

Liverpool: past, present and future*

COLIN G. POOLEY

Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YQ

Liverpool's designation as European Capital of Culture for 2008, together with the 800th anniversary of the founding of the borough in 2007, has (unsurprisingly) generated a number of books dealing with different aspects of the city's history. The five volumes reviewed here represent just a small selection of those available, ranging from the deliberately academic to much more popular publications. Together they provide much of interest for urban historians. If these books have a common theme it is the argument (or assumption) that for much of its history, and in many different respects, Liverpool was (and remains) in various ways different from other British cities. The celebration of difference lies very much at the heart of Liverpool's Capital of Culture activities, and these books provide additional perspectives on Liverpool's demographic, social, cultural, sporting and architectural distinctiveness.

Liverpool, 1660–1750 is the product of a detailed research project at the University of Liverpool, directed by Michael Power who sadly died before the publication of this volume. It is an important book. There are very few comprehensive demographic studies of large British cities and this volume is a significant contribution to the literature. Chapter 1 provides useful context for the demographic analysis that follows but it would have been helpful if there had been more attempt to compare Liverpool to other places. Chapter 2 gets right to the heart of the study. It is a detailed and painstaking reconstruction of Liverpool's demographic history using family reconstitution from parish registers. Having outlined some of the problems of dealing with such sources, the authors examine aspects of mortality, fertility and migration, emphasizing the high infant mortality (especially amongst mariners' families) and also stressing the problems of

* Diana E. Ascott, Fiona Lewis and Michael Power, *Liverpool, 1660–1750*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006. xi + 244pp. £50.00.

John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, second edition 2006. xxx + 228pp. £11.95.

John Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: The History of the Liverpool Irish, 1800–1939*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007. xi + 364pp. £35.00.

Ray Physick, *Played in Liverpool: Charting the Heritage of a City at Play*. Manchester: English Heritage, 2007, 192pp. £14.99.

Joseph Sharples, *Liverpool* (Pevsner Architectural Guides). New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. vii + 332pp. £9.99 pbk.

such demographic reconstruction for such a mobile population. Chapter 3 focuses on the occupational structure of Liverpool, 1660–1750, but the small sample size limits analysis and leads to mostly fairly obvious generalizations, though the individual case studies are valuable. Chapter 4 links an analysis of wills to the family reconstitution data to examine patterns of inheritance. Again, it was the individual case studies that I found most telling as the data are too fragile to allow meaningful generalizations, though the authors clearly demonstrate the importance of wealth preservation down the social scale, and the variety of strategies used. Chapters 5 and 6 focus mainly on city governance and local politics, examining who ran the city (with councillors drawn quite widely from across the social scale) and the importance of political consensus based on a shared commitment to the overriding importance of trade. In some ways these chapters sit a little uneasily within a book where the main emphasis is demographic. Clearly this was a problematic project, which dealt with difficult and disparate sources and encountered serious disruption of the research and writing. At times the authors struggle to craft a coherent and fully analytical story out of their material, focusing more on description than interpretation, but it is (and is likely to remain for some considerable time) the definitive study of Liverpool's early demography and the authors are to be congratulated for bringing this important and difficult material to publication.

Of the two books by John Belchem, *Merseypride* is a second edition (with a new introduction) of a book first published in 2000 and extensively reviewed then. The core of the book provides a useful collection of essays (some previously published elsewhere) on Liverpool culture and identity, while the new introduction sets these within the context of Liverpool's urban renaissance centred on its status as city of culture. The new edition should help to bring the essays to a wider audience. However, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse* is a much more original and important volume. This is the product of extensive research on the Irish in Liverpool, conducted over many years, and is a particularly valuable addition to the literature. The book is divided into two historical time periods, 1800–1914 and 1914–39, and begins with an analysis of the position of Liverpool's Irish population within the labour market. Belchem emphasizes that not all Irish were unskilled, and by focusing on key individuals highlights the role of Irish workers within the labour movement. Chapter 2 is entitled 'spatial dimensions' and, from the perspective of an historical geographer, is probably the weakest chapter. Although outlining the residential structure of the Irish, and relating this to their labour market characteristics, the chapter lacks detail (for instance there are no maps) and fails to bring out sufficiently clearly the extent to which some Irish were found in all parts of the city. The main strength of the book is in its focus on the construction of Catholic Irish identities, and the use of detailed case studies and vignettes to illuminate this. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on different

sets of networks that supported Liverpool Irish identities including the role of the Catholic church, charities and community-based activities (chapter 3) and through more strongly sectarian organizations including Friendly Societies and Ribbonism. Belchem demonstrates the ways in which such organizations combined political, cultural and social support networks within the Catholic Irish community in Liverpool, whilst at the same time helping to construct anti-Irish/Catholic views from within the English establishment. Chapters 5 and 6 focus directly on the political dimension, examining the role of sectarian politics within Liverpool. Chapter 5 demonstrates how Irish, British and Liverpool political ambitions often intersected in the context of Home Rule, while chapter 6 provides a detailed account of Fenian activities in Liverpool in the 1860s, focusing on links to Irish-American activism. In both these chapters the author assumes quite a high level of prior knowledge by the reader and, in places, some of the argument could have benefited from fuller elucidation. Chapter 7 examines the product of sectarianism as seen through street violence, especially in the early twentieth century. Belchem links such activities back to the Liverpool labour movement and the 1911 dock strike and, as elsewhere in the book, he provides a wealth of fascinating detail. Chapters 8 and 9 move from sectarian politics and violence in Liverpool to Catholic associations and leisure pursuits. Here, Belchem argues that, despite many attempts to establish it, there was never a strong, separate, Irish leisure and associational culture within Liverpool. The last three chapters of the book focus on the period 1914–39, examining the role of the Irish in World War I, the political and cultural impact of the Irish revolution on Liverpool and the effects of the depression. In comparison to the nineteenth century, this period is dealt with rather briefly and, by concentrating on key events, there is little attempt to situate the Liverpool Irish community within broader social trends in the twentieth century (and there is little consideration of second wave Irish migration). Overall, however, the book is very successful. It covers a wide range of material encompassing a great deal of original research, it is engagingly written and has a convincing combination of statistical information, detailed vignettes and socio-cultural interpretation. The book is stronger on the cultural and literary interpretations than on statistical analysis, and there remains scope further to integrate statistical data with archival sources, but this volume is likely to be a major source of reference and inspiration for researchers working on the Irish in Liverpool and elsewhere for many years to come.

While the first three books reviewed are aimed mainly at academic audiences, the last two have much more general appeal. *Played in Liverpool* by Ray Physick, published by English Heritage, provides a beautifully illustrated history of sport and recreation in Liverpool, focusing mainly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following an introductory essay on the history of recreation in the city, the book focuses on over 50 sports-related sites of historical or architectural interest. The main body

of the book is divided into three sections: the first deals with major sites of sport and leisure (Aintree, the Mersey, Stanley Park, etc.); the second focuses on areas of sporting innovation where Liverpool entrepreneurs have had a particular impact (billiards, goal nets and football pools); and the third examines both a selection of stadiums and grounds and a range of activities including cricket, bowls, golf and many others. The author has drawn together an impressive array of illustrations and matches these with an accessible text which provides a fascinating insight into aspects of organized leisure on Merseyside and, especially, the legacy that it has left on the modern townscape. Some readers will no doubt feel that their particular sporting activities have not been fully covered – and as a former member of Liverpool Harriers I would have liked to see more on the Liverpool athletics scene – but the focus of the book is very much on the sporting and leisure artefacts that have survived to the present and the selection presented provides an excellent introduction to this relatively neglected aspect of the cityscape.

The final volume is hardly new. This edition was published in 2004 and is based on the 1969 Pevsner architectural guide to South Lancashire. Nevertheless it is an excellent way to conclude this review. Joseph Sharples has done a magnificent job of expanding and updating the Liverpool material for this edition and the book provides the definitive guide to architecture in the city. A very clearly constructed historical introduction is followed by sections on the major buildings of the city (for instance the Town Hall and cathedrals) and on the dock architecture. Subsequent sections deal with different geographical districts, moving from the inner city to Speke and Birkenhead. Each entry provides a wealth of information, all clearly presented and with excellent illustrations. Anyone interested in the buildings of Liverpool will find the volume indispensable.

As this review has demonstrated, all five of these volumes have many individual merits, but do they tell us anything collectively about the urban history of Liverpool? It is clear that many authors and publishers have capitalized on the publicity associated with Capital of Culture; this expansion of publishing on Liverpool history, life and culture is to be welcomed but do the works add anything beyond their particular contents? For me, when reading all five of these volumes together, what comes through most strongly is the importance of linking social and cultural histories of the city to the physical fabric that remains visible today. The more academic books by Ascott *et al.* and Belchem tell us much about Liverpool population, culture and society in the past, but do little to relate that to the present-day city. As such they are likely to remain largely the preserve of those with a more academic historical interest in the city. The books by Physick and Sharples focus primarily on the evidence of past activities that has been left in the built environment, and attempt to relate this to the social history associated with the use of these buildings. Inevitably, however, the social history is relatively

brief and narrowly focused. It would have been nice to know more about the townscapes through which the Irish who lived in nineteenth-century Liverpool moved, and also to have a richer cultural and social history of the artefacts. This is not to criticize any of the books themselves, but I feel that the conjunction of these volumes nicely reminds us, as urban historians, of the importance of seeking to link people and place, and of interpreting physical structures within their social, cultural and political context. None of these books provides a complete urban history of Liverpool, and they were not designed to do this, but they all provide rich evidence both for those interested in Liverpool and for all urban historians who want good comparative examples of how to examine the many different facets that all cities contain.