

London

Black, Jeremy and Donald M. MacRaid. *Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

London has a rich history of urban development. From the fifteenth century it was the largest city in Europe, with people from across the continent finding their way there. It was (and remains) a cosmopolitan place; a magnet for an admixture of different people from Britain and further afield. Jews and Irish, Scots and Welsh, for instance, formed noticeable and commented-upon ethnic clusters prior to the eighteenth century. Distinct crafts and religions led to the settlement of German tailors and Protestants escaping the

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persecution in Europe's Catholic countries, notably the French Huguenots. Labour migration was seen as a challenge to the stability of the social fabric in the medieval period, but events such as the Black Death in the fourteenth century, and increasing demand in growing towns, meant that restrictions had to be slackened. As a greater flow of people developed, much of it was drawn to the burgeoning capital, mainly from the southern counties. This influx more than compensated for London's high death rate; by the twentieth century some 20 per cent of all English-born people were resident there.

London's population was dynamic, with a steady but uncounted flow of people passing in and out of its boundaries. Between 1861 and 1911, it burgeoned from 2.8 m to 4.5 m inhabitants. While much of this was due to net in-migration, natural increase accounted for 85 per cent of all growth by the end of the century. Yet, London, while not a centre of industry or any large factories in comparison with the great northern cities, did nevertheless have a richly variegated economy. Few of its businesses employed large quantities of labour; workshops and small concerns prevailed, and 86 per cent of employers in 1851 had fewer than ten employees. Women out-numbered men, because, according to Philip Waller 'domestic service and the prospect of marriage were the prevailing forces'. This coincided with a reduction in labour opportunities for rural women: in 1851, 229,000 women were employed in agriculture; by 1901, this had fallen to 67,000. This decline was especially noticeable in places where urban industrial development was least apparent, for example, in the shires of southern England and East Anglia. Like their counterparts elsewhere, migrants to the metropolis were young, mainly in their twenties. Rural migrants tended also to avoid London's inner city, where three-quarters of residents were London born, and many others were Irish and (especially later in the century) Jewish and Italian. Although it peaked in 1851 at 108,548, the Irish population remained an important until well into the twentieth century.

Mobility was highest among casual labourers, whose job security was lowest. Once in London migrants did not necessarily stay put, and the social investigator, Charles Booth, who conducted extensive research into poverty in London's East End, in the 1880s, discovered that 40 per cent of families in Bethnal Green had moved within one year. In general, migrants from other counties were attracted to London in inverse proportion to the distance from the south-east of England. Among these migrants, turnover was high, with a large part of the working-class populace occupying the same housing for only a few months.

By the later nineteenth century London had cemented its position as the world largest metropolitan centre. It was a magnet for people, a centre of political life, a place whose cultural elite had European pretensions but whose businesses were of world importance. As the administrative centre of Britain, London was also the hub of the world's greatest empire. Its waterfront thrived on a huge commercial traffic which saw London conducting European and Empire traffic in a way that dwarfed even Liverpool's dominance of transatlantic commercial activity. London's waterfront housed

at anyone time more vessels than any other port in the world. A cosmopolitan maritime population-- Chinese, Lascars (East Indians), Americans, Europeans-- crowded the dock front embarking on, or disembarking from, vessels. This was very much an environment moulded by man. In 1913, Arthur Sarsfield, a London crime reporter who, under the pseudonym Sax Rohmer, published *The Mystery of Fu Manchu*, described a journey down the Thames, the 'oily

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glitter of the tide', and 'on the Surrey shore a blue light ... flicked translucent tongue' against the night's curtain ... a gasworks'.

The people of London lived in a multitude of different types of dwellings, dependent upon their status and social class. As London sprawled outwards, areas of countryside were swallowed up by new suburban areas. Although Ford Madox Brown's Hampstead was still surrounded by suburban greenery when he painted it in *English Autumn Afternoon* (1852-4), it had been fully rural thirty years earlier when John Keats had lived there. Twenty years later it had itself been engulfed by more suburban places. As London's boundaries rolled out into the Home Counties,¹ too, small towns and villages were swallowed up by its progress.

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¹ the counties of England that surround London: Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey, and Sussex