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**Robert Poole, *London E1*, paperback, 355 pages,
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When Emmanuel Litvinoff's book *Journey Through a Small Planet* (1972) was republished by Penguin in 2008 it was welcomed as an important reminder of the literature of the East End of London. Like his peers Alexander Baron, Gerald Kersh, Simon Blumenfeld, Bernard Kops and Willy Goldman, Litvinoff helped to develop an Anglo-Jewish tradition which, whilst not solely focusing on the East End, certainly found its emotional core there. A life-long Jewish rights activist, Litvinoff chronicled his upbringing in the Brick Lane area and focused on his own community with the result that the gentile community in his work tend to serve as secondary and background figures rather than as established members of the community in their own right.

Robert Poole's only published novel *London E1* – originally published in 1961 and reissued last year by New London Editions with an introduction by Rachel Lichtenstein – alters the perspective of this perception of the Brick Lane area and focuses on the gentile community, the street traders and the brewery workers, the kids at the local school and the parents down the pub. Similar in tone and narrative to Blumenfeld's *Jew Boy* (1930 – recently republished by London Books) a young man seeks to make his way out of the East End by his own means but circumstances conspire against him. For Jimmy Wilson, protagonist of Poole's novel, these are the grinding poverty of his parents and their low expectations of what he can achieve, the resentment of others at his obvious intelligence and a doomed attraction for the half-Indian, half-white English girl Pinkie.

This is a novel of a changing community; the Jewish community are present here as the background or secondary characters. They tend to speak in dialect, which can

be condescending if not done correctly and Poole does sometimes miss the right tone. Caricature is never very far away, and the ghost of Fagin is constantly in these passages. During the Blitz scene a Mrs Plotsky asks the landlord 'vhy izzen somevun playink der pee-anner?' (123). Phonetic dialogue is rarely convincing, and it seems out of place here. While both Indians and white English characters are afforded standard English, the Jewish characters are not. It is a rare misstep for Poole who by the late 50s, early 60s should surely have been aware that a better appreciation of a Jewish accent was possible.

Where he is more successful is in noting the gradual development of the Indian community in the Brick Lane area and in the last part of the book the arrival of the West Indian community. The squalor of the Indian house is described with equal-parts fascination and horror. Yet the Indians seem to offer a new and exotic physical presence. Peggy, who lives upstairs from the sailors, is clearly entranced by their corporeal charms. One of Jimmy's friends is taken up by another male Indian for equally physical, if subtly understated, needs. Even in the immediate post-Chatterley trial era there is still a strong reluctance to discuss sexuality except with euphemism as, for instance, when Jimmy loses his virginity or Tommy is revealed as gay because he uses too much pomade – a 'nauseous sweetness' (335) – and mascara. Again a description becomes a cliché rather than a signifier. Or is it simply representative of Jimmy's lack of understanding?

Poole, who came from the Brick Lane area and shared some of Jimmy's family background, does not shy away from describing the violence of the area. People are crushed under brewers' drays, beatings are regularly given out, his father advises him to carry three half-crowns, as the edges 'rip anyone's cheeks an' ears open wi' no trouble' (289), rather than knuckledusters, and an abandoned wife gasses herself. If the misery is piled on in a manner which Flann O'Brien successfully subverts in *The Poor Mouth* (1941) then it is not without a sense of reluctant verisimilitude. This is not a book that revels in its violence but acknowledges the slow corrosive effect it has upon the soul.

London E1 is a claustrophobic novel in some ways. The action takes place mainly indoors: school, pub, the Wilson's home, nightclub or flat. Jimmy's war service in the navy is dealt with as an ellipsis between the second and third parts of the novel. Through its restraints of space the novel suggests much about the limited perceptions of the people who live there. Jimmy's sister marries a local thug, who administers two beatings to Jimmy and shows no moral qualms about what her husband does for a living. If denial is the price for getting out of Stepney then she seems to be happy to pay the price.

This is not the way for Jimmy. Within him there remains a spark of integrity, a light that seems to be reflected within what we know of Poole's biography, as Rachel Lichtenstein describes in her introduction. Peggy, a white woman who 'services' the Indian seamen, encourages Jimmy's self-improvement because otherwise he will have a 'dead end job in the brewery or a factory, you'll go nowhere, do nothing, see nothing' (49). This is a refrain heard several times throughout the book. Opposing this is the attitude of his parents. When Jimmy wins a scholarship to go the Grammar School his father's response is to punch his son in the face: 'I was at work when I was

eleven what's the use o' keepin' a kid at school all them years, when 'e could be earnin' wages?' (90). However, Jimmy keeps trying to better himself and throughout the book Jimmy keeps checking his grammar and remembering to sound his Hs and Gs.

Poole is not such a cynic as to dismiss the community of the East End completely. In two major set pieces – at a pub in the middle of the Blitz and at a wedding some days later – he offers extended descriptions of the community working together to survive the danger from above. Community can be a force for good. The crowd in the pub offer a form of mutual reassurance as the bombs explode around them. The wedding gives Jimmy's mother, dying from TB, a chance to show that her family can still celebrate the traditions of the area properly. There is special sense of memory about these episodes – like the descriptions of the children riding the brewery drays – and if all end badly, it is not for the want of trying. The positive feeling of these scenes offsets some of the negative aspects but also throws them into greater relief.

Poole's writing sometimes conveys an uncertainty of tone. He can write observational sketches, as noted above, or didactic assessment. He can slip between tenses but not always without effect. The book is strongest in describing the infatuation of Jimmy for Pinkie and her moral distress at the damage she may be doing to Jimmy. The book moves between Simon Blumenfeld and Graham Greene sometimes well and other times less comfortably. Sometimes it feels that the verity of the opening chapters or the social observations of the wedding sequence have been passed over for a plot which can provide the climactic confrontation. Then again it may be that this is how the East End was for Poole. Racism is slight within the text. Jew and gentile engage in some street scraps; there is some condescension towards Indians; and West Indians are viewed as a source of novelty.

Peggy and Pinkie are the most interesting characters because they try to operate outside of the spatial culture. Peggy is middle class by birth and Pinkie is biracial. Thus they start with an initial separation from the people and are affected by a personal need to get out of the area to improve themselves and to be something more. What neither reckons on is the war; injury damages one physically and the other morally. Values are questioned, perspectives altered. But then this seems to be the way of things in this social space. Survival and acceptance of one's lot seem to be all that matter. The violence of one generation is visited upon the next. The characters we meet at the start of the book have their own children by the end of the novel and they will become the mods and rockers of the 60s or maybe Burgess-like droogs, perhaps even the youths of B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo*.

London E1 is not going to be regarded as one of the classics of London literature yet it has a quality to it. Poole never patronises the bulk of characters and balances both the good and the bad elements of life in the area. In seeking to explore an area of London and a group of people not often written about, except as caricatures or comic relief, it provides a welcome new perspective. The Brick Lane area would change much in the next 15 years, as the white working-class community would be moved out to the new estates in Essex and new immigrant communities would come

in. It is one of the few white, gentile working-class accounts of the area and as such deserves some form of recognition.

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