Death and Survival in Urban Britain: Disease, Pollution and Environment 1800-1950

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Death and Survival is a collection of eight previously published articles and chapters with a new preface, introduction and conclusion. Luckin is without a doubt one of the most important urban environmental historians of London. His career evolved from a focus on the social history of medicine to an overlapping interest in urban environments, disease, infrastructure and environmental discourse. He provides a crucial bridge between environmental historians and the rich history of British urban public health. So it is not at all surprising that this is a strong collection of essays. They are not, however, updated, meaning some of the scholarship is more than three decades old. This leads to the question as to whether the book adds enough value when readers can find copies of the majority of the material. Three of the chapters were published in journals and should be relatively easy to track down, but my good-sized Canadian research library only has two of the three on hand. Five chapters appeared in edited collections, ranging from the ubiquitous volume three of *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* to a more obscure book held in only a handful of major North American research libraries. Readers in London might be able to find, print or photocopy all eight chapters in an afternoon at the British Library, but those of us without easy access to a top research library will find the convince of book appealing. Secondly, the introduction and conclusion are generally excellent. The first situates 30 years of scholarship within historiographical developments in the social history of medicine, environmental history and urban history. The second is a succinct 18-page overview of the history of disease and death in the urban setting from 1800 to 1950, broken into three sections: 1800–1860, 1860–1900 and 1900–1950. This, read alongside similar overviews from Simon Szreter and Anne Hardy, provides a very good primer on our broad understanding of urban public health during this time period.⁽¹⁾ Luckin is very good at synthesis. The endnotes in both of these chapters are an excellent starting point for graduate students interested in the overlapping histories of urban public health and environments.

Part one, 'Disease in the city', includes four chapters originally published in 1977, 1980 and 1984 and 2004. As a result, they have different utilities for the reader, as the scholarship in two of them is dated. Luckin acknowledges in the introduction that his conclusions in 'Evaluating the sanitary revolution: typhus and typhoid in London, 1851–1900', published in 1984, were 'convincingly challenged' by Anne Hardy in 1988 (p. 7). The chapter is presented as an important early attempted to grapple with the multiple causes of a disease in the 19th-century urban context and it helps frame the questions Luckin pursued in the decades that

followed. Chapter two is another chapter with historiographical significance, as it was Luckin's first engagement with the McKeown thesis (summarized a few years earlier in Thomas McKeown's 1973 *The Modern Rise of Population*). It is evangelical in its promotion of the social history of medicine, providing an important reminder that as late as 1980, Luckin felt the need to make a case for studying the people who suffered from illness, instead of focusing on the advancement of 'medical theories and practice' (p. 22). Luckin makes a case for urban and social historians to intrude on the territory of internalist historians of medicine and uses the remainder of the chapter to review sources and methods available to expand the understanding of the quality of life in 19th-century cities. This chapter set out an agenda that he and others followed in the subsequent three decades, which has not only deepened our understanding of the improving health of the population in British cities, but also adds a rich subfield of urban social history and improves to our understanding of political reform in the late 19th century.

Chapter four, published in 1979, focuses on the 1866 cholera epidemic and remains an authoritative source on this final outbreak of the disease in Britain. The only mark against this chapter is that it is easily available online and much of the material was revisited in Luckin's book on the Thames.⁽²⁾ The final chapter in the first section was published in 2004 and it is an important contribution on the politics of public health, particularly between London and other major urban centres in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. While London lagged behind provincial centres in local government reform and interventionist public policies, it maintained a healthier population throughout the second half of the 19th century. This context is very important for those of us working on local case studies, as it is essential to situate local developments within the regional and national trends. This section would have been strengthened further with the inclusion of Luckin's 1997 article on mortality decline in London.⁽³⁾

The autobiographical introduction is very strong in providing the context and historiographical significance of the chapters in part one, but it misses an opportunity to situate these four chapters with the rest of Luckin's contributions to the history of disease in British cities. Luckin's book, *Pollution and Control: a social history of the Thames in the nineteenth century*, for example, is oddly absent, given that it fits very much with the themes of the collection. It must have played an important role in Luckin's evolution from a social historian of medicine to someone interested in incorporating environmental history into the history of urban disease. It would have been interesting to read how it was situated between the articles and chapters republished in this book. The same goes with Luckin's collaboration with Graham Mooney and Andrea Tanner in the late 1990s.

Part two, 'Pollution and the burdens of urban-industrialism' contains four chapters published between 2000 and 2006. The first is a survey of the history of urban pollution published as a part of the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*. Starting with this chapter, the decision to not revise the material is somewhat disappointing. Luckin frames this chapter and the other environmental history chapters, with a lament that 'little work has yet been completed within the mainstream of social, economic and urban history on the origins, distribution and impact of environmental pollution in the first industrial nation' (p. 93). The chapter ends with suggestions on for new directions in the urban environmental history of Britain. Given Luckin's talent for synthesis, I would have very much liked to read an updated version of this chapter or one that took an even broader scope, reviewing the work of Steven Mosley, Peter Thorsheim, Harriet Ritvo, Andrea Tanner, Leslie Tomory, Christopher Otter, John Broich, Vanessa Taylor and others who have greatly deepened our understanding of British urban environments in the 19th and early 20th centuries over the past decade and a half. I would be equally interested to read a new final section suggesting where the field should go in the next 15 years. I understand this is not a fair criticism of a book whose goal was to bring together previously published material, but there is not much value in republishing a widely available 15-year-old review of the literature on pollution. This points to another minor weakness in the introduction, as Luckin could have done more to situate his important early contributions to British urban environmental history with the literature that followed in his footsteps.

Chapter eight, on the other hand, confirms the value of this book. 'Unending debate: town, country and the construction of the rural in England, 1870–2000' was originally published in an edited collection on German

and British environmental history Luckin co-edited in 2006. Google Scholar does not record any citations for Luckin's chapter and this is not a surprise given the limited availability of the book in academic libraries. It is to be hoped that this republication makes it available to a new readership.[\(4\)](#) It is a short but strong chapter exploring the cultural and political divides between London and the countryside. In particular, it makes a strong argument that historians need to pay closer attention to suburbanization, both in Greater London and around other major cities. He argues the '[a]nglocentric, pro-rural preservationism in British between 1870 and 1945 gained in persuasiveness because it gave little detailed attention to the crucial issue of the material and social formation of an emergent national suburbia' (p. 150). Michael John Law has made a similar argument in his book on private transportation in inter-war London, but Luckin's argument that historians pay too little attention to British suburbs remains largely true.[\(5\)](#)

Chapter nine continues to focus on a history of ideas and explores the relationship between the development of environmentalism, environmental justice movements and environmental history in the United States and Britain. Luckin presents American historians Harold Platt and Andrew Hurley as positive examples of historians exploring urban environmental justice issues without slipping into a presentism by seeking the historical roots of contemporary social movements. The chapter then unfortunately returns to Luckin's lament on the limited enthusiasm for British urban environmental history. Much like chapter five, these closing pages of the republished material in this book feel dated. Thorsheim published *Inventing Pollution* in 2006 and Mosley had already made an important contribution a few years earlier, confirming Luckin's complaint was already being remedied when the chapter was first published in 2005.[\(6\)](#) In fact, I think these two authors, along with Luckin, are excellent examples of blending urban environmental history with social history and British urban environmental history now provides an important comparative example to read alongside Hurley, Platt, Joel Tarr, Martin Melosi and others writing on the environmental history of American cities.

However, it is a testament to the strength of Luckin's book and his wider contributions to the history of London and British cities that this collection of previously published material left me wanting more.

Notes

1. Simon Szreter, *Health and Wealth: Studies in History and Policy* (Rochester, NY, 2005), pp. 1–22; Simon Szreter and Anne Hardy, 'Urban fertility and mortality patterns', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. Martin Daunton, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 629–72.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bill Luckin, *Pollution and Control: A Social History of the Thames in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, MA, 1986).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Bill Luckin, 'Perspectives on the mortality decline in London, 1860–1920', *The London Journal*, 22, 2 (1 November 1997), 123–41.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. A WorldCat search identifies 58 copies, many of which are in Germany.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Michael John Law, *The Experience of Suburban Modernity: How Private Transport Changed Interwar London* (Manchester, 2014).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Stephen Mosley, *The Chimney of the World: A History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester* (Cambridge, 2001); Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800* (Athens, OH, 2006).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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