

**Seth Koven.** *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. xvii + 399 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-691-12800-9.



**Richard Tames.** *London: A Cultural History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 285 pp. \$15.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-530954-6.



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London is enjoying something of a historiographical renaissance. After decades of neglect in which the course of British history has been largely mapped through events in the English regions and the Celtic nations, there is now an acceptance of London's centrality and cultural pre-eminence. In recent years the literature on London has been augmented by the work of a new generation of political, cultural, and gender historians from outside Britain. In contrast to British historians who are attuned to the complexities of "English" and broader "British" identity, Americans have never doubted the importance of London as a major center vying with the great European and North American cities for power and status. Seth Koven is the latest transatlantic historian to revisit Lon-

don and to re-evaluate the city through the lens of cultural and gender theory. The result is a book of considerable power and elegance that will prove invaluable to students and teachers of metropolitan history.

*Slumming* is a highly readable and important reassessment of the late Victorian phenomenon of visiting and experiencing the poverty of the East End first-hand. Much alluded to, but never explored in any detail, "slumming" has unaccountably failed to find a historian until now. Under Koven's deft touch, slumming, it turns out, was always about more than just philanthropy. Drawing on Charles Dickens's notion of "the attraction of revulsion," slumming provided a space in which affluent and liberal Victorians might transgress

the limitations of their background and probe the carnivalesque, alien, but somehow inviting, world of the poor. This volume casts aside many of the conventional depictions of slumming as worthy but dull. In Koven's descriptions of the movement the result of the encounter with slum denizens was a series of same-sex, homoerotic, exotic, and revelatory adventures that befell the pioneers of the movement and provided a voyeuristic literature for consumption by the broader Victorian public. Despite the book's heavily theoretical base, Koven's prose races along, imparting a page-turning quality in places. Koven is excellent at exploring the little-known corners of the world of the "slummers." In particular he restores the American dimension to slumming, demonstrating the existence of a transatlantic "slumming" experience in which female American philanthropists moved between "civilization's inferno" in the Lower East Side in New York and London's East End.[1] Chapter 5, "The New Man in the Suburbs," gives a fresh inflection to the settlement house movement, and reveals the existence of a fraternity of young males experimenting with their sexuality and exploring dissident and communal masculinities in the East End. Much of this is fresh territory that engages with perspectives only hinted at in the pre-existing literature on this subject. In this sense time spent in the slums might be regarded as an experience, relegated or sublimated in later life, but often feeding through into the aesthetic homo-eroticism of the fin de siècle period. In Koven's reading, the East End was not only a place of political and social turbulence, it was also a place of sexual turbulence.

Despite the very considerable strengths of the book, there are also some drawbacks. In particular the organization is somewhat episodic in nature. The book has the feel of a series of articles, rather than a sustained narrative, and, indeed, one chapter has appeared in print before. Unaccountably absent is any sense of the reasons for the demise of slumming. Koven's conclusion detects echoes of the "slummers" in the Anglican

Church's *Faith in the City* report of December 1985. Broadly, however, Koven concurs with James Adderley's assessment that slumming was losing its glamour by the 1890s, but offers no clue as to why this was.[2] There is an opportunity missed here. Slumming continued into the 1930s. Visits to the poorer parts of London became far less fashionable, however, following the exploits of the Reverend Harold Davidson, the infamous Rector of Stiffkey in Norfolk. In 1932 Davidson was defrocked after revelations about his contacts with prostitutes and waitresses during pastoral work in London's Soho. This feels like exactly the kind of territory Koven has devoted much space to exploring for the nineteenth century. The case finally discredited philanthropic work in London, and made those who undertook it objects of suspicion. By the 1950s a new wave of social investigators who took their lead from the slumming phenomenon, but avoided its excesses, engaged in the very different business of social surveys and sociological research.[3] A willingness to follow these themes into the twentieth century would have given added scope and range to Koven's narrative. Similarly absent are references to the "un-English" and "foreign" nature of the East End of London. This racial construction of the East End as a space of "others" and "outsiders" made it the haunt of eugenicists, advocates of sterilization, and ultimately the extreme Right. All this added to the thrill of slumming, which was not just about dirt and immorality, but also about encountering racial "otherness." As Richard Tames points out in his highly readable and informative guide-book to London, the city has always been regarded as a place that attracted "outsiders" and voyeurs. Indeed, the best nineteenth-century accounts of London are by those who merely visited the city, or who took up residence there after uprooting themselves from other parts of the United Kingdom. For those inspired by *Slumming*, Tames has produced a superior and more informed guide-book, which engages with many of the new cultural insights into the social history of London

proffered by Koven, but without losing what Henry James called the "thick detail" of London life.

#### Notes

[1]. For "civilization's inferno," see Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1940* (Manchester University Press, 1985), 128.

[2]. James Adderley, "Is Slumming Played Out?", *English Illustrated Magazine*, 10 (1893): 834-841.

[3]. Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 17-20.

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