, the Walloons of Lille – who provided a significant contingent in the silk industry – were not subjects of the King of France. The assassination of Henri IV in 1610 boded ill for the future of the French Protestants, and the stream continued, with a peak following the Revocation of the Edict in 1685 and the warm welcome given to the ‘Huguenots’ by William and Mary after 1689. Another interesting figure given by Randall is that ‘[t]he 1711 vestry records of St. Anne’s church in Wardour Street, first consecrated in 1686, show that 40 per cent of contemporary parish residents were Huguenots’ (p. 33) – Soho must have been ‘the most populous French “ghetto” in London’ at the time, as confirmed by the excellent map (pp. 14–15) of the French presence in London around 1700 (each chapter in fact has a map of London showing ‘Places mentioned in the text’ – an excellent idea and a very useful feature of the book). The chapter also has a wealth of information on many prominent Protestant ‘French-speaking Europeans’ who made a name for themselves in their country of adoption – particularly Augustin Courtauld and his highly successful descendants.

Some of them, like Louis Chéron or Daniel Marot, have their portraits in the next chapter, ‘Montagu House, Bloomsbury: a French household in London, 1673–1733’, by Paul Boucher and Tessa Murdoch, whose piece is largely based on the household account books, which ‘provide details of the artists, craftsmen, employees and suppliers, English and French, who played an essential role in the maintenance of Montagu House’ (p. 58). Ralph, Duke of Montagu, ‘enjoyed French society and surrounded himself with French friends’ (p. 59), and even his physician was French. Montagu’s patronage was not confined to the decorative arts, and he had a special interest in dancing. The authors have a number of interesting pages on the influence of French ballroom and ballet dancing in London in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In ‘The novelty of the French émigrés in London in the 1790s’, Kirsty Carpenter writes that initially, by the influx of refugees, ‘the British were given a sense of the difference of cultures in their midst; and, one could strongly argue, a heightened appreciation of their own by comparison’ (p. 69). She reminds us of the contrast with the Huguenots, who settled in Britain and ‘brought many artistic and artisanal skills with them’, ‘whereas the vast majority of the émigrés after 1789 were concerned only with their financial survival until their return to France’ (p. 81). Their means of survival were mainly ‘teaching, publishing, small business, art and music’, the harp business of Sébastien Érard being a case in point (p. 82). Carpenter’s chapter is also the first one in which the French are seen to make their mark as cooks, pastrycooks and confectioners in fashionable London society. She concludes on a potentially very fruitful hypothesis – that some of the élites to whom ‘would fall the task of rebuilding France in the nineteenth century’ (p. 89) had had their formative years in exile in London before 1815, with beneficent consequences for Anglo-French understanding in the long run. Her chapter is usefully complemented by a ‘Note on French Catholics in London after 1789’, adapted and edited by Helena Scott, from Douglas Newton’s 1950 work *Catholic London* which confirms once more that at the time ‘the Soho district had for long years been London’s French quarter’ (p. 95).

The next chapter, by Philip Mansel, is devoted to more elevated refugees: ‘Courts in exile: Bourbons, Bonapartes and Orléans in London, from George III to Edward VII’. This very entertaining essay begins with the story of the rubicund Philippe Égalité, an Anglophile Prince, father of the future King, Louis-Philippe, who settled in London in 1779, and was ‘executed in Paris in 1793, devoured by the Revolution he had encouraged’ (p. 103). It continues with the comte d’Artois, Louis XVI’s ‘reactionary youngest brother’ (the future Charles X), encouraged and paid by Pitt, who believed that only a restoration of the French monarchy would put an end to the wars, to move to London in 1799. He organised plots and even assassination attempts against Bonaparte, and thanks to him, as Mansel puts it, ‘London remained the capital of French royalist propaganda, as it would be of Gaullist propaganda in 1940–4’ (p. 105). The disputes in London between the descendants of Philippe Égalité and those of Louis XVI, including the future Louis XVIII, who only arrived in 1807, make for fascinating reading for anybody interested in the political infighting of the *ancien régime*. Equally fascinating reading is provided by the secret efforts of the British government and monarchy to promote a Restoration headed by Louis XVIII, as the Prince Regent already called him when officially receiving him in London. On 20 April 1814, we learn, ‘Louis XVIII received a triumphant welcome in London’ – for the population, he and the Bourbons meant peace, whereas ‘Boney

[was] the invader' (p. 111).

Ironically we read in the section devoted to Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte that 'London was a spring-board for Bonapartist plans in 1838–40, as it had been for royalist plots in 1799–1814', and only a few years later it 'was also used as political base by the legitimate pretender the comte de Chambord, grandson of Charles X (the former comte d'Artois)' (p. 116). The dethroned and exiled ex-Napoleon III died near London, in Chislehurst and he is buried in Farnborough.

Mansel's chapter ends with an excellent discussion of the complex continued relations between the Orléans branch and London, where they became 'permanent exiles' – as '[n]aturally Louis-Philippe and his family chose England as their refuge after the revolution of 1848 in France' (p. 119). They were allowed to return to Paris in 1871 – crossing Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in Dover, who arrived there as they left – only to be forced into exile again in 1886. As in a good situation comedy, '[t]he London region now contained two rival French courts: the Empress Eugénie [Louis-Napoléon's widow] in Farnborough and the comte de Paris [Louis-Philippe's son and heir] in Twickenham' (p. 123). On a more serious note, Mansel observes that 'London and Paris were never closer than in the years between 1814 and 1870' and that 'as a capital of French royalism, Orleanism or Bonapartism', it 'was as much part of French politics as it is today, as the seventh largest French city, with 100,000 French voters' (p. 127).

We go back to the July Monarchy, 'a rather neglected era in comparative studies of Britain and France' (p. 129) in Ma?ire Cross's chapter, 'The French in London during the 1830s: multidimensional occupancy'. Not surprisingly, in view of her specialism, she concentrates on Flora Tristan and her *Promenades dans Londres* – but she also discusses Tocqueville and Michelet. Michelet only made a brief stay in London, in 1834, precisely when the Lords were discussing the Poor Law Amendment Bill, it seems, since Ma?ire Cross reports a conversation which he had with the ageing Talleyrand (whose presence in London is not explained) on the contrasting attitudes of the Bishops of London and Exeter to destitute mothers during the debates. Ma?ire Cross seems guilty of 'presentism' for indirectly reproaching both Michelet and Tocqueville with not making 'women's emancipation their priority' (p. 140). Apparently, Tocqueville was also in London in connection with the proposed Poor Law Amendment Bill – she speaks of 'a parliamentary enquiry in London': he must have been consulted on the section which the Poor Law Report devoted to 'Bastardy' and he gave his view that 'enquiry of paternity' should be rejected as favouring bad morals among women as it greatly diminishes their strength of resistance. When we read that 'Michelet, Tocqueville and Tristan knew they were part of the French presence in London' (Conclusion, p. 153), we feel that there is little or no evidence of that in the brief information on the two men given in the chapter: they appear as little more than foils to the heroine, with her 'highly politicised feminist, socialist and national views' which, we are told, 'add a fragmented but multiple dimension to being French in London' (p. 152).

In a way, the next three chapters have to be read in combination, since they basically cover the same theme – admittedly at different periods and with differing shades of 'progressive' commitment – the French Left, moderate or extreme, in London between 1848 and 1914. The exploration of the theme starts with a short 'Introductory exposition: French republicans and communists in exile to 1848', by Fabrice Bensimon, who rightly reminds us that '[n]o foreigner was known to have been expelled from Britain between 1823 and 1905' (p. 157). A little-known aspect of unofficial cross-Channel activities at the time is the way the French police kept a close watch on the French 'agitators' in exile in London, and Bensimon quotes from a magnificently phrased report from a French police spy who had infiltrated a meeting of the Fraternal Democrats on the Strand in support of the Cracow patriots whose uprising had just been crushed, in 1846. An incidental, but not negligible, interest of Bensimon's brief survey is that it shows that the French political exiles of the Left did not operate in a vacuum: they had strong connections with the Germans who had fled to London for the same reasons.

Not unexpectedly, this collaboration receives more extensive treatment in ‘The French left in exile: *Quarante-huitards* and Communards in London, 1848-80’, by Thomas C. Jones and Robert Tombs, who start by reminding the reader of the weight of their presence in London:

During their time in London, they had a significant impact on the life of the city, transforming several of its neighbourhoods into essentially French enclaves, infused themselves into certain sectors of London’s economy, blended into particular social milieux, and greatly affected the shape and trajectory of political radicalism in the capital (p. 165).

They then discuss these various points in great detail – they have evidently ‘read everything’ on this vast subject – with a magnificent quote from Dickens, who says it all in 1853 when he speaks of these ‘ex-representatives of the people, ex-ministers, prefects and republican commissaries, Prolétaires, Fourierists, Phalansterians, disciples of Proudhon [...], professors of barricade building [...].’ (p. 176).

If many of them somehow carved a niche for themselves in London, as Jones and Tombs show, such was not the case for the succeeding wave of Anarchists, whose ‘almost complete lack of integration’ (p. 201) is observed by Constance Bantman in her chapter, “‘Almost the only free city in the world’: mapping out the French anarchist presence in London, late 1870s–1914’. Unsurprisingly, they also ‘settled down in Soho and Fitzrovia’ (p. 203) – a concentration which most vividly appears on map 8-1 (‘London c.1910’). Linking their experience to the subtitle of the book, she concludes that ‘London afforded its French visitors [including of course the Anarchists] a truly unique political opportunity, by allowing them to form contacts with their international counterparts’ (p. 215).

No collection of essays on the French in London would be complete without a discussion of food, most competently provided by Valerie Mars in ‘Experiencing French cookery in nineteenth-century London’. It all started very early, with the Tudors and Stuarts in fact: ‘French culinary influence was found not only in the employment of French cooks but also in important cook books that were translated into English’ (p. 219). Needless to say, the ordinary population was not affected, but she has a very interesting remark showing the differing attitudes of the upper and middle classes: ‘Throughout the period French haute cuisine was still both loved and hated. This was in part due to its political role in symbolising recurrent views of all things French; but it was, at the same time, the cuisine of Europe’s elites’. (p. 227). Still, what she calls ‘bourgeois dining out’ in French *table d’hôte* restaurants (p. 235) seems to have been particularly common in the Leicester Square area, and she concludes that ‘through the nineteenth century the influence of French cuisine steadily grew’ – and some restaurants like ‘L’Escargot, opened in 1894, where they reared their own snails in the cellar’ (p. 239), are still there today.

Michel Rapoport follows, with ‘The London French from the Belle Époque to the end of the inter-war period (1880–1939)’. He distinguishes between ‘two broad categories’: the permanent residents, seen as ‘London’s “French colony”’, and ‘temporary visitors’, including ‘tourists’ (p. 241), and his text provides a thorough examination of these groups, notably with figures derived from Census returns. The sad conclusion is that 1940 marked the definitive disappearance of this world. His chapter has a unique feature in that it is illustrated with old contemporary postcards from his personal collection.

The discussion of the cultural aspects of the period has been entrusted to Charlotte Faucher and Philippe Lane, in ‘French cultural diplomacy in early twentieth-century London’. It concentrates on the creation of the Université des Lettres françaises (1910), the embryo of the Institut français du Royaume-Uni, but it also examines major events of the period, like the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908.

Then, three chapters discuss ‘The French in Second World War London’. Here again, Debra Kelly’s contribution, ‘Mapping Free French London: places, spaces, traces’, is perhaps most notable for its wealth of rare illustrations, especially the photograph of the Free French scarf by Jacqmar, London. Most readers will also no doubt be grateful to her for drawing their attention to ‘the little gems of novels [...] by Mrs. Robert

Henrey, a Frenchwoman married to an Englishman who lived in Mayfair throughout the war' (p.329), especially *A Village in Picadilly* (1942), which once more provides fascinating material on 'Soho's French colony' (p. 331). It is equally likely that many readers will discover a great man, 'a neglected and rather misunderstood figure' (p. 343), Denis Seurat, director of the French Institute from 1924, in "'The first bastion of the Resistance": the beginnings of the Free French in London, 1940–41' by Martyn Cornick, who also discusses an even more 'neglected' figure, Émile Delavenay, 'incontestably one of the spokesmen for French culture in London' in Stéphane Hessel's words (p. 360). These and other 'forgotten' Free French intellectuals in London at the beginning of the war discussed by Cornick are in total contrast with the towering figure of Raymond Aron, the subject of David Drake's chapter, 'Raymond Aron and *La France Libre* (June 1940 – September 1944)' – though, as Drake rightly argues, his time in London as 'the mainstay of the review' (p. 384) has not received much attention. Could it be because 'he remained something of an outsider in Free French circles in London' (p. 388)? Anyway, Drake manages to make his own reader feel like reading the whole series of *La France Libre*.

The final chapter, 'From the 16ème to South Ken? A study of the contemporary French population in London' by Saskia Huc-Hepher and Helen Drake, might be dismissed by 'authorised' sociologists as impressionistic (what is the scientific validity of their sample of interviewees?) and based on unreliable statistics – as they are the first to admit. But one can confidently guess that it will be appreciated by the vast majority of its readers, as it somehow 'rings true' to anyone familiar with the current London scene. In their conclusion, the authors give a twist to the subtitle of the book – they speak of London 'as a place of refuge, liberty and opportunity' for the French. 'It seems always to have done so and continues to fulfill that role', they continue (p. 423): a perfect summary of the guiding thread of this excellent book, which very aptly answers the regret expressed by Jerry White, quoted on p. 2: 'The wider French community in modern London has yet to find its historian'.

A History of the French in London should naturally be in all University libraries – but it would also make an ideal gift for a member of the age-old 'French Colony' in London.

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