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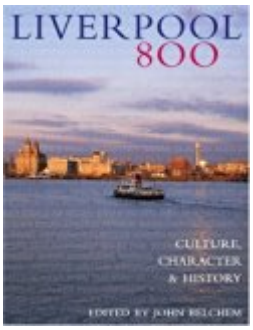

John Belchem, ed.. *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character, and History.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006. 532 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-84631-035-5.

Reviewed by Isaac Land

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This impressive collaborative volume was published with financial support from the Liverpool City Council and the University of Liverpool; the editor also notes the close cooperation between all of the contributors and the Liverpool Record Office. The result is an unusual amalgam that might be described as three books in one: a comprehensive historical atlas of the city, a narrative history documenting eight hundred years of economic, political, demographic, and cultural developments, and simultaneously a browsable coffee-table book featuring hundreds of beautifully reproduced images (many of them in vibrant color) ranging from oil paintings to postcards, commemorative ephemera, and photographic records of urban life.

Outside of the realm of art history, it is rare for a book with a complete scholarly apparatus to have so many illustrations, and there was a risk that the maps and pictures would steal the show. It is a tribute to John Belchem's leadership and the wisdom of his publisher that *Liverpool 800* achieves a balance between text and image, often bringing out the synergy between them rather than making the reader wish that the atlas, the narrative history, and the coffee-table book had been disaggregated and published separately. The effect of Belchem's richly visual assemblage is rather like walking through a well-designed museum exhibit at a leisurely pace, in the company of an entourage of guides, each familiar with the latest scholarship in their respective areas of specialty. Certain kinds of images, such as figure 1.2--an aerial photograph of modern Liverpool with the seven streets of the medieval city helpfully superimposed in red--are the sort of thing that one would normally encounter only on the wall of a historical interpretive center catering to tourists, but this sort of three-dimensional, multilayered representation can be helpful to serious readers as well. *Liverpool 800* has no electronic components, but its design--influenced by the picture-saturated world of websites--may well point the way forward as urban history publications make the transition to digital and multimedia formats.

Not originally an Atlantic port, Liverpool remained a small community into the late seventeenth century, focused on trade with Ireland and

handling humble products such as salt, coal, cattle, and hides. The wars with the Dutch and the French made the English Channel dangerous and generated fresh interest in westward-facing ports. Trade with Africa and the Caribbean transformed the city. Between 1700 and 1807, approximately 5,000 slaving voyages departed from Liverpool. This Atlantic connection benefited the city's economy in indirect ways as well, stimulating manufacturing (since various articles of cloth and metal could be traded for slaves) and fostering a sugar refining industry that would outlive the era of the slave trade. By the time that Parliament made the slave trade illegal, the city on the Mersey was well on its way to becoming the second city of the British Empire (although *Liverpool 800* has little to say about Glasgow, another westward-facing port with a claim to the same title). In the nineteenth century, Liverpool handled immense quantities of cotton and grain. It was also the embarkation point for several million immigrants leaving Europe for North America, Australia, and elsewhere. The city became known as Britain's New York for its ethnic and religious enclaves; the Irish communities (both Protestant and Catholic) are especially well served in this volume. Graeme Milne's outstanding chapter on "Maritime Liverpool" explores not only the famous seven miles of docks, but also the complex social and occupational divisions between the sailors, the cargo handlers, and the small army of clerks that kept tabs on one of the world's largest and most complex collections of crates and parcels. Milne reminds us that the Liverpool docks functioned as a showcase for "the world's largest machines," notably the immense Cunard liners, which would anchor right alongside the downtown business district in a way that London's biggest ships, for example, had not done for more than a century (p. 274). All the more painful, then, to watch these highly visible docks shut down as cargo became containerized and the prestigious passenger ships were displaced by air travel.

Liverpool 800 supplies a wealth of statistical tables detailing the city's demographic and economic trajectory; it is less satisfying when it tries to put the spirit or character of the great metropolis into words. In 1877, a journalist offered this assessment: "Unlike the dwellers in most English towns ... all of us in Liverpool are, to a great extent, citizens of the world" (p. 319). Formulations like this imply encounter, exchange, and mixture, on roughly equal terms. Yet this cannot be the full story. A term like "cosmopolitan," which appears dozens of times in *Liverpool 800*, is not an ill-chosen word to describe the character of a great port city, but like the contributors' other favorites--"entrepreneur" and "globalization"--it can also serve as a euphemism for a multitude of sins. The chapter on "Cosmopolitan Liverpool," co-authored by Belchem and Donald M. MacRaild, recognizes this, referring to the term twice as a form of "specious rhetoric" that ignores power relationships (pp. 312, 320). This recognition did not prompt a change in the chapter's title, or the revision of a particularly disheartening section heading: "Slavery: An Early Cosmopolitanism?" In a similar vein, the chapter on the medieval era tells us that English kings embarked troops for Ireland at this western port, "establishing one of Liverpool's most durable commercial, demographic and cultural connections" (p. 63). One way to read such sentences is as an acknowledgement that imperialism was not a simple, unilateral process in which only the empire-builders exercised agency. However, discussing entrepreneurial enterprise, migrant communities, and other "connections" with Liverpool's "hinterlands" without fully integrating the power politics of imperialism into the analysis does not work when readers know that maps were drawn up showing Liverpool with India, South Africa, Australia, and other colonies crouching in the corners like heraldic supporters. Nonetheless, readers will find no chapter on "Imperial Liverpool."

We get many glimpses of past retrospectives and commemorations in these pages; Liverpool's

700th anniversary, in 1907, seems to have been marked by a clearer sense of what empire was all about. One lyricist conjured up the image of the planet Earth writhing beneath the city's merchant fleet like some kind of submissive lover: "Seven oceans read her name, / Bend in homage to her fame, / Rise to kiss the titled sterns with eager grace" (p. 8). Granted, Liverpool was not like Venice, endowed with its own military, foreign policy, and subjugated colonies. Through networks of investment and informal influence (not to mention its delegation in Parliament), though, the self-described second city of the British Empire was implicated in developments worldwide. Marika Sherwood's new book, *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807* (2007) examines the role of sugar and cotton, as well as the continuing trade in human beings, in cementing Liverpool's prosperity. *Liverpool 800* clearly resists reducing the city's history to the single issue of its involvement in slavery, but a more wide-ranging book on another "cosmopolitan" city, Gray Brechin's *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (1999), shows how the problem of exploited hinterlands can be tackled from many different angles. Admittedly, both Sherwood and Brechin have cast themselves self-consciously in the role of muckraker; *Liverpool 800* tries to balance the negative aspects of the city's past with a more upbeat "Merseypride" perspective. Still, this book would only have benefited if chapters had been solicited from historians of West Africa, or of the Caribbean. Belchem and his contributors did a good job of revealing "the world in one city," a phrase that Liverpool recently deployed in its successful bid to be declared a European Capital of Culture. They were less successful in illuminating what we might call "the city in the world."

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