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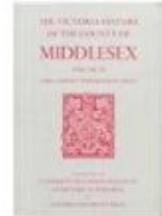
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



T F T Baker, ed. *A History of the County of Middlesex*. Volume XI,: Oxford University Press, 1998. xxii + 298 pp. \$135.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-722791-6.

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Victorian Values

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The Victoria County History needs no introduction to historians of Britain, but it does in some sense still require justification; a project that has been running for more than a century, with many of its original targets still to meet, is necessarily engaged in self-examination, and in considering its own place in the changing context of historical studies and historiography. As the recipient of public funding, through a number of different channels (counties, boroughs, the University of London for central staff and production, other universities for some county staff) the VCH is obliged to show what it is doing and why this is worthwhile. Its claim to be a work of scholarship means it sets itself up for academic review and criticism. Its publications, therefore, come in for some hard scrutiny. Reception has been uneven: while many commend the VCH's continued production and high standards, real praise is sometimes grudgingly given, admiration tempered by agnosticism as to the project's general objectives. What are virtues to one audience may seem vices, or at least faults, to another. The volume reviewed here, volume 11 in the history of Middlesex, merits review in its own right, but it is also important to look at it with a view to the VCH's place in the world of history and in the light of its future plans.

The initial aim of the VCH was to produce a multi-volume history of all the counties of England, extensively researched and fully referenced. Each county would have several volumes, in two formats: parish histories, cov-

ering each locality from the Anglo-Saxon period to the present, and general volumes with more thematic treatment of topics such as geology, Roman settlement, religious houses, and so on. Comparability of treatment, from volume to volume and county to county, was a fundamental rule. The early publicity was confident that the task was feasible and eminently worthwhile: "one of the greatest works ever attempted, in extent, interest, and importance ... a definite finality in English history," written by "many hundreds of England's finest scholars." For most of the past century the VCH has moved ahead to the original plan, though more slowly than had been hoped, making progress on a limited number of counties at a time. Finance has always been a problem. The range of topics covered and the amount of archival research required to write to modern standards have expanded considerably, and this too has slowed the rate of production. But the number of large red volumes on library shelves has steadily mounted, and is now over two hundred and twenty. In the past few years, however, self-evaluation and new opportunities have resulted in a significant change of emphasis. The VCH's future plans are now far more ambitious than might once have seemed possible, beginning with the exploration of new media for presentation: a website, new web-mounted volumes, the eventual creation of an electronic, on-line VCH archive, and an expanded library of visual images and graphic illustration to the text.[1] Pilot projects have begun work on new counties, and an interactive guide to using the VCH—opening it up to a wider range of readers and users than in the past—is in progress. The VCH

is now claiming a central place in English local history, in the right of its own published contribution but also as host to a wider range of facilities. In a new burst of confidence for its second century, the VCH presents itself as “a truly national resource,” connecting to schools, universities, local history groups and resources, and individual studies.

In the light of these new directions, how do we evaluate the continuing production of parish histories in the traditional format? Will the late-twentieth century volumes be seen as the last products of an outdated approach? In some sense, yes, this is bound to happen; the new audience to which the VCH hopes to speak will not necessarily regard hard-copy publication as fundamental, and may not even see the writing of parish histories as the primary defining activity of the VCH. Within the counties there may well be more enthusiasm for general volumes than for parish histories; new themes and groupings are to be explored. But in other ways, the new developments will address many of the criticisms made of the VCH volumes over recent years, such as the paucity of illustration, and an insufficiency of maps—not to mention the large size and unwieldiness of volumes. There is no proposal to abandon the parish histories, and indeed uniting the whole series in one searchable format will make a real virtue of the strict editorial control exercised over the series so far. Standardisation of treatment of topics, regularity in the sequence of sections, control of referencing practice, can seem unduly restrictive and formulaic in individual volumes, but will come into their own when it’s possible to search across the series by theme or subject. A real attempt to make the VCH user-friendly will overcome the forbidding barriers of tradition; in the past, you had to know quite a lot about the series before you could pull a volume off the shelves with any certainty that it would be the one you needed. The groundplan of the series will have to be made clearer—indicating what has been covered and where, what will be covered and when—and it will be possible to join up county to county along their common boundaries, always one of the intrinsic weaknesses of the original scheme. There will still be anomalies, and a century of publications will not pour into a homogeneous whole, but if all that is envisaged can be delivered, the VCH will again be at the leading edge of historiographical production.

That said, the content of individual volumes, and the suitability of the VCH’s program of treatment, may still be questioned. Does the parish-history format still offer a satisfactory template for future research and publica-

tion? Can what is in effect a nineteenth-century formula accommodate the kind of history we wish to write in the twenty-first?

It is important to recognize how far the format has been modified already over the years: the VCH has gone a long way towards rewriting its original brief, without letting go of the overall scheme of comparable treatment. The original proposal was clearly inspired by a vision of England as rural, localized, rooted in the land, and of the English as Anglo-Saxon, Anglican, and educated middle class—and male. This was reflected in the primacy given to manorial descents and the Church of England, and in the confidence that these constituted the real history of England. A mission statement of 1904 appealed to “every Englishman,” promising “a history of his own individual ancestors,” of value both to him and to the “new generations ... born to live in the land of their forefathers.” As this suggests, in its early days, the VCH did not really grapple with the developments of the nineteenth century, let alone the reality of twentieth-century England.

It is almost impossible to imagine how the VCH of the nineteenth century would have coped with the subject of the present volume, *Middlesex XI: Early Stepney and Bethnal Green*, even though that was as truly an element of Victorian England as the most untroubled rural shire. The specific problems of writing about Stepney and Bethnal Green in the parish-history format are numerous. In the first place, the history of a single ancient parish will fill more than one substantial volume. Early medieval Stepney (some 4,150 acres or 1679.5 ha) extended from the city of London to the river Lea, the border with Essex. It was cut up into successively smaller administrative and ecclesiastical units from the middle ages to the twentieth century; several of these later reformed as metropolitan or London boroughs, or parts of them. This volume begins the story, taking the history of “early Stepney”—the whole medieval parish, with the exception of Whitechapel, a separate parish by 1320—from the post-Roman period to the early modern, and in some cases to the modern. The second part brings the history of Bethnal Green, a daughter parish of the original Stepney, and a distinct hamlet from early days, though a separate ecclesiastical and administrative parish only from 1743, up to the 1990s. Dealing with this unwieldy monster does lead to some awkward disjunctions, though the problem seems not to lie with the parish framework as such, but rather in the way in which discontinuities and necessary breaks in treatment are handled. Different sections of *Early Stepney* end at different dates: economic

history is taken up to c. 1550, “settlement and building” to 1700, the parish church to the present, and Protestant nonconformity and Roman Catholicism within Stepney parish to 1689/1700.

Stepney is a work-in-progress, as far as the VCH is concerned, and the current format is not designed to allow an overview of the whole project. There is less framing, less guidance, than there might be; it would be good to have explained the reasons for choosing to follow through the history of Bethnal Green in this volume, rather than that of the core of Stepney parish. Although this is precisely the sort of problem that a VCH guide and electronic access can be designed to relieve, it needs addressing sooner.

Stepney and Bethnal Green’s history has been unique, dramatic, and troubled, defying the stable categories of traditional historiography. The present volume manages to tell this complex story quite well, largely in an extended section on settlement and building, divided by area and period, that prefaces the familiar sections on “estates,” “economic history,” “local government,” and so on. The full story is distributed between sections, but in a way that the reader can grasp. Every historian needing to tell a story that is at once synchronic and diachronic is faced with problems of structure and order, and there is much to be said for accepting a formula and making the best of it. The VCH account can be read as a narrative (a profoundly depressing one, it must be said) or dipped into for reference; some sections, indeed, in a terse notation, are designed for reference only in any case. Apart from the difficulties already alluded to of understanding what is covered in this volume and what is “reserved for treatment” in one or more later volumes, it does make a coherent whole; the different parts of the history fit together, showing that the VCH of today can work the traditional format to make an effective frame for a non-traditional history.

Perhaps even more challengingly for the view of England promoted by the VCH’s 1904 publicist, Bethnal Green at that time was very far from the “happy corner” that is one possible interpretation of its Anglo-Saxon place-name. It is important that the real drama of this story comes through, and again, the VCH style proves perhaps unexpectedly accommodating. Though the treatment is generally self-effacing, the authors have allowed themselves some wry comments and implicit condemnations, and are able to emphasize key points in an otherwise dispassionate narrative. The poorest parish in London by 1871, Bethnal Green suffered from poor

housing, high mortality (the connection between the two was recognized), bad labor conditions, including sweating and outwork, much unemployment, crime, and other evidence of deprivation. Its population reached a peak of 129,727 in 1901, living at average densities of 170 to the acre; 3.6 per cent of the population (rising to 6.1 per cent in 1911) were foreign-born immigrants. Bad as the general picture was, certain streets and areas were even worse than average. In the Nichol, in the north-west corner of the parish over towards Shoreditch and Hackney, deathrates in 1886/8 were 40 per thousand, compared with 22.8 for the parish as a whole and 18.4 for London. The Nichol, cleared and replaced by the Boundary Street estate, subsequently became the home of many of Bethnal Green’s Jews, mostly immigrants from eastern Europe and Russia, who made up 75-95 per cent of its population in 1899. The haphazard evolution of local government structures seriously failed to meet the problems of Bethnal Green, even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The practices of the parish government of the period were overtly corrupt and intimidatory; for a long time the parish was dominated by Joseph Merceron, whose large fortune was “perhaps attributable to his control of parish funds and public and private trusts” (p. 193).

The VCH account subtly hints at long-term continuities, referring to the “climate of commercialism and criminality” in the 1950s, “culminating in the reign of the Kray brothers” (p. 146). The parish vestry and the guardians that ruled Bethnal Green in the nineteenth century (it became a metropolitan borough in 1900) were at best lax and self-interested, resisting the appointment of medical officers of health who might produce troublesome reports. They also failed to apply housing legislation, such as the Torrens Act of 1868 which facilitated slum clearance. Progressives and socialists in the twentieth century addressed some problems, but perhaps contributed to others, including the flight of industry and employment opportunities.

The story of the church in Stepney is likewise far removed from an ideal of settled Anglicanism. Stepney was always a home for nonconformity, with high rates of prosecution in the later seventeenth century. Worsening social conditions in the nineteenth century hampered the work of the church, as did disputes over doctrine. Despite the very real efforts of Anglican clergy and numerous missions, by the turn of the century (1902) Church of England attendance (6,583) was exceeded by nonconformist attendance (7,753), with strong followings also for Roman Catholic (3,238) and Jewish (2,437) services (see table, p. 77). Both Stepney and Bethnal Green had

seen the church move toward High-Anglicanism, a tradition that was maintained in modern Bethnal Green. The twentieth century saw a real decline in the Anglican church and in most churchgoing, with congregations dwindling and church buildings closing. However, although non-Anglican Christian congregations and the Jewish communities are given reasonable coverage in this volume, one unexplained omission is the absence of any discussion of Muslim congregations or organisations; probably reserved for treatment elsewhere, the reader of this volume would still like to know why, and when it will be dealt with.

Through all this, the VCH holds unapologetically to its original belief that history is made up of facts, and that these can be brought together in an impersonal and accurate account. It is bound, therefore, to be criticized on grounds of theory as well as substance and interpretation. But it is evidently much more self-aware, as well as aware of the complexities of the world it deals with, than a Victorian institution might be thought to be. And by

sticking to its brief, with all the constraints this imposes on individual authors, it also enshrines an important and laudable attitude to historical study: that the full picture is made up of many contributions, and that facilitating the historical project as a whole is as valuable as any individual pyrotechnic performance. Though the VCH's way of writing history is not everyone's, it is a valid way, and has much to offer the rest of us.

NOTE

[1]. Quotes are from the newsletter of the VCH, no. 1 (Spring 2001). Homepage for the VCH is <http://www.englishpast.net/>.

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