

Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1596-1720

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That grand old patron saint of London historians, John Stow, currently seems to be inspiring a new wave of historical and literary studies. As well as this collection of essays and the conference which inspired it, another conference on Stow has been held recently - papers from which are soon to be published - and a number of other studies have appeared in the past few years.⁽¹⁾ If this collection is a fair representation, then this renewed fascination is no bad thing. For Julia Merritt has assembled an impressive array of authors whose interests and expertise range widely, indeed it is something of a star ensemble.

The essays in this collection aim head on at the issues that are inspiring this renewed interest in Stow and his antiquarian peers. On the one hand, a necessary, if sometimes slightly fusty, extension of academic interest to history's earliest practitioners and their antiquarian kin.⁽²⁾ On the other, a growing concern with how contemporaries perceived and understood the locations and events they experienced. In this latter regard, the sprawling, mobile and fluid setting of early modern London, which more than doubled in population during the seventeenth century, presents a particular interpretative challenge. Few historians are now happy speaking of metropolitan experience in the singular. Current writing on the city emphasises pluralities, fragmentation, and personalisation - not one London but many. Smaller communities, networks and neighbourhoods have survived on the pages of some recent studies, as in the work of Jeremy Boulton, but these are almost defined by their limited relationship to any city-wide identity.⁽³⁾ Older works on the city were not wholly dominated by a lumping approach to mentalities, but at present it seems that the splitters have the party to themselves.

No surprise then to find that few of the essays published here are without an elegant apology for the limits of interpretation. In their various approaches to how contemporaries knew and understood the city, these pieces expose weaknesses in older assumptions about collective portrayal and description as they seek to construct an alternative, less fragile understanding. But the price of a more grounded vision is a reduction in scale and reach. London or its inhabitants understood as a whole or perceived by a collectivity appears in only in a few places here. Interestingly, this tends to occur in the essays on more literary subjects, suggesting that - if historians continue to follow a theoretical trajectory to some extent prefaced in the experiences of literature departments - then generalisation may soon reassert itself. However, it is to be hoped that the subtler point

about the bounded nature of contemporary and historical understandings made implicitly in various of these essays survives any blending process. The interrelations of the limits of vision, perception and comprehension, of localised rather than local knowledge, are too often neglected.

It is worth running through these essays individually. Stow and his work are the subjects of the first pair of essays, by Patrick Collinson and Julia Merritt. Collinson sensitively scrutinizes Stow's 'selective nostalgia' and its relationship to his conservative religious position, and compares this to the interaction of faith and focus in other antiquarian writings of the day. The *Survey* emerges as a moralising, even mythicising work, imbued with a religious sensibility that fuels its tendency to condemn recent changes in the city. However, there was no inevitability about its tone or content, as demonstrated by the very different approaches of Carew and Lambard to Cornwall and Kent respectively. The religious nostalgia that suffused Stow's version of London presented a problem for his later, and more Protestant, editors and revisers, as Merritt shows. From Munday's firmly Protestant gloss of the 1630s to Strype's equally Protestant but more sympathetic reworking in the early eighteenth century, those who reused Stow's *Survey* simultaneously remade it to serve their own confessional concerns and to respond to current events. But, as Merritt emphasises, this was not a crude process; nor was it the only factor. New genres, most importantly the guidebooks that appeared in response to the expansion of the city, and new approaches, especially the later seventeenth century fascination with quantification, played their part.

Among Stow's greatest hatreds were the iconoclastic breakers of tombs and monuments. These and many other aspects of contemporary memorialisation - stained glass windows, paintings, sermons - are examined in Ian Archer's contribution in relation to benefaction and charity. Something of a fixture in the emergent field of Stow studies, Archer argues here that charity remained tied to posthumous reputation and godliness in a way that suggests a continuity with pre-reformation traditions.⁽⁴⁾ Devices for remembrance multiplied across the city's religious and civic fabric. In fact, there seems to have been a growth in memorialisation, running in parallel with charity. How this relates to the Reformation's rupturing of traditional religious memory-work remains an open question. While the main focus here is on these devices as memorials for the dead, much of this glass, plate and portraiture was given while company members were alive - and this was not necessarily just in anticipation of their death. Pictures could legitimise power, as Archer emphasises.

Archer's essay, like Collinson's, highlights continuities of perception and practice over the early modern period. Not all change - particularly cultural and religious change - was rapid or complete. Much was, nonetheless, dramatic, as Vanessa Harding's essay on the spatial transformation of the city shows. Over the seventeenth century, London accommodated an exploding population in its congested inner parishes and sprawling suburbs. In the process, the old scaffolding of community, particularly the parish, was shaken by urban growth, and the city was increasingly divided along lines of wealth, health and social difference. Yet the conclusions that Harding is able to offer about the fabric and social composition of the city can, she argues, have only a partial connection with the idiosyncratic understandings of the city that each Londoner, like the inhabitants of any locale, developed. A city becoming ever more divided by health and environment is also a central theme in Laura Williams's study of green spaces in the city. One way in which citizens responded to the growth of the city, she suggests, was to use nature to maintain a balance, in the process laying the foundation of many of the green spaces that still grace the capital. But as the urban green space moved from suburban field to city park, it also became more exclusive, exemplified best in the railed-in eighteenth-century square.

Robert Shoemaker starts with much the same question as Harding - how Londoners perceived the city - but instead of space, he targets gender. His delineation of the factors that influenced mobility (adopted as an unsatisfying but necessary substitute for perception) exposes some striking and unexpected results, most notably the higher levels of mobility among women than men at some social levels. However, in the final section of his paper, Shoemaker self-consciously undermines his own method by emphasising the importance of social preconceptions to perceptions recorded in diaries, ending up at a similar point to that of Harding - although by a rather different route.

A rather different London, one despised and largely ignored, is analysed by Tim Hitchcock in his essay on the lives and strategies of the poor - and their depiction by the elite. Interestingly, Hitchcock's explanation of the different responses evoked by the various begging strategies he describes shares the emphasis on continuity of responses apparent in Collinson and Archer: beggars traditionally moving from house to house were more acceptable than those who adopted a stationary public pitch. Moreover, in what should prove to be a provocative argument, Hitchcock suggests that this new, more visible public poor made carceral, non-residential responses possible: a fascinating argument that brings the re-making of the city and the responses of the poor into debates about the development of the poor law.

Many of these pieces talk about imagined communities - borrowing Benedict Anderson's term, if not his theoretical standpoint - in an attempt to articulate contemporary perceptions. But it is the imagined city as an entirety that emerges in Peter Lakes' study of order in London. His attempt to identify what about London frightened and alarmed people unpicks the binaries of praise and condemnation in contemporary texts, such as sermons and crime pamphlets, to suggest that depictions of London faced a problem: the fonts of its glories were often its sins. What one person saw as wealth and magnificence could as easily be seen by another - or the same person at another time - as greed and covetousness. Without an unambiguous language to praise commercial wealth, portrayals of the city naturally possessed an ability to slip between two extremes, and the city itself became a landscape in which opportunity and danger, advancement and corruption seemed equally likely. Ambiguities also surrounded political crowds, Tim Harris argues. A schizophrenic attitude among contemporaries to crowd action and petitioning can be explained by uncertainties about the status and composition of the crowd, and the (shifting) relationship between the public and the political nation. Status, honesty, orderliness, and party affiliation could legitimate or delegitimize a crowd, according to the observer's own alignment.

The final essay in the volume takes up the physical, prophetic and spiritual fires that so constantly threatened survival - whether spiritual, physical or both - in the early modern city. Moving in a unique manner from the Hollywood apocalypse of *Terminator II* to the fiery biblical destruction that, sermons warned, faced the citizens of London, Nigel Smith explores aspects of the relation between the literal and figurative in the experience and language of fire and destruction.

Overall, this is a good collection. It is particularly fruitful in its integration of textual and historical studies of London. Not all the essays are equally well developed or convincing, but all are of value. No edited volume can ever be complete, and it would be cheap to complain about areas that are omitted here. However, it is worth pointing out that all these imagined Londons are those of Londoners: these are views from within. The city was also the centre of imperial or mercantile networks, and the object of admiration, fear, praise and scorn from outsiders in the provinces and abroad. It is also strange that the river plays such a small part in this history. Early modern London was a port city in a way that is difficult to imagine now, as the present-day city largely turns its back on the river that winds through it. A more telling area that remains unresolved is the degree to which metropolitan life was experienced in ways that were unique to itself. By the end of the seventeenth century, London was more populous than either Liverpool or Sheffield is today. Did this provoke a set of conceptions that were as definitively metropolitan as its royal parks or the scale of its trade? Or was the metropolis just another seventeenth-century urban experience on a larger scale?

Notes

1. The conference 'John Stow (1525-1605): author, editor & reader' was held on 30 March - 1 April 2001 at Corpus Christi College, Oxford and is the basis of a collection edited by Ian Anders Gadd and Alexandra Gillespie, *John Stow (1525-1605) and the Making of the English Past: Studies in Early Modern Culture and the History of the Book* (British Library; London, forthcoming). See also B. L. Beer, *Tudor England Observed: The World of John Stow* (Alan Sutton; Stroud, 1998); M. J. Power, 'John Stow and his London', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 11 (1985), 1-20; and Ian Archer's essays cited below. One might also mention the title of Mark Jenner's and Paul Griffiths' recent

collection of essays on London, borrowed from one of Stow's successors: P. Griffiths and M. Jenner, eds, *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Probably the best recent work in this area is R. Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. P. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: A London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1987). Cf. J. P. Ward, *Metropolitan Communities: Trade Guilds, Identity, and Change in Early Modern London* (Stanford University Press; Stanford, 1997).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. I. W. Archer, 'The Nostalgia of John Stow', in D. L. Smith, R. Strier, and D. Bevington, eds, *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1995), pp. 17-34. Archer also has a chapter on 'John Stow, Citizen and Historian' in the forthcoming volume cited in note 1, edited by Gadd and Gillespie.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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