

## Introduction: Revisiting the Victorian East End

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‘This street is in the East End. There is no need to say in the East End of what’, wrote Arthur Morrison in a vignette published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1891. ‘The East End is a vast city, as famous in its way as any the hand of man has made.’ A decade after the term came into common parlance — a decade in which London’s East End was the subject of an unremitting media frenzy — its location and significance were proverbial. Yet, as Morrison suggested, ‘many and misty are people’s notions of the East End.’<sup>1</sup> Despite his own attempt at a prosaic realism — insisting here that the average street was ‘not often spectacular’ but characterized by dull, hopeless monotony — the myth of the East End’s irredeemable and unapproachable depravity persisted. According to Jack London, his West End friends gestured vaguely, ‘It is over there, somewhere’, and a travel agent at Thomas Cook’s in the City declared, quite implausibly, ‘we know nothing whatsoever about the place at all.’<sup>2</sup> London’s exaggeration of the gulf between West End and East End was evidently designed to heighten the drama of his undercover exploration in *People of the Abyss* (1903). For there was, of course, a plethora of knowledge circulating in the late-Victorian period about the East End, a place that was both intensely mythologized and intensively investigated. How this knowledge, in the form of maps, newspaper reports, sociological studies, photographs, novels and diaries, was produced, and how experienced by its authors and objects, has been the subject of some of the most exciting recent work in Victorian studies.

It is forty years since Gareth Stedman-Jones’s magisterial *Outcast London* inaugurated the terms of the late twentieth century’s engagement with the Victorian East End. A meticulous work of social and economic history, *Outcast London* was nonetheless also key in pointing to the overdetermined role that London’s East End played in the Victorian imagination. The preoccupation with the East End as ‘nursery of destitute poverty and thriftlessness, demoralized pauperism, as a community cast adrift from the salutary presence and leadership of men of wealth and culture, and as a potential threat to the riches and civilization of London and the Empire’ articulates for Stedman-Jones the contradictions of mid-Victorian economic and cultural complacency.<sup>3</sup> The assurance of the Victorian middle and upper classes for whom in ‘[t]he late 1860s and early 1870s the liberal utopia had never seemed nearer’ (p. 16) was radically undermined by the spectre of

the East End ‘residuum’, the anxiety only increasing through the 1880s and 1890s when the journalistic depictions of G. R. Sims and Andrew Mearns, and the social research led by Charles Booth, revealed the residuum’s persistence and proliferation in the face of, by then, substantial charitable and State attempts to eradicate it.<sup>4</sup> Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, documented mostly in the 1850s, is a perpetual, incompletely synthesized presence in *Outcast London*.<sup>5</sup> But it is precisely this presence — the gesture at various points throughout the study directly to the testimony of Mayhew’s cast of characters — and Stedman-Jones’s attention to the poetics as well as the factual import of Mearns, Sims, and Booth, that has ensured the reach of *Outcast London* well beyond the concerns of left or Labour history. For three decades it has provided the basis of a grand narrative of the Victorian East End, one that has stimulated and structured the work of cultural historians in particular.

There have been key moments of reinlection in subsequent decades. The fears generated by the East End were reconsidered from the perspective of debates about gender and sexuality in Judith Walkowitz’s 1992 study *City of Dreadful Delight*.<sup>6</sup> The stake that Walkowitz’s thinking about sexual danger places in the Victorian East End of the 1880s perhaps remains to be fully considered. The impact of her book upon the conceptualization of late nineteenth-century women’s experience and agency within urban space, however, is incontrovertible. *City of Dreadful Delight* is often interested in the new intellectual and professional routes that connected West and East End locations, and explores the dynamics of the Men and Women’s Club, at least one member of which, Olive Schreiner, pursued in addition to her career as a Bloomsbury intellectual, by residence and observation (and by her own lights) a moral and political identification with the East End. The events of W. T. Stead’s exposure of the ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ and the scandal of the Ripper murders form the core of Walkowitz’s account of women’s sexual interpolation by the East End, but it is within a narrative frame that refuses female victimhood. The abject predicament of the little girls sold into prostitution of Stead’s narrative and the female bodies horribly mutilated by the Ripper are contextualized in Walkowitz’s text by an emphasis on, respectively, the vivid, public, working-class response to the reports in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the ‘vigilance committees’ set up in Whitechapel.

More generally, Victorian London in Walkowitz’s study is a space of new forms of freedom and agency for women. These encompassed not only travel, settlement work or

social investigation for middle-class women but the artistry and careers of the music hall ballet girls of the 1880s and 1890s, one form of the ‘autonomous working class vitality’ explored in Anne Witchard’s opening essay. The interpenetration of late-Victorian East End street dance culture and the developing, *elite* English ballet tradition — ‘down from the ballet — up from the clog’ — is emblemized for Witchard in the career of Lydia Sokolova, born Hilda Munnings in Wanstead in 1896. The inspiration and impetus for her career, which culminated in the status of principle character dancer in the *Ballet Russes* came, she testified, from her enchantment by the flamboyant performances of the East End factory girls — ‘high kicks, *ronds de jambe* and splits’, to the music of the barrel organ played outside the public house.

Following Walkowitz, a Foucauldian approach to power, as a dispersed and decentred rather than stable force, informs the most recent celebrated rereading of East London cultural history, Seth Koven’s *Slumming* (2004). Koven’s study focuses on the sexual and social politics of the encounter between Victorian philanthropists, missionaries and journalists, and their East End clientele. The East End in his account is a place of opportunity, a locus more of desire than of fear, where the poor figure as ‘erotic objects of elite spectatorship’ but also, frequently, as knowing agents.<sup>7</sup> The slum, experienced as a space ‘free from the inhibitions and prohibitions of middle-class domesticity and conjugality’, could function productively as a crucible for imagining and enacting new social and sexual relations (p. 285). Holding together the paternalism, smugness, self-criticism and sincerity of these middle-class men and women, *Slumming* opens up their complex subjectivities to a more empathetic scrutiny.

Koven’s rejuvenation of the figure of the philanthropist and the scene of cross-class encounter, crucially mediated by questions of gender, is evident in the essays here by Gabrielle Mearns and Susan David Bernstein. Mearns explores two forays into philanthropic and investigative engagement with the East End poor by middle-class, self-consciously professionalized women. The Fabian Beatrice Webb (née Potter) disguised herself as an unemployed trouser-hand in order to gain inside knowledge of the sweatshops of the East End undetected; Clara Collet transformed her experience as a Charity Organisation Society inspector into fictional form in her short story ‘Undercurrents’, which depicts a middle-class philanthropist’s failed attempt to save an alcoholic factory girl. Mearns emphasizes the instability Webb and Collet, in different ways, experienced in their self-assurance and identity as professional women and social

researchers and their ambivalent fluctuation between models of middle-class female slum-visiting derived from earlier nineteenth-century ideas of female purity and ‘influence’ and the late nineteenth-century commitment to scientific impartiality, which was the official basis of their research and intervention. Bernstein explores an aspect of the intellectual and political traffic between Bloomsbury and the East End in the late 1880s, principally through the career of Constance Black as librarian of the People’s Palace Library in Mile End. A renowned translator of Russian literature who was later to become the daughter-in-law of Richard Garnett, Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum, Black was a member of a significant female literary and political grouping who worked in the Bloomsbury Reading Room and included Webb, Eleanor Marx, Constance’s sister trade Union activist Clementina Black and the Anglo-Jewish feminist writer Amy Levy, all of whom also in one way or another had significant preoccupations with the East End. As Black and her female assistant librarians worked to bring the culture of the Panizzi Reading Room to the East End poor, Black’s egalitarian ideals battled with her bemusement at her ‘rough readers’ — the factory girls whose raucous behaviour disturbed the peace and the ‘facetious youths’ who signed their reader applications with the name ‘Jack the Ripper’.

If Walkowitz and Koven have restored the perspectives of gender and sexuality to accounts of the Victorian East End, a second expansion of the scope of Stedman-Jones’s scholarship has come from historians of religion and ethnicity, particularly David Feldman in his 1994 study *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840–1914*.<sup>8</sup> The East End was an area of dense Jewish settlement from the 1880s onwards and beliefs about racial difference crucially informed debate about urban degeneration in the late-Victorian period. Anglo-Jewish philanthropists ministering to the East End Jewish poor, meanwhile, were especially complicated figures, sharing class interests with their Christian counterparts as well as harbouring anxieties about their own social status. The voices of East End Jews, too, have entered the historical record through important oral history work in the 1980s and 90s, notably Jerry White’s landmark study *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887–1920*.<sup>9</sup> White’s book documented the social and cultural life of one sector of the immigrant population in the East End, evoking a community that was both cohesive and complex, declining in religious observance, mostly unresponsive to philanthropic discipline, inward-looking but in constant contact with the gentile world. White’s emphasis on everyday life in the ‘ghetto’

and the texture of communications across religious boundaries or ethnic enclaves is echoed in Ellen Ross's essay in this issue, which draws on oral history and diaries to explore the diverse experiences behind the public rhetoric of missionary dealings with immigrant Jews. As Ross describes, the Jewish mothers who accessed the healthcare services of Bethnal Green's Mildmay clinic exercised 'selective deafness' when negotiating the dose of Christian evangelization their children's treatment was conditional on. Ross's exploration of the motives of the mission doctors, of the Mildmay and the other proliferating medical missions of the East End of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, selected as they knew they were as much for the purity of their Christian conviction as for their medical skills, attests to the emotional complexity and compromise of their dealings with both their patients and their medical and religious vocations.

Such nuanced accounts of the politics of Jewish integration in the East End and its wider ramifications are given a broader context in David Feldman's essay in this issue. Challenging the predominant view in recent scholarship that Victorian cultural and political responses to the Jewish minority were fundamentally ambivalent, Feldman points to the positive support for religious plurality evidenced by State funding of denominational education (including for Jews). There was no single discursive relationship, he argues, among liberal culture, the East End, and the Jews. For sure, in many textual representations of this period, including those by Beatrice Webb and other social reformers, East End Jews were simultaneously idealized and denigrated, but for Feldman this indicates not the ambivalence of Victorians towards the Jews as such but the particular demands that the structure of East End industry posed for its observers. The 'Jewish type', like the 'residuum', was a late-Victorian means of explaining East End phenomena that did not fit current theories of economic and social progress.

The essays in this issue refer to an East End that was both an imaginative space and an administrative jurisdiction — especially before the creation of the London County Council, which took over responsibility for education, sewage, housing, and hospitals in 1888. These official agencies, however, stretched and compressed the 'East End', bringing it into different spatial configurations. The Poor Law, for example, created complex administrative geographies: while the East London Poor Law Union established its workhouse at Homerton, the City of London Poor Law Union farmed paupers out to its workhouse in Bow. Thus, although the City of London was legally responsible for the paupers and patients discussed in Caroline Bressey's essay, they were accommodated east

of its boundaries. For Charles Booth, documenting the lived reality of working-class poverty in his 1889 study *Life and Labour of the People in London*, East London stretched from Aldgate to Bow and Poplar. But if Booth's investigation empirically established an identity for East Londoners as suffering shocking levels of deprivation, this definition was complicated by his later work on West London, where poverty statistics were strikingly similar. A different version of the 'East End' defined the zone of intervention adopted by the university settlement movement, which sprinkled its Oxbridge-style quadrangles across the area in the 1880s and 90s, and included Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel, Oxford House in Bethnal Green, Mansfield House University Settlement in Plaistow and Canning Town Women's Settlement, but also extended south of the river to Bermondsey and Camberwell. Professional missionaries, on the other hand, headed for whichever part of East London had received the latest wave of immigrant unbelievers, whether Indian sailors in Canning Town, objects of the Lascar Mission there, or Russian Jewish immigrants in Whitechapel. Imagined geographies of East London, meanwhile, were just as important in shaping both lived experience and mythic representation. Residents often evinced loyalties to localities far smaller than the 'East End', identities tied fiercely to particular streets or even buildings.<sup>10</sup> Micro-localities also proved a rich resource for literary ethnographers like Arthur Morrison, as Diana Maltz shows in her essay, as he ascribed East End brutality in the Old Nichol to its poverty-induced isolation, and in Wapping to the rootless nomadism of its transient sailor population. For Morrison, a historical geography of the East End was the key to understanding its distinctive ethos.

The essays collected here bring into focus neglected aspects of the Victorian East End — its street culture, its intellectual life, its differentiated localities. In Bressey's suggestive photo-essay, however, we incorporate an emergent area of research that indicates something of the sources, stories, and questions still to be asked. Bressey's research draws on previously unexamined photographic records from the City of London Asylum to reveal tantalizing traces of the lives of men and women of colour, whose stories of movement and settlement, yet to be recovered, point to new readings of the East End as imperial epicentre.

In its powerful evocation of invisible, everyday lives, perhaps the most moving of recent revisitations of the Victorian East End has been Rachel Whiteread's extraordinary site-specific sculpture 'House'. This work, made on 193 Grove Road, Mile End, E3 in late 1993, was cast in concrete from the interior of a Victorian terrace house. The row in which

it stood had been partially obliterated by the Blitz; the clearance of the terrace during the 1990s was a small moment in the huge phenomenon of gentrification that has accelerated through London's East End during the past three decades. Whiteread's art, in this work and others, has explored the juxtaposition of the mundane and the monumental, the transformation of the mundane into the monumental. Her visible rendering of 'negative space', the internal volume rather than the external shell of the house, memorializes something of the weight — the symbolic and discursive weight, if no other kind — of the obscure lives lived out in that dwelling. Located in an area of repeated erasure and reinscription, it was a reminder of how the still unfolding story of the Victorian East End continues to provoke our thinking about the relationship between urban life and social progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Morrison, 'The Street', reprinted as 'Introduction' to *Tales of Mean Streets* (London: Methuen, 1894), pp. 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1995), pp. 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> Gareth Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 15–16. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> G. R. Sims, *My Life: Sixty Years of Recollections of Bohemian London* (London: Nash, 1917); Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Enquiry Into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (London: Congregational Union, 1883); Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (London: Macmillan, 1897).

<sup>5</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Woodfall, 1851).

<sup>6</sup> Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social, Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 283. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>8</sup> David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840–1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887–1920* (London: Pimlico, 2003). See also Lara V. Marks, *Model Mothers: Jewish Mothers and Maternity Provision in East London, 1870–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> White, *Rothschild Buildings*, p. 137.