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Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing*, paperback, 704 pages, London: Vintage Books, 2013. ISBN: 978-0712600422; £11.99.

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Is it possible to write a history book about London which is not in some sense a history of England? Such a question may seem bootless. Our age reverberates to ever-new volumes with more to come from Peter Ackroyd in particular. No one seems inhibited. The problem, if it is a problem, is that London is just so big and uncontrollable that it sucks in everything around it. The historian, if not careful, can end up writing a biography of the capital as metaphor for nation. These days, public debate rages on London's disproportionate share of national wealth and influence: its houses are too expensive, its transport infrastructure too ambitious, its media dominance overweening, and so on. The eighteenth century was free of such considerations. True, London was lusted after and travelled to for its glamour and influence or shunned and abhorred for its moral degradation. But modern complaints reflect contemporary arguments about distribution. In the 1700s Britain had a small state.

And yet eighteenth-century London dominated more completely even than ours. Jerry White's assessment—suitably qualified for statistical uncertainty since the first national census came only in 1801—puts its population at a staggering 25 times larger than the next biggest city: in Defoe's estimate, derived from Sir William Petty, one million souls (Defoe 1962: v. 1, 322). This eighteenth-century city was the very antithesis of mercantilism. The great interventions of the state from which it benefited had all taken place before 1700: The Royal Society (1660), The Royal Exchange (1669 and not regulated until 1801), the Bank of England (1694), *Lloyds News* (1696). London in the 1700s had no help from the Crown which was 'supine, and never seized any opportunity to improve London in the eighteenth century' (White 2013: 44).

White might have given this point added heft had he drawn attention to international dirigisme. The absence of St Petersburg and Madrid is excusable, the one on grounds of infancy, the other for senility. But Vienna? True, Paris and Rome do show up, but merely as places men pass through before making it big in London.

To write a history of London you first have to know where it is. Defoe, the source of White's subtitle, took the broad view, identifying ten distinct 'parts' (Defoe 1962: v. 1, 323), four south of the river. A quarter of a century in, he was alive to the dynamic of the city, confidently (and accurately) forecasting the imminent absorption of tangential villages (Novak 2001: 631–2). White prefers to specify five distinct geographical areas, but both agree that there was a 'London' consisting of them all by the early 1700s. White's great fruitcake of a book is, like London itself, large and sprawling. Its dense references—44 pages to accompany 550 of text—testify to six years in the making. The cake has five fat slices—'city', 'people', 'work', 'culture' and 'power'—prefaced with a descriptive poem of the obscure John Bancks. Samuel Johnson's satire of the same year is better known (and better):

Here Malice, Rapine, Accident, conspire,
And now a Rabble rages, now a Fire;
Their ambush here relentless Ruffians lay,
And here the fell Attorney prowls for Prey;
Here falling Houses thunder on your Head,
And here a female Atheist talks you dead.

White ladles out London history a century at a time (White 2001, 2008). Now he has matched medium and message with a long eighteenth-century novel, bursting with anecdote but based on fact.

Defoe (1962: v. 1, 323) warily withdrew from the field of architectural judgement, pleading that Stow (1603) had already done the job. In fact this was essentially a new city, the Great Fire having done such thorough work. White is braver and plunges in, depicting the informal but century-long building rivalry of Westminster and the City, each provoking the other into public improvements (White 2013: 47–61ff). The focus of this competition was bridges. London Bridge had not faced a rival in eight centuries, and the first Westminster efforts foundered in the face of entrenched City opposition. Its 1750 bridge took almost 30 years to arrive (though only 14 to build) and represented a rare eighteenth-century triumph of property over commerce, for the 'nobs' who had located their town addresses up west in preference to the noxious and muddy City. Bridges stimulated public works. What use were they without passable approach roads? What use new roads without lighting? And so on until in the end it was the City that recognised that the roots of its power lay not in its location but in its physical connections to elsewhere and began building bridges itself.

This City could define itself as London because it had a coherent political identity. Its Corporation was a medieval creation. Westminster, however, was the seat of private citizens, grandees who had done well out of the 'Glorious' Revolution. Although they were wealthy, their only political recourse was petition to Parliament. Balked of their bridge early in the Whig Ascendancy, they gained in power as it approached

middle age. Nor was the new bridge and its environs their only concern. Their town houses were surrounded by open space. Not all were as powerful as the Dukes of Bedford, able to protect their view of the 'Northern Heights' from Bedford House for much of the eighteenth century. Development, all the same, was a private matter. In one of the most successful passages of the book, White traces the irruption of those Scots architects—from Gibbs, via both Adams, to Milne—who throughout the 1700s were employed by Bedford and others to create suitable urban seats for such patrons. In between these private commissions they embellished the City with new adornments like the Mansion House, begun in 1739 (White 2013: 44).

As White demonstrates at length (92–3 and *passim*) London was Mecca to the English, and indeed to the Scots and Welsh, and the list of comers-in in the arts alone is certainly impressive. At the end though, one is left wondering what has really been said. The city's exponential growth could hardly have been powered *sui generis* by births. White himself movingly depicts the explosive infant mortality—at least in the first half of the century—which circumscribed their impact (White 2013: 100–116). Coming to London to make one's fortune is so well embedded in the DNA, myth and actual experience of Britons it scarcely raises an eyebrow, but the city's appeal was international too. This early multiculturalism brought Indians and Black people as 'exotic' trophies to ruling circles, as it had since Pocahontas and before. There are estimates of 5–10,000 Black residents in London during the century (Porter 1991: 132) but White would go higher, at least after the 1780s. He adds 'what evidence we have points to the full integration of blacks into metropolitan plebeian life' (White 2013: 134). He does not mean by this that the city was a tolerant multi-ethnic paradise, for elsewhere he grimly catalogues the persecution of Gypsies, Jews and above all the Irish by the London mob.

This hectic growth simply defied bottlenecks. A fine passage elaborates the interaction of the Thames—for many London's defining feature—and its infrastructure. Considered from a UK point of view, the handsome (though noisome) river was then an asset in relative decline: London's *share* of the new nation's trade was diminishing. However, trade expanded overall (even at its nadir London still accounted for seventy per cent of British exports) despite failure (partly for technical reasons) to address the shallowness of the river. What could have been rectified, but was put right only slowly and tardily, was the parlous state of approaches and docking facilities. Yet the city had to wait until the early nineteenth century for the building of an infrastructure which matched its natural nautical advantage.

While London dithered, others acted. Liverpool opened five docks between 1715 and 1796 ('Liverpool: The docks' 1911). Bristol surged to Britain's second port and then declined all within the eighteenth century. In Aberdeen, where port expansion was limited by the harbour bar, the first section of Smeaton's North Pier was complete by 1780, and improved by Telford soon after (Aberdeen Harbour 2013). Telford (consulted about the new London Bridge in 1800) was the great port and water engineer of the time, yet he does not figure in White's list of Scots who made their fortune in the capital. He played no role in expanding London's docks until 1824.

Dysfunctional—and absent—local government thus perpetuated the wretched infrastructure of the city. Expansion and improvement required—as at all British

ports—an Act of Parliament. White cites a Commons Committee of 1796 which lamented nautical overcrowding: shallow water, 'insufferable' delays as vessels waited to discharge cargoes, 775 ships in the space where only 545 should be (White 2013: 171). The internationalisation of the city was driven by trade but occurred *despite* the failure to exploit the natural advantage of the Thames. The City and Westminster might be rivals but 'London' was not stimulated by the progress of other British ports. Merchants did not abandon it—they kept coming and grumbled—but their pressure for improvement did not bear fruit until the nineteenth century.

The explanation for London's turbulent growth then must be found elsewhere. White singles out the monopolies and enterprising 'marginal' men wholesaling in commodities and groceries and information (i.e. communications). The City, supine on physical infrastructure, woke up to spreading the news. Its busy traders had 'an obsessive desire to associate' (White 2013: 121). The previous century had seen the establishment of the Royal Exchange and if one could not find a partner for one's venture there, then one might stroll to the nearest coffee house (White 2013: 175–6). By the second half of the century guides even to their whereabouts could be obtained. And if the docks were sclerotic, mail was not. London had the Penny Post with *six* deliveries a day; no other British city had such a system, nor any other entrepôt globally.

Above all London was the heart of the new Britain's money economy. It accommodated not only the Bank of England, but a proliferating number of private banks eager to offer credit to fund trading ventures. Insurance could also be had, and at an attractive price—so much so that merchantmen based in foreign ports also brought business to London. Finally the emergence of joint-stock companies—and an exchange at which shares in them might be traded—offered alternative sources of capital.

London's later contradictory position—dominating British trade yet not strong as a manufacturing centre—was a product of the industrial revolution. In the eighteenth century, however, this was still work in progress. The coming mass production would require proximate raw materials and these were absent, but this London was a centre of small-scale industry and of crafts in particular: watchmaking lurked in the narrow alleys of the City; furniture—before it moved up the valley of the Lee—was represented centrally by Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton; silk-weaving huddled at Spitalfields, where Huguenots and Irish shared a double immigrant identity as foreigners and exceptional religionists. Elsewhere there was brewing, distilling, sugar refining, cutlery manufacture, porcelain production and foundries. Francis Place, to whose writings White has frequent recourse, began as an apprentice making leather breeches (White 2013: 209). A Directory of 1792 lists 492 trades, leading Porter to dub London 'Britain's most diversified craft centre' (Porter 1994: 141).

The quantity of this subsistence work depended on trade. But trade was constantly disrupted. Britain bookended the century by wars with France and filled in much of the space in between. Then there were political and economic disruptions: speculative bubbles and the Jacobites before 1750, revolutions thereafter. These provided the context for the emergence of a turbulent populace, driven to desperation by the collapse of their economic livelihood. It is fascinating to read such a modern

tale where artisans or craftsmen seek to act in restraint of trade to prevent the collapse of their livings. Most adept were the Spitalfields weavers, maddened by the collapse of wages, who sustained pressure on London by quasi-insurrectionary means between 1763 and 1769. They terrified Horace Walpole: White quotes his breathless report of 1765 'we have been on the eve of a civil war'. But the querulous Walpole was not alone in his fears and this, plus the sheer destruction in annual—or more frequent—riots brought legislation to enforce wage rates and revive trade in the Spitalfields Act of 1772. By this time, and certainly by 1789, the inchoate 'mob' is succeeded by something more akin to George Rudé's revolutionary crowd.

London in the eighteenth century had no university, and in this was inferior to other capitals. Yet it dominated Britain's world of writing, while suffering, as in trade, relative decline. How did it then match Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, all of them ports with an intellectual cadre just as associative? Perhaps the very absence of professional definition actually helped. It might explain the explosion of popular print, first ignited in the revolution of the previous century, and steadily erupting in this? There may not have been a clerisy but there was certainly a reading public. White believes six out of ten men of the 'middling' sort (and four out of ten women) could read and write by 1750. This was an admirable market and determinedly served by scribblers of all kinds. London's first daily appeared in 1702; by 1793—the fateful year which saw Britain enlist in the counter-revolutionary ranks—there were 13. London published three-quarters of the country's books. Its many booksellers—150 by 1785—saw their trade expand steadily. For the impecunious there were libraries.

Addison reflected sadly that writers were more influenced by a desire for fame than any regard for the public good, but here was a genuine free market that all with some facility with a pen might enter. For Johnson it was the 'age of authors': he was shrewdly (and unhappily) identifying the rise of the professional writer. Opportunities abounded. In first place stood the Inns of Court which required the foot soldiers of legalism. An author might pen a novel, even verse, but he (and an occasional woman) might be paid as a scrivener as well, and that was just one of many outlets for the fluent hand. White builds his chapter on the professions around Eliza Haywood who in a long life (and to Pope's irritation—he targeted her in *The Dunciad*) was novelist, translator (from the French), poet, librettist, moraliser and political pamphleteer. The trajectories of Fielding, Goldsmith or Johnson were just as impressive. Samuel Richardson actually began—and spent most of his life—as a compositor, only publishing his first novel at the age of fifty. If you could write, you just moved around from one opportunity to the next trying to keep your head above water and your body out of the Marshalsea. Without regulatory bodies to control entry to medicine, literature, the law or even divinity, each man in his life might play many parts. From hackery to quackery, London was an arena for them all.

And the picture might reach farther than the word. A city with such a burgeoning print output never lacked the means to publicise the work of the great succession of London caricaturists. Fine art, however, was one sector where some attempts at regularisation were made. The young Hogarth was part of an early attempt to found an academy, and in 1760 Chambers and Reynolds managed the real thing (White 2013: 279–81). Even here there was a market and its moods determined success.

Music is the curious exception to this London rule of demand calling forth supply. 'The best musicians in London were most frequently foreigners', comments White (2013: 299). When one contemplates the dismal absence of worthy indigenous successors to Purcell it is hard to dissent: this was an age distinguished neither by the birth of musical scholarship nor by its composition (Abraham 1979: 544n). Yet Londoners thirsted for live performance and lively entertainment. They were quick (and noisy) in demonstrating disapproval and such an environment invited populist appeal. There were five theatres in addition to Covent Garden and many smaller concert rooms, and in 1728 the New Play House staged the most successful crossover of all, Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*—London holding up a mirror to itself. Later in the century, David Garrick sought to elevate the public's taste with Shakespeare (White 2013: 311–12). White distinguishes between the audience for theatre 'almost all ranks' and that for opera 'a greater proportion of the quality' (307, 305). Then as now, price stratified the audience.

Some crossed over from prostitution to the stage. Both were opportunities for young women, though few found theatrical fame. Once seduced, your reputation gone, the stage was an attractive alternative for 'fallen' women (White 2013: 378–9). Prostitutes thronged Covent Garden, The Strand (then at the river's edge) and—above all—Leicester Fields. The hauteur of their propertied clients has not escaped White. The bitterness of these rakes at the highly likely health consequences of their nocturnal activities was expressed in the crudest class terms. Not every buck contracted the pox as often as the incontinent Boswell (17 times), but there is enough written record to suggest it afflicted all classes (White 2013: 364ff). As for syphilis we have not only letters and diaries, but pictorial evidence from Hogarth and others. How licentious was the eighteenth-century city? White does not tell us, though he piles on anecdote. The standard-setting court was debauched virtually throughout, with an interval under George III until his wits failed. Intriguing questions about moral boundaries attach to sodomy (a hanging offence throughout the century) which surfaces via some court cases. Our own awareness of gay eighteenth-century life was raised by Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001) but given the dire penalties, how widespread must we suppose it to have been?

Zoos, monsters, fairs, pageants, pleasure gardens, spas—the bustling city had them all, along with sport, gambling and the pub. Beer was ubiquitous, as the abstemious Ben Franklin's observed at Watt's printing house (White 2013: 327–8). Hogarth however distinguished this wholesome beverage from English gin (Madame Geneva) and its dread social consequences. Uncharacteristically, White hesitates here, at one point attributing the copious complaints of polite society about its impact to a moral panic, at another judging the evidence of abuse 'overwhelming and extraordinary' (White 2013: 329, 330).

That crimes against property were the main business of the courts has been a safe verdict since E. P. Thompson (whose great 1963 text is absent from White's massive bibliography): property crimes dominated the statute book. 'Laws grind the poor and rich men rule the law', wrote Goldsmith, reflecting on rural deprivation (Goldsmith 1764: line 386). White's depiction of plebeian depravity is, at this safe distance, rich in detail. He shows us pickpockets, horse robbery, counterfeiting—significantly an offence repressed with the utmost severity—and highway robbery.

After the arrival of paper money a whole number of new frauds were invented. This being the century of the South Sea Bubble—and many smaller bubbles besides—confidence was fragile.

When considering violent crime in society, White raises an eyebrow at historians' received wisdom that it declined through the century. He certainly adduces spectacular examples of grisly crime. Nor was it perpetrated just by the vicious poor. Men of quality carried swords, were sensitive to aspersions on their honour and ready to quarrel and this was so also of the 'middling sort' who went unarmed. Duelling was common enough to draw the attention of all major London writers of the century (Kiernan 1989: 173–5). The courts might punish a man of breeding for killing another in a duel but they might let him off with manslaughter, fortunately for Byron's great-uncle (Kiernan 1989: 137). But it was the casual violence, often exercised as if by right by men against women which was most ferocious and unrestrained. Many a poor eighteenth-century London woman anticipated Nancy in how she met her end.

White could have coupled his examination of the justice system with his treatment of crime. Instead, he reserves it for the final section, entitled 'power'. We are introduced to Henry and John Fielding, the brothers who succeeded each other as reforming magistrates in Westminster and Middlesex between 1748 and 1780. Reforming in this context must not be understood in a nineteenth-century way: Henry Fielding, for all the robust humanity of his novels, was no bleeding heart—not even a Robert Peel. He was venal and could take callous short-cuts through the thicket of the law. But he and his brother put thief taking on a regular footing, reorganised the administration and (with secret service funds) formed the Bow Street Runners. Taken together, White dubs them the 'founders of professional policing in London' though he is careful to balance his verdict with Walpole's contemporary view that 'the greatest criminals in this town are the officers of justice'—an anticipation of Sir Robert Mark's contemporary famous dictum: 'a good police force is one that catches more criminals than it employs' (White 2013: 425, 444).

If caught and not executed—there were some 200 capital offences on the eighteenth century statute book—a convicted felon might be incarcerated (Porter 1991: 141). The prisons of that era were, in White's view, the most important civic buildings (after churches) of that era. Certainly they were numerous and their reach capacious. A spell in one of them—particularly for debt—was, if not an actual rite of passage, a common entry on one's CV. It may not even have been a mark of shame: too many knew debt at first hand to be overly censorious. Large institutions, such as that collection of debtors the Marshalsea, were farmed and there was no enforcement of standards.

Capital punishment was inflicted in public ('the best free show in London') and usually took the form of hanging, though a lord might be beheaded (White 2013: 459). It is startling to learn that the last public burning was in 1789 (White 2013: 456ff). Henry Fielding worried about empowering the mob with such spectacles, and indeed it might adulate or execrate according to their peculiar code. Johnson by contrast valued the deterrent effect of condign punishment, publicly administered. It was certainly common and frequent enough to please him: nearly 1700 men and

women met their end at the gallows in the second half of the century (White 2013: 460).

White is content to observe the interaction of the mob with the discovered felon, along with its peculiar sense of honour: fear of the criminal, yet adulation at his (he was usually male) 'taking off'; admiration of (often because of participation in) certain crimes such as smuggling; excoriation of the informer and exultation at the grisly end of the prince of thief-takers, Jonathan Wild. But if thoughtful observers differed over the impact of public punishment on common sensibility, the thing itself was not controversial: White finds no agitation for abolition before 1800, even in the Church. Perhaps the knowledge that only one in three death sentences was actually carried out was a factor (Porter 1991: 141).

Between imprisonment and death lay a range of other punishing tools at the disposal of the law. Whipping, branding (until 1779) and the pillory were all available and each—to some extent—drew on the relationship between the felon and the mob that worried Fielding. In fact popular feeling was at least as likely to be severe as lenient, depending on the moral code of the street. White gives the hideous instance of a sodomy conviction where the mob turned a corporal punishment into a capital one (White 2013: 458–9).

The Church may have been unsympathetic to the convicted facing ritual death, but this was a charitable age. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), founded in the last year of the old century, had a growing influence in an age when services were private. The only schools available to the poor were those funded by charity, but this brought with it a narrow curriculum confined to that knowledge they were deemed to need—in Marxist terms, what was sufficient to reproduce the labour force. The celebrated Foundling Hospital had trustees glittering with cultural achievement and an honest desire to do good. But it shunned social engineering, teaching children 'to undergo with contentment the most servile and laborious offices' (White 2013: 473–4). In the absence of a modern state ambitious to rival or supplant private service consumption there was wide scope for charitable activity. The eighteenth century, and London in particular, saw the foundations of the first hospitals in the modern sense. It is an honourable roll-call: Westminster, Guy's, St George's, the London and the Middlesex, all run by annual subscription and benefactions and all founded in a quarter of a century from 1720 (Porter 1991: 284).

The Church confidently began the century with the Fifty New Churches Act. Thereafter, tainted by Jacobitism, embarrassed by plural holdings, undermined and rivalled by dissent, it experienced almost continuous decline. Dissent proved the deadliest enemy. Again and again, nonconformity, when barred from access to key institutions did not pine impotently but simply invented its own. If the Church (and royalty) openly favoured Bethlehem and Bart's, dissenters and Whigs could find alternatives in the shape of St Thomas's and Guy's. Dissenters were found as active charitable proponents everywhere, even working with the runners for a 'reformation of manners' among the London poor.

At this point, as he approaches his final chapters on religion and politics, White abandons the structure which has served him for four-fifths of the book. Hitherto he has forsworn the historical narrative, treating the century as a whole in each area.

Now we are given “No Hanoverian, No Presbyterian”: Religion and Politics 1700–1759’ and, ere long, plunged into the turbulent life and times, sequentially recounted in four highly specific time-slices, of John Wilkes. No one would cavil—eighteenth-century London without Wilkes is bread without wine—but it does come as a jolt, leading one to ask what manner of book this is. We are led in via Gibbs and Adam and shown round ‘their’ London, thence to successive others, but when at the end we get to crude power only the conventional narrative will suffice.

Yet the later eighteenth century was the moment when radicalism—with which London had annoyed tyrants since the Tudors—yielded to the greater threat of revolutionary sympathy: many Londoners admired, and some sought to emulate, events across the Channel. Some, like William Blake, saw as much cause for change at home as in France. Blake appears here largely as a working man, less as ‘witness against the beast’. The activity of such forward-looking organisations as the London Corresponding Society seems understated at the back end of an eighteenth-century history. Perhaps White should have followed the example of other historians (the ‘long’ nineteenth century, the ‘short’ twentieth century and so on) and stopped earlier or finished later. All the same, if you want the turbulent London of the 1700s to come to life, this is the book for you.

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