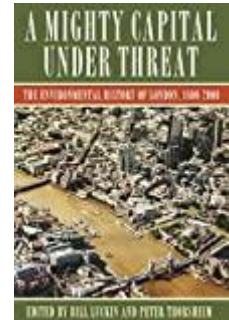




Bill Luckin, Peter Thorsheim, eds. *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. 288 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4610-6.



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This impressive volume brings together leading historians to explore the latest approaches to urban-environmental history, as applied to nineteenth- and twentieth-century London. It addresses issues of explosive population growth, overcrowding, and the expansion of the lived environment; industry and manufacturing; energy; pollution, including that of the atmosphere and water, with a particular focus on the Thames and Lea; waste, including sewage; and governance.

This latter focus is one of the defining themes of the volume, and from the outset, authors situate London as a complex network of discrete neighborhoods and locales rather than a centralized entity. In a clear and comprehensive introduction, editors Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim outline multiple administrative and jurisdictional shifts that made the metropolis a hodgepodge of governance and subsequent environmental management. From the Metropolitan Board of Works and boards of health overseeing localized districts and vestries from the mid-nineteenth century, to the reign of the London County Council from 1889 to

1965, to the establishment of the Greater London Council (1965-86) and Greater London Authority (2000 to the present), the city has seen many iterations of rule that advanced or limited regulation. It is a credit to volume contributors that they so successfully convey this heterogeneity while maintaining clarity for readers. This is not a story of sweeping, linear change, but one of deeply localized growth and planning that did not always look to the future so much as immediate and often pressing contingencies.

Discrete, localized developments entailed political schemes and material processes, but they were also shaped by ideas about the environment; a number of chapters subsequently focus on circulating conceptions of space, pollution, or disease. For example, Christopher Ferguson charts the influence of early “environmentalists,” a term distinct from its contemporary applications. Until the 1870s, he observes, these scientific and medical experts devoted attention to discrete milieus—or environments—and the effects of their external influences—or “circumstances”—on the health

and morality of those moving through them. Environmental challenges could be circumvented via human agency, however, and environmentalists insisted that actors had power over their movement through—and avoidance of—unhealthy environs. Attention to ideas continues in Christopher Hamlin’s evocative essay, which focuses on “layered standpoints” through which interlocutors imagined London and its environment. Chronologically organized around four key shifts—from experiential London to inspectorial London to systemic or dynamic London to Anthropocene London—the chapter vividly tracks the metropolis’s transformation from that of natural spaces to a site of impending environmental crisis. A key contribution is Hamlin’s identification of “environmental communities” of the official variety, such as improvement commissions, or less formal communal pursuits, such as “friends” of various parks, cemeteries, and squares (p. 50). In such configurations, tensions between broad and localized needs prevailed.

Tensions are also at the heart of Vanessa Taylor’s essay on the ways that water was understood in metaphorical terms, as networks, flows, and systems. She counters claims that, despite the dramatic expansion of commodified water provision in the nineteenth century, London’s water was somehow restricted in this moment. Instead, lived realities shaped London’s nineteenth-century “waterscape[s]” and defied any “scripted behaviour” (p. 156) or top-down definitions of water’s meanings. In an effective final section, she shows how differing usage of domestic supply across social classes meant that, despite the influence of “experts, policy makers, and private property” (p. 163), water itself remained complex, fluid, and multifaceted. Water is also the focus of a final chapter, by Bill Luckin and Joel A. Tarr, that takes a comparative approach to water management in London and New York City. The differences, they argue, turned in large part on private versus public ownership, with the British metropolis relying on a blend of the two, while Americ-

an management remained primarily public. Ultimately, they conclude that New York’s attention to technology and regulation, in concert with its cooperation with neighboring rural providers, set it above London’s current water provision system and namely its ongoing and unhealthy reliance on Thames Water, a formerly public utility privatized under Margaret Thatcher in 1989.

Despite sophisticated ideas about managing the health of London and its environment, material developments could nonetheless make for a city that roiled from one problem to the next, from industrial waste to impure water. This is laid bare in Leslie Tomory’s meticulous study of nineteenth-century industrial pollution. He tracks the concentration of industry—and its most egregious polluters—in London’s eastern environs, as industry leaders sought to escape from increasingly powerful boards of health regulating the West End, City, and parts of the East. In spite of challenging issues of jurisdiction and enforcement, Tomory convincingly demonstrates that governance effectively curtailed much of the metropolis’s polluting industries by the 1890s, albeit with the effect of displacing these offensive operations to increasingly polluted eastern regions like the Lea Valley and West Ham.

In the face of enduring concerns like pollution, there were some moments when concerted efforts made for positive outcomes. This is evident in Anne Hardy’s study of death rates from environmental factors, which offers surprising revelations about the success of localized authorities in tempering the effects of polluted air, waters, and places such as the home and workplace. She emphasizes the decline in “environmentally-associated mortality” in London from around 1850, after which “the city’s annual death rates were below those for England and Wales as a whole” (p. 70). She attributes this success to the deeply localized nature of governance and specifically the concentration of power, until the 1960s, in the hands of small units, including Medical Officers of Health

(MOH), who were directly accountable to rate payers. Peter Thorsheim's chapter charts another successful example in the form of London's green spaces and their transition from those dominated by elite and middling sensibilities to sites of working-class leisure, sport, and fresh air. In a poignant turn, these efforts expanded in the wake of the devastation wrought by World War II air raids, which engendered a further reimagining of London's green space via schemes like the suburban greenbelt. Today, concludes Thorsheim, "46 percent of London consists of green space," including "600 squares, 142 parks and gardens, and nearly 900 conservation areas" (p. 129). These are for the most part public, unlike the stately squares and semi-private parks of the past.

Despite some successes across Greater London as a whole, contributors remind us time and again of London's functioning as a collection of discretely managed locales, with their own politics—and subsequent environmental approaches—often inflected by class, industry, and location. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bill Luckin's and Andrea Tanner's lively case study of rapidly developing Hackney of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their "environmental portrait" (p. 180) foregrounds the area's transformation from "once rural" to that of urban density and its attendant ills: poverty, sanitary concerns, and subsequent environmental problems. Through a careful analysis of annual MOH reports, they conclude that Hackney officials adopted increasingly environmental discourses in their attention to water and air pollution, housing, and waste management. This operated alongside sanitarian, moralistic modes of thought, in a blend of new and old ways of understanding the city. London's piecemeal development is also clear in Jim Clifford's contribution on the rapid expansion of London's suburbs. He focuses on Greater London, which stretches across some 1,600 square kilometers. By relying on historical maps and census data rather than jurisdictional boundaries, he demonstrates that the "urban fringes" were key sites of

industrial and residential development between 1800 and 2000, albeit in haphazard, sometimes piecemeal fashion. This, he concludes, made for "significant environmental consequences" (p. 23), including devastation to marshes and forests. To this day, Greater London's impervious roads and buildings, decommissioned landfills, and brown-fields represent enduring threats to current residents, most pressingly in the form of flooding due to rising global temperatures.

From encroaching floodwaters to the insufficiencies of privately managed water companies, the collection as a whole offers an ambivalent take on London's environmental future. Like its jurisdictional boundaries, London's environmental condition has ebbed and flowed since 1800. One needs only to look to the Thames; once mired in human waste and effluvia, it gradually recovered by the late twentieth century, only to face new threats from sewage, storm water, and plastic. When surveying such instances of progression and regression, a reader can't help but feel the press of time in a moment that demands collective action toward a more sustainable—and promising—environmental future for London. If developments over the last two hundred years—as meticulously charted in this volume—are any indication, this could prove a challenging feat.

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