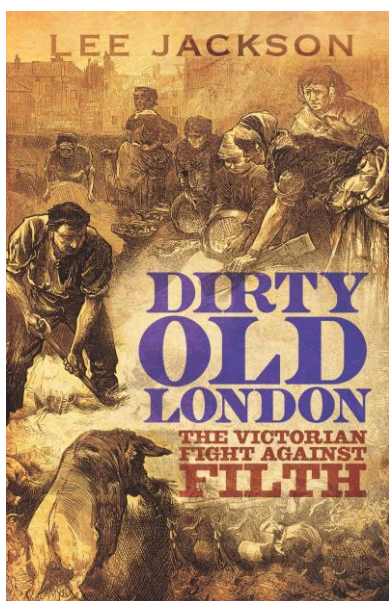


BOOK REVIEW

Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth, by Lee Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). 304 pp. Hardback, £20.

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Living in the Victorian city was a dirty experience, a fact known by the contemporary writer as much as by the modern-day historian. Giving a ‘true history of metropolitan dirt’, Lee Jackson takes up an examination of *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth* (2014), providing an inviting and valuable resource for both the academic and everyday reader. While numerous studies have enquired into Victorian theories of hygiene and contagion (both medical and moral), corruption, and disgust,¹ Jackson’s work uncovers the grit of Victorian London on its own terms: how did the physical, day-to-day realities of Victorian mud, waste, smoke, and disease arise, and how did nineteenth-century Londoners contribute to (or, at times, resist) the public works established to combat these problems (p. 2)? Despite chronicling ‘numerous battles ending in stalemate or’, ultimately, ‘defeat’, *Dirty Old London*’s chapters animate how and why ‘[r]eforming zeal was frequently met with plain indifference’, reorienting reformers’ biographies and theoretical claims about the rise of the modern state towards an examination of nineteenth-century dirt and debris. Jackson looks to the graphic details to paint their own picture of the city: ‘The stench of overflowing dustbins, dung-filled

¹ Notable recent publications include: Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson eds., *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008); Alison Bashford, especially *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Stephen Halliday, *The Great Filth: Disease, Death & The Victorian City* (New York: The History Press, 2011); and Peter Hounsell, *London’s Rubbish: Two Centuries of Dirt, Dust and Disease in the Metropolis* (Stroud: Amberley, 2014).

thoroughfares, the choking soot-filled atmosphere – even the peculiar history of the public toilet’ becomes here ‘part of the (in)sanitary history of Victorian London as [much as] the more familiar story of its sewers’ (p. 2). While nineteenth-century Londoners often operated on the principle of ‘out of sight, out of mind’, Jackson attempts to recuperate the unappealing material facts of life at the heart of the British Empire.

For any sceptical readers who might anticipate (perhaps judging from the pop-history-esque cover and title) a perfunctory or sensationalist account of scandalous ladies and Dickensian pauper boys crammed up chimneys, rest assured. When familiar figures appear, they do so seeking public toilets (largely, and late into the century, at urinals rather than in full, multi-gendered lavatories – p. 168); accosted at, or working to clear, street crossings; or, in a brutally chilling account, deformed and sickened by years (pp. 214–17). Rather than simply confirming or dispersing the common notion of Victorian London as a dingy, grubby, foggy metropolis, Jackson fills in the details of exactly what made up the grit and grime depicted in Gissing’s *The Nether World*, and what the fuliginous scenery of Dickens and Gaskell meant for working-class as well as middle-class Victorians.

Jackson works, as it were, from the ground up. Early chapters tackle the underexamined histories of dust and mud, the two main culprits fouling up nineteenth-century streets and homes. Chapters One and Two focus on the haphazard enterprises of ‘dust’ collecting and street sweeping, and of how local and national authorities came to complicate standardisation across the metropolis. The practicalities of the dustman’s trade were marked not just by the coals, ‘offal and bones’, ‘linen rags’, ‘broken pots, crockery, and oyster shells’, food scraps, and (most profitably) ash, but also by the ‘large “D” neatly printed on a piece of card’ that signalled for the dustman’s visit (pp. 11, 8). Jackson also highlights the unsystematic projects introduced for recycling dust to power the city’s growing electricity needs (p. 25). Vestrymen and parish administrators (collectively a recurring character in *Dirty Old London*’s drama of sanitation reform) invariably feared expense and, unsurprisingly, danger to their own political standing. They were thus often reluctant to do more than discuss contracting work out, unwilling to take on more work directly under their administration.

As Jackson makes clear, local officials, like all Londoners, were literally standing in filth: ‘The sheer volume of London traffic, drawn by the humble, long-suffering horse, was the principal source of all this dirt. By the 1890s, it took 300,000 horses to keep London moving, generating 1,000 tons of dung daily, not to mention a large volume of urine’ (p. 28). On streets which were

inconsistently made of granite or other stone, new asphalt, or even wood, the burgeoning London population made its way slipping and sliding across town. The life of the dustman or street sweeper is less the focus of Jackson's study as the public discourse on neglect and reform – the disputes between the 'trouble[some] nuisance' of 'beggarly' sweepers and middle- and upper-class pedestrians, as one writer to the *Morning Post* described as late as 1883 (p. 34). Jackson's book thus adds to Miles Ogborn's chapter on metropolitan paving, in which he considers the formation of modern ideas of uniformity and state control in the eighteenth century.² Jackson largely refrains from any such Habermasian social theory or ecocriticism, venturing only to suggest a cautionary tale: how the 'nineteenth century's alchemical dreams' of converting rubbish and smoke into energy have a place (if perhaps an ominous one) in the story of twenty-first century efforts to combat climate change (p. 26).

Two later chapters, on 'The Great Unwashed' and on 'Wretched Houses', offer perhaps the strongest, yet occasionally incomplete, investigations for the Victorian cultural historian. Specifically, Chapter Six considers nineteenth-century views on bathing, discussing the sanitarian cry for greater access to public bathhouses for the poor. Here, and at times elsewhere, Jackson's somewhat middle-class sensibility comes through. We hear it in moments when he is describing the realised separation between 'first- and second-class facilities' as 'highly cosmetic' and 'superficial', and when discussing the problem for working-class Londoners of being excluded from public toilets in fashionable shopping streets that were accessible only to customers (pp. 148, 167–8). Admittedly, a more theoretical framework might have provided deeper analysis about the political and ontological implications of (state and private) attempts to determine the origins and consequences of the dirt on the unwashed citizens and streets of the metropolis. Overall, however, the book brings together a well-researched, if thus under-theorised and de-politicised, study.

Like much of *Dirty Old London*, Chapter Six draws on a wealth of material combed from a variety of sources: beyond the familiar history told by governmental legislation and city maps, Jackson uses extant posters and public notices, letters to the editor from the Bishop of London, accounts from bath house and public toilet ventures on their building plans and financial and personal intake, Old Bailey testimonies of working-class 'attitudes' (p. 138), and forty images of photographed and illustrated impressions of London's

² Miles Ogborn, *Space of Modernity: London's Geographies 1680-1780* (London: The Guilford Press, 1998), pp. 75–115.

uncleanliness. As in Chapter Eight on 'urban poverty' and housing reform Jackson presents a bird's eye view of the project to 'disinfect London slums' (p. 184), either by renovation (complete with Jackson's recurring object, the novel water closet) or by demolition.

This is not to say that Jackson fails to consider the working-class subjects, whose 'wretched' homes were neglected by slum landlords and whose streets remained ignored by dustmen or rubbish collectors well into the century. His depiction surveys the appalling treatment of working-class bodies after death, not just in the 'Magnificent Seven' garden cemeteries of the middle classes, but also in the Spa Fields burial ground. Jackson's evaluation of this infamous site, 'more akin to a butcher's shop and crematorium' for shoving multiple, dismembered corpses, including those of children, into single coffins, is a compassionate account of the horrors and grotesque spectacle that led to the 'near riot' by working-class families in the East End in 1850 (pp. 120–4). Equally, his findings on reports of slum living, spurred by cholera outbreaks, reveal the investigators' biases as much as their horror at the antiquated use of communal cesspools shared among hundreds in the face of ever-rising rents (pp. 61, 191–2).

Jackson is not entirely unmindful of the roles of gender, class, race, and queer sexuality in the Victorian experience of the city, topics which elsewhere have yielded much to our understanding of nineteenth-century 'dirt' (in all its forms).³ Nevertheless, the major criticism to be levelled against *Dirty Old London* is that it seldom enters into the arenas of politics or religion, except as part of narratives of public works and personal careers of reformers (or anti-reformers). In general, this book keeps its eye on spaces rather than identities, in order to interrogate the kinds and causes of that dirt, allowing the washed and unwashed to speak, though limitedly, for themselves.

If the sign of a good book is the reader's craving for additional chapters, *Dirty Old London* is certainly a good book. A chapter on Victorian dockyards might have offered interesting insights into discussions of empire and foreign 'dirt'; another on knackers yards or food stalls, though certainly unappetising, could have entered into a scholarly conversation on historical attitudes to consumption, taste, diet, and unsanitary human and animal bodies. But this yearning for more comes from an appreciation of Jackson's work as it appears here: producing an appealing, accessible study that belies the incredible research apparent in his copious, but unobtrusive, footnotes. Well-known politicians and reformers including Edwin Chadwick (particularly in Chapter 4,

³ See Koven, particularly Chapter Four, 'The Politics and Erotics of Dirt: Cross-Class Sisterhood in the Slums', pp. 183–227.

'Removable Causes'), Lord Shaftesbury, and Joseph Bazalgette appear alongside lesser-known agents of change, including the menacing figure of cholera and the ever-present, if inconsistent, conscience of public opinion. Jackson does not take anyone's word for granted, tracing the origins and courses of his subjects as much as of the dirt they struggled to combat.

Overall, *Dirty Old London* provides a study of Victorian life on the ground, examining the origins of both the unclean modern city and the public programmes that worked to clean it. It adds vividly to our understanding of that proverbial question: what would it be like to live in another time? By Jackson's account, living in Victorian London meant wading through a battle of public and private interests, through social apathy and individual fervour, through a city variously under new construction and doggedly, unaccommodatingly historic, and through the seemingly irreversible tide of soot, mud, foul water, and all things unpleasant in the city.

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