

## Two Interpretations of Victorian London

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Richard Rempel

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6 Richard Cobb, "The Assassination of Paris," *New York Review of Books*, 28 (February 1980), p. 16.

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British urban historians, led by the pioneering work of the late H.J. Dyos, have increasingly demonstrated that many aspects of the Victorian period and after cannot be comprehended without digesting their detailed findings and reflecting on their conclusions. Historians trained conventionally twenty years ago in political and economic fields have had to come to grips with the work of Dyos, Sutcliffe, Stedman Jones, Tarn and Jackson, to name but a few. This adjustment is essential for teachers of history both because many students are deeply interested in the social effects of urbanization and because it is necessary to integrate the urban dimension with traditional history in order to shed new light on our own research. For example, what historian would now claim to understand the decade of the 1880s without an acute awareness of the housing crisis which preoccupied politicians, churchmen, journalists and the general public. Yet to open the standard biographies of

politicians such as Gladstone, Chamberlain and Salisbury is to read hundreds of pages about Ireland, Egypt, radicalism and electoral reform with scarcely a mention of housing in Gladstone's case and only fragmentary references to Chamberlain's and Salisbury's interests in urban problems. Is it not profoundly revealing that Wohl can demonstrate that Gladstone was "totally uninterested" in housing reform, whereas Chamberlain and, to a greater degree, Salisbury had keen insights into the dilemma and constructive policies to deal with some housing and casual labour problems? Moreover, Wohl is surely correct to claim that, until the Fabians, the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party, as well as other socialist groups, are studied with greater reference to the urban crisis (in London especially), we shall be limited to incomplete rehashings of internal political struggles, personality dissections and stale reviews of their programmes for change.

It is a mark of Wohl's achievement that in his ranging study he should force us to re-examine traditional views of politicians and parties, philanthropy and governmental finance, while at the same time presenting the fullest examination to date of urban dilemmas in Britain's capital. While London was not in the vanguard of many important urban reform movements, he justifies yet another study of that city in terms both of its sheer size when compared with other British cities and its unique importance to the United Kingdom and Western Europe generally. If his book lacks the analysis of the de-industrialization of Victorian London, carefully developed by

Gareth Stedman Jones, this omission is not a serious flaw since *The Eternal Slum* ought to be read in conjunction with Jones's *Outcast London*.

Drawing upon a massive range of parliamentary papers, contemporary writings and current scholarship, Wohl traces the early awareness of housing problems from the 1840s through the crisis of the 1880s and carries the reader to the Great War and after in an extended epilogue. He is right to concentrate the main focus of his book on the 1880s, since that decade witnessed the greatest agitation over the housing crisis before the stormy "homes for heroes" controversy in the post-1918 Reconstruction era. Moreover, since the publication in 1971 of *Outcast London*, this neo-Marxist explanation concerning the interrelationship between working class unrest and the twin problems of high unemployment and wretched housing has been the most intriguing, if controversial, interpretation for many students of Victorian Britain. For Jones, the various bourgeois reactions - the Royal Commission of 1884-5, the relief funds of 1886 and 1889, the response to the London Dock Strike of 1889 - all arose from middle class fear, not guilt, about the possible consequences of the masses suffering from terrible overcrowding and uncertain employment. Wohl, with his guardedly meliorist, liberal assumptions and his more detailed historical background of responses to overcrowding, provides a powerful alternative explanation. Jones does not deal with individuals save as he perceives their acts to be a function of their class-determined state. Wohl, on the other hand, uses evidence to argue that the

individuals he examines act from a complex interaction of a variety of motives by no means all class determined. Hence we have rich (and more convincing) portraits of many Medical Officers of Health, leading civil servants, philanthropists and politicians.

Wohl shows how the housing crisis in the period 1850 to 1880 was gradually isolated from other social problems. He explains more satisfactorily than Jones the groping attempts to alleviate the problem, such as the Torrens Act of 1868 and the Cross Act of 1875, as proceeding not from sinister or at least limited class perceptions, but from a legacy of Tory democracy and Christian philanthropy. The complexity of the problem is not reduced to a simplistic Marxist formula, which simplicity Jones himself has abandoned in his more recent writings on working class culture. Wohl convincingly illustrates how, in an age before progressive taxation and the welfare state, philanthropy was the most sensible attempt to grapple with imperfectly perceived social problems. He credits, persuasively, the agitation of both the enlightened Medical Officers of Health and sensationalist journalists for pushing the governing classes towards a realization that the magnitude of the problem in London was such that municipal and state socialism had to be viewed as the only progressive means to approach the housing crisis. It is in the context of this enlightenment that we have excellent evaluations of the implications of the Royal Commission on Housing of 1885 and work of Sidney Webb and other Progressives on the London County Council after 1888.

Wohl tends to tail off by

1900, although his discussion of the impact of cheap workmen's train fares on the growth of lower class suburbs, with their combination of more space but also dreary design, is thoughtfully presented. But both Wohl and Jones prove conclusively that, more than any other issue, the housing crisis revealed the inability of classical economic theory to provide solutions to overcrowding and many other social problems. Unlike Wohl, however, Jones laments that the housing crisis was not alleviated through a rise in proletarian class-consciousness but only by the bureaucratic state and by the London Labour party "machine" of Herbert Morrison. Occasionally, Wohl reveals a lack of authority in traditional political history when he describes George Goschen, a very important Unionist cabinet minister (1886 to 1892 and 1895 to 1900), as having died in 1886. Wohl also is not completely accurate about, or fair to, Gladstone. Certainly he was not interested in housing legislation. But he was not indifferent to suffering. Driven by a mixture of evangelical zeal and Victorian sexual repression, Gladstone often prowled the streets of London's dangerous areas seeking to convince prostitutes to repent. Convinced of the truth of laissez-faire theory, he could only hope that the terrible urban conditions he saw would be alleviated through working class self-help fueled by Christian righteousness. Imprisoned by his ideology and relying so much on self-help, he was far too optimistic. Victorian urban history needs to be written with greater knowledge of Gladstone's political and moral beliefs. Similarly, in his references to Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree as social investigators, he could

have profitted from E.P. Hennock's important article on poverty and social theory.\* More serious is his failure, shared by Jones, to explore, or even to hint at, the possible links between the failure to proceed with the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Housing and the Home Rule crisis. That crisis of 1886 produced a geological shift in British politics, diverting, arguably, energies from social reform into manoeuvrings to create and maintain new party alignments. Nevertheless, Wohl has written an important work which is essential to all serious students of Victorian Britain.

Richard Rempel  
Department of History  
McMaster University

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Nash, Gary B. *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and The Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979. Pp. xix, 548. Appendices, maps, index.

The Progressive interpretation of the American Revolution, thought to be near death during the hegemony of consensus historiography in the 1950s, recovered much of its health after resuscitation by the New Left in the 1960s. With American society torn apart by deep divisions over the poor, minority rights and the Vietnam imbroglio, a past based on a sense of shared values seemed sanguine to many historians and one

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\*See E.P. Hennock, "Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience, of the 1880s," *Social History*, Vol. 1 (1976), pp. 67-91.