

Jim Clifford. *West Ham and the River Lea: A Social and Environmental History of London's Industrialized Marshland, 1839-1914.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. 240 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7748-3423-0.

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Jim Clifford's *West Ham and the River Lea* offers a social and environmental history of the Lower Lea Valley in outer East London, with a focus on West Ham. The book covers the second half of the nineteenth century as well as the first few decades of the twentieth century, during which time this area underwent a rapid transformation from a marshy, mixed-use suburban area to industrialization and subsequent economic decline.

Clifford weaves together Historical Geographical Information System (HGIS) maps, archival research, and quantitative sources to emphasize Greater London's importance as a major nineteenth-century industrial city in its own right. West Ham had as many people as the northern city of Bradford, and more than twice the population of Newcastle's Gateshead at the time, and Clifford's maps show the development of both heavy and light industry to the east and south of central London. In particular, the maps show the importance of water to this process of industrialization. West Ham became a prominent industrial suburb due to the many braided back rivers of the lower Lea, but also suffered consequences from the expansion on its floodplain, as periodic flooding and damaging environmental crises left the new developments vulnerable.

The Lower Lea Valley in the second half of the nineteenth century offered spatial and temporal advantages for industrialization: the lower cost of transporting coal over water and the river's multiple streams attracted many factories, while proximity to London offered these industries a nearby market for their goods. In addition, being just outside London's jurisdiction meant that the area was shielded from London's public health and environmental regulation laws, which first encouraged industry, but later hampered environmental management. Lack of upkeep of the rivers led them to silt up to become ineffective waterways with little flow that were difficult to navigate, and by the end of the nineteenth century the Lea caused frequent flooding. At the same time, cheaper overland transport of coal and the advance of electricity freed industry from its reliance on proximity to water as a source of transport and power. Thus the industrial boom ended by the 1890s and within a decade West Ham went from a vibrant economic center to a heart of the unemployment crisis of 1904-05.

By this time there had been explosive population growth, with West Ham growing from under 25,000 people in 1851 to 280,000 people in 1911, and the Lea Valley as a whole counting over one million people in 1911. This created additional

problems for water supply and the drainage of sewage. The East London Waterworks Company diverted much of the river into its supply, but sewer systems then returned some of this water back into the Lea, contributing to stench and disease. Attempts to solve the environmental conditions were halted by insufficient legislative powers and the fact that there was no unified government across this area. These issues shaped the social geography of the area as well: poverty and a degraded environment went hand in hand, with the Lower Lea Valley left to low-income and socially marginalized people while more affluent people escaped to higher ground away from the marshland.

Water supply played an important role in local politics, with a late 1890s water crisis mobilizing a vote for the Labour Group. This was symbolic of a wider shift from laissez-faire liberalism to a more interventionist social democratic politics, here driven by environmental instability, protests against the water supplier's monopoly and a lack of response to the pressures of population growth, expectations of continuous supply, and a drought. Clifford illustrates the different ways in which these issues were framed by contracting newspaper accounts, with the more socialist *Herald* columnist blaming the water supply crisis on company greed while the *Times* columnist blamed nature, rather than humans. This local water crisis is used to provide insight into a wider political movement.

Flooding proved a similar water-related issue for people to rally around: the West Ham Distress Committee organized a drainage project that employed over 2,000 unemployed men to improve water management and create a recreational lake. Later plans were made to improve flood defenses along the Lea, although these stranded on legal and financial complications. Eventually the Lea's riverscape was transformed during the 1930s economic crisis, when large numbers of un-

employed men were put to work to reorganize the back rivers and create a flood diversion canal.

While there are many river histories using the Thames or other rivers as a lens to study the relationship between environment, nature, and society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this book focuses on a smaller, less known but by no means less important river. The Lea witnessed some similar issues as the Thames, such as pollution and flooding, but had also some unique factors, such as its greater and denser industrial use. Throughout the period, the Lea played an active role both in supporting and damaging the local economy and living environment, and it helped shape social divisions and local politics. But the book also points out the Lea's fragility. There was only a comparatively short period in which all factors came together in a way to foster industrialization, and as the river became an obstacle to the industries it used to enable, West Ham's economy collapsed.

Clifford shows these changes through a fantastic series of maps, which depict the synergy between water, industrialization, population growth, residential growth, disease, and infant mortality, and throughout the book these maps clearly identify the time and place where problems coincided. The end of West Ham's rapid development came before the whole area had been fully built up, meaning that even in the late nineteenth century, farms, gardens, and marches co-existed with houses and factories, with the maps showing this patchwork landscape. The book shows how water, in its many different guises including drinking water, sewage, mode of transport, and source of power, transformed West Ham's environment and shaped London's social geography.

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