

TABLE RONDE / ROUNDTABLE

London Calling!

Paul Griffiths — *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City, 1550–1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

London, thou art of townes A per se.
Soveraign of cities, semeliest in sight,
Of high renoun, riches, and royaltie;
Of lordis, barons, and many goodly knyght;
Of most delectable lusty ladies bright
Of famous prelatis in habitis clericall;
Of merchauntis full of substaunce and myght:
London, thou art the flour of Cities all
(Anonymous, sixteenth century)

Hell is a city much like London—
A populous and a smoky city;
There are all sorts of people undone,
And there is little or no fun done;
Small justice shown, and still less pity.
(Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Hell,” pt. 3, st. 1, *Peter Bell the Third*)

DIVIDED by three centuries, these differing visions of London offer images and elicit emotions that would have been all too familiar to the Tudor and Hanoverian Englishmen and women for whom they were written. The first anonymous sixteenth century quotation, drawn from the aptly titled poem *London* and once ascribed to the Scottish poet and priest William Dunbar, provides readers with idyllic impressions of a city (and its people) divinely blessed with virtue, wealth, beauty, and learning. London was, quite literally, in the eyes of the poet, “Soveraign of cities.” Over the next two or three centuries, London not only came to dominate the British Isles, but it also became the metropole of a burgeoning archipelagic, and then global, empire.¹ Moreover, as it grew in size and scope

1 On the expansion of London, see V. Harding, “City, Capital, and Metropolis: The Changing Shape of Seventeenth-Century London” in J. F. Merritt, ed., *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and*

throughout the early modern period, so too did the challenges and problems that faced the city fathers and inhabitants of the “old Smoke.” For Shelley, gazing out at the same city some 250 years after our anonymous poet, those same civic crises and social problems cast a dark shadow across the capital and posed innumerable challenges to many of its modest and more vulnerable inhabitants.

The experiences of early modern Londoners — patrician and plebeian alike — have been the focus of a rich, sustained, and vibrant academic and popular historiography.² Despite voluminous, and at times vociferous, debate over aspects of its political, social, religious, economic, and cultural history, a number of the salient features of London’s history are less contentious and generally accepted by scholars toiling in the field. Well known is the fact that London’s population soared from 120,000 in 1550 to roughly 200,000 in 1600 and on upwards to 575,000 in 1700 — a rate of growth that eclipsed other major European cities over the same period.³ Equally important are the facts that, during the same period, London experienced prolonged immigration from its surrounding environs, it witnessed deep and at times lacerating poverty and immiseration, and it harboured stark inequalities between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless, and between those ascending the social hierarchy through opportunity or newly found success and those falling from it through misfortune or miscalculation.⁴

Pressures that generated this urban expansion were not only local, national, and international in nature, but were galvanized by provincial economic and agrarian change and ongoing processes of political and economic centralization. These

Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598–1720 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 117–143; and the essays in a special issue on London of *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 1 (2008). For imperial contexts to this subject, see, for example, R. Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); K. O’Brien, “Imperial Georgic 1660–1789” in G. Maclean, D. Landry, and J. P. Ward, eds., *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 160–179; P. Gauci, *Emporium of the World: The Merchants of London, 1660–1800* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007).

2 See, for example, P. Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Vintage Books, 2001); R. Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); A. N. Wilson, *London: A History* (London: Modern Library, 2006).

3 See J. Boulton, “London 1540–1700” in P. Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume Two, 1540–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 316; V. Harding, “The Population of London, 1550–1700: A Review of the Published Evidence,” *London Journal*, vol. 15 (1990), pp. 111–128; R. Finlay, *Population and the Metropolis: The Demography of London, 1580–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

4 J. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: A London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth Century London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); I. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and, more generally, K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

processes may not have embodied a Tudor Revolution in government as was once assumed, but they proved still powerful enough to ensure that all political and commercial roads led to, and through, an increasingly dominant London. Surplus labour and in-migration, of a scale somewhere between on average 7,000 to 8,000 people per year from the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, permanently punctuated London's political and economic pre-eminence as the metropole for England and, after 1707, for all of Britain. Metropolitan political centralization not only encouraged an influx of landed elites to the Court, to Parliament, and to the Inns of Court, but it also sustained a rebuilding of London that had begun in the midst of the Reformation and continued well into the later eighteenth century. The contours of these social, economic, political, religious, and cultural processes have been elaborated upon in considerable detail over the last three decades.⁵

Worth reconsidering in the wake of this sustained scholarship on London are the experiences and daily lives of those who called London, its suburbs and its environs, home during the period. Within and without the walls of early modern London, immigration, immiseration, and inequality all presented daily challenges to both those who sought to shape the city and its future and those who merely hoped to scratch out a living and survive in the city. The rough and ready statistics of poverty available for the early modern period help reveal the scale of the problem faced by paupers and poor relief providers alike.⁶ A census of 1598 revealed nearly 2,000 destitute Elizabethan souls, but in times of dearth — such as 1596 — the number could treble. After 1596, the English, as Peter Laslett has famously argued, may not have starved *en masse*, but such an historical interpretation offered meagre sustenance to the thousands of underfed and undernourished who struggled and migrated to the metropolis to make ends meet in *fin-de-siècle* London.⁷ Thus the challenges of metropolitan poverty were

5 On these subjects, see A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay, "Introduction: The Significance of the Metropolis" in A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay, eds., *London, 1500–1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London: Longman Group, 1986); L. C. Orlin, ed., *Material London ca. 1600* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); P. Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner, eds., *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); the essays on early modern London in Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume Two*, and in Merritt, ed., *Imagining Early Modern London*.

6 See Beier and Finlay, "Introduction: The Significance of the Metropolis," pp. 17–19; A. L. Beier, "Social Problems in Elizabethan London," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1978), pp. 203–221; P. Fumerton, "London's Vagrant Economy: Making Space for 'Low' Subjectivity" in Orlin, ed., *Material London ca. 1600*, pp. 206–225.

7 P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost – Further Explored* (London: Methuen, 1983 ed.), pp. 122–152. See also R. S. Schofield, "The Impact of Scarcity and Plenty on Population Change in England, 1541–1871," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1983), pp. 265–291; J. Walter and Roger Schofield, eds., *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); R. B. Outhwaite, *Dearth, Public Policy and Social Disturbance in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1991); S. Hindle, "Dearth and the English Revolution: The Harvest Crisis of 1647–50," *Economic History Review*, vol. 61, S1 (2008), pp. 64–98.

compounded by those posed by growing numbers of vagrants. Between 1560 and 1625, London's population quadrupled while the number of vagrants increased twelve-fold.⁸ Poverty within the Capital was expanding faster than was London itself.⁹

Recent research on London and on social relations in early modern England has revisited and revised established explanations for all this urban growth, economic expansion, political and religious turmoil, and social tension. Fortunately for scholars toiling in these early modern fields, the recent publication of Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City 1550–1660*, engages with many of these contentious themes and also with the historiographical debates that swirl around them. This roundtable discussion on Griffiths' book emerges out of a lively plenary session that took place at the North American Conference for British Studies in Cincinnati in the autumn of 2008. Put bluntly, Griffiths' book offers a revisionist's understanding of early modern London, and consequently he challenges a number of established and currently held historiographical conceits. Those interpretations and the debate they elicit are taken up by the various contributors to this roundtable and are pursued in greater detail in their essays. Three of these themes merit greater elaboration in this brief introduction. First, Griffiths raises the long-lived question of whether London was stable or unstable — for him, instability was, in short, one of London's few constant features. As he categorically states in the conclusion to his work, we should “make no mistake, London cannot be called stable on any day covered by this book” (p. 433). This interpretation challenges, as our contributors (Ian Archer, Tim Hitchcock, and Patricia Fumerton) show, a number of assumptions about, and numerous studies on, metropolitan stability and the social order.¹⁰

8 P. Griffiths, “Building Bridewell: London's Self-Images, 1550–1640” in N. Jones and D. Woolf, eds., *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 232–237; A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560–1640* (London: Methuen, 1985), and “Foucault Redux? The Role of Humanism, Protestantism, and an Urban Elite in Creating the London Bridewell, 1500–1560,” *Criminal Justice History*, vol. 17 (2002), pp. 33–60; S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c.1550–1640* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 162–169; P. Fiderler, *Social Welfare in Pre-Industrial England* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); P. Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

9 P. Griffiths, J. Landers, M. Pelling, and R. Tyson, “Population and Disease, Estrangement and Belonging” in Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume Two*, pp. 195–233.

10 Some readers will recognize Ian Archer as author of *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and as the general editor of the *Royal Historical Society Bibliography*, a major project funded by the AHRC to make bibliographic data on British history electronically available. Patricia Fumerton is perhaps best known for her works *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Among other works, Tim Hitchcock has published *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London*

Secondly, Griffiths challenges the historiographical understanding that there was little public policing in the metropolis and that “law and order” really lay in the hands of private persons — he finds instead a functioning and growing cadre of officers of public policing. Surveillance was writ large, and discretionary authority was defused into the hands of magistrates, officers, and citizens who monitored the streets, alleys, and passageways of the capital because “no one ever said that London was safe, stable, quiet, or trouble free” (p. 434). Here again, Griffiths calls for us to rethink our understanding of early modern London, this time with a focus upon law, discretion, punishment, and authority. On these subjects, too, our contributors have observations that reveal the importance of such issues for early modern English history.

Finally, *Lost Londons* also shifts the historiographical lens from felonies to the much more pervasive world of petty crime. Griffiths’ point here is that “petty theft” and “victimless” crime were much more common, for they were the stuff of daily life and therefore did not grab attention in contemporary reportage nor captivate historians, who have been more likely to concentrate on events that surrounded felonious behaviour. On one level, Griffiths offers a straightforward thesis that “we’ve gotten it all wrong” and then offers an archivally intensive thesis on an “unstable” and “ambiguous” early modern London and early modern Londoners to set the matter and the record straight.

This book is much more than that, however, as this roundtable reveals. Such a simple, binary set of images (like the ones that began this essay), as well as opposites of right and wrong, do not begin to do justice to the work; in fact, they fly in the face of Griffiths’ whole understanding of the complex, tense, and *ambiguous* nature of early modern London (and, as we might add, of the whole enterprise of historical research). In the case of London, this is hardly surprising. As Paul Slack has recently reminded us, contemporaries routinely offered contrasting and frequently simultaneous images of London as either the New Jerusalem or Babylon.¹¹ For Griffiths, the two mechanisms of London’s change were its growth, both in terms of the number of its people and in terms of its physical construction, and the establishment of Bridewell, which itself was a response to London’s growth and also an addition to its brick-and-mortar landscape. It is primarily through the records of London’s Bridewell that Griffiths explores England’s capital city.

(London: Continuum, 2007), has edited with Heather Shore *The Streets of London: From the Great Fire to the Great Exhibition* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2003), and with Robert Shoemaker of the University of Sheffield and Clive Emsley of the Open University has also created an online and entirely searchable edition of the Old Bailey Sessions Proceedings, 1674 to 1913 (<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>).

11 See P. Slack, “Perceptions of the Metropolis in Seventeenth-Century England” in P. Burke, B. Harrison, and P. Slack, eds., *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 162.

Lost Londons offers its readers a set of mental maps of early modern London that outline the contours of petty crime, public and private policing, and the language and perceptions of both authorities and the underclasses.¹² In short, Griffiths attempts to reconstruct and recapture the atmosphere of the streets — fetid and festering and increasingly “imagined in feminine ways” — and the attitudes of those who walked them (p. 208). Consequently, the city that this book describes is one of shifting networks and group identities that sometimes overlap, occasionally work together, and often compete against each other as everyone in London struggled to make sense of, and to take advantage of, a wildly expanding and growing city. Londoners had long ago forsaken nostalgic attempts to return their city to some former, and realistically imaginary and illusory, stable time. Instead, as Griffiths argues, they sought to build a better London based on what they had, instead of what they did not.

Along the way, as we navigate the streets and the descriptions and experiences of those who inhabit Griffiths’ *Lost Londons*, we learn that vagrancy continued to concern London’s authorities, citizens, and inhabitants, but by “around 1600” — a phrase much used in the book — much more interest and effort were directed towards environmental crimes and the crimes of women. We are reminded that London’s inhabitants belonged to more than one “London” and more than one culture — in the book, culture is broadly conceived and considered. Neighbours, in fact, could be both neighbour and public official, and public officials could themselves run afoul of the law and become “criminal,” only to be policed by other neighbours acting as public officials. It was, quite clearly, a complex world full of contradiction. Indeed, “contradiction” is the very word that lies at the heart of Paul Griffiths’ *Lost Londons*.

One clear and compelling image we are left with from Griffiths’ monograph is that London was quite literally a civil arena of contentious, contested, and continuously disputed discretionary authority. Within their urban arena, Londoners monitored manners and mores (often by fellow and neighbouring parishioners on the front doorstep) that could at once be personal and individual, but also anonymous and impersonal.¹³ In our age of closed-circuit video cameras and electronic surveillance, we would do well to remember that Elizabethan, Jacobean,

12 Griffiths has given us earlier insights into these themes in his “Contesting London Bridewell, 1576–1580,” *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2003), pp. 283–315; “Overlapping Circles: Imagining Criminal Communities in London, 1545–1645” in A. Shepard and Phil Withington, eds., *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 115–133; and “Politics Made Visible: Order, Residence and Uniformity in Cheapside, 1600–45” in Griffiths and Jenner, eds., *Londinopolis*, pp. 176–196.

13 On this subject, see P. Griffiths, “Secrecy and Authority in Late Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century London,” *Historical Journal*, vol. 40 (1997), pp. 925–951; S. Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); C. Herrup, “Law and Morality in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Past and Present*, vol. 106 (1985), pp. 102–123; K. E. Wrightson, “Mutualities and Obligations: Changing Social Relationships in Early Modern England,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 139 (2006), pp. 157–194; E. Higgs, *The Information State in England: The Central Collection of Information on Citizens since 1500* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004),

and Caroline London's streets had eyes and ears covering, if not controlling, those suspected of anti-social behaviour. What is different, as Griffiths makes clear, is the language contemporaries drew upon to characterize and compartmentalize those "miscreants" who displayed such qualities and conduct. *Lost Londons* illuminates the rich and vast vocabulary contemporaries used to describe and to define the poorer, meaner, humbler plebeian inhabitants of the city. As he argues in his conclusion, early modern Londoners knew "they also tried to capture crime in a cage of chosen words, confining shifty people inside labels" (p. 435).

Among the aforementioned themes of instability and the social order, policing and punishment, languages of identification and labelling, continuity and change, wealth and poverty, and alongside emerging mechanisms for surveillance, inquiry, and prosecution that, in part, inspired and invigorated institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and Bridewell that took shape between 1500 and 1660, we also hear in *Lost Londons* the discordant and disembodied voices of early modern Londoners calling out across the centuries. They provide us with a bewildering variety of images that would have been well understood, and all too well recognized, both by the anonymous sixteenth-century poet who wrote of London as "a sovereign citie" and by Percy Bysshe Shelley, who saw it as the early-nineteenth-century embodiment of Hell.

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"Sare . . . Ghamidh"

Perhaps surprisingly, this book starts with a single word. Perhaps equally surprisingly, most books do not. Most books begin with a story, perhaps a compressed but affecting tale of a single individual's tragic experience; or with an image, a word portrait of a single room to set the scene; or with a question, a beautifully crafted conundrum drawn from a lifetime of setting too many undergraduate essays; or with a mere statement of outrage, a recognition of the crackbrained foolishness of the academy and the many errors of its denizens — a preface to a quixotic foray into tilting at the windmills of historiography.

pp. 28–63; and, more generally, V. Groebner, *Who are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).