

**Victoria Kelley, *Cheap Street: London's Street Markets and the Cultures of Informality, c.1850-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019). 224 pp. Hardcover \$120.00.**

The representation of the London East End poor remains an ongoing subject of research and lively debate. Victoria Kelley's major new study of London's street markets re-visits many of the traditional accounts and weaves a somewhat different narrative around the open-air cultures that emerged in the East End following the clearing of the rookeries of central London by the Metropolitan Board of Works that compressed poverty into an area east of Aldgate Pump during the mid-nineteenth century. In the resulting "separate city of two million people," as Arthur Morrison called it, many of the traditional depictions of poverty in London that coloured the image of the old East End became lodged in the popular imagination.

Kelley's hugely entertaining treatment of the market culture of the East End provides an important contribution to the literature surrounding the area and the cultures of poverty and subsistence that underpinned the "informal" economy of the poor. Moving beyond many of the established images of the old East End, Kelley's gaze moves from the topography of East End street life to the architecture and regulation of East End markets, the design of market hall buildings, and the lively and raucous open-air culture that surrounded the markets themselves. In its willingness to re-examine traditional accounts, and its close attention to detail, this wide-ranging study sheds new light on the transitional, constantly shifting society that constituted East End life in the later part of the nineteenth century, through to the inter-war period and beyond. There is a breadth of scope and an adventurousness of interpretive method here that gives Kelley's study a refreshingly different take on some traditional themes. Readers seeking images of poverty and exclusion will find many of the usual descriptions provided by "slummers" and casual visitors to the East End portraying a debased quarter of the city absent from the material quoted in this study. The world of "outcast London" or the "submerged tenth" in which voyeuristic social investigators sought out lurid scenes of poverty, recorded the excesses of the poor and the destitute, and subjected a sub-stratum of the population to merciless and relentless scrutiny, is far less evident here than in previous historiography. As some historians have observed, there were elements of the "human zoo" apparent in these representations of the poor and excluded, symbolized by Charles Booth's description of the most destitute in his social survey as living "the life of savages with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and occasional excess." Inevitably these accounts, with their echoes of colonialism, primitivism, and the vision of "darkest England," have made their way into mainstream historiography, with a detrimental impact on representations of poverty and exclusion in the

later nineteenth century. When George Borrow talked of an East End that faced “East” his description carried with it suggestions of an orientalized image of the inhabitants of the East End that emphasized their strangeness and “otherness” as denizens of a separate ghettoized world.

Kelley reappraises many of these traditional accounts. In her view, the informal street markets and their exuberant and quixotic stall holders appear as part of a quintessentially English landscape. A population usually depicted as merely subsisting on the scraps of the city is here reassessed as one displaying astute economic and household management. In this treatment, Kelley restores nuance and balance to contemporary representations of poverty. Far from portraying a world of seasonal labourers and immigrants from abroad with feckless habits representative of an impoverished population forced into a subsistence economy through desperate domestic circumstances, Kelley describes the opportunities provided by the street markets, including a culture of sociability, popular entertainment, cheap but nourishing food, and an environment of open-air conviviality much admired by engravers, photographers, and journalists. In a very twenty-first-century take, the street markets themselves may be seen as part of a culture of re-cycling, re-purposing the worn-out consumer goods of the late nineteenth century city for re-use. Slumming and visits by the wealthy to the poorer parts of the East End to experience the street markets emerge here as far more joyful and liberating experiences than in some of the standard accounts. They act as a reproach to Henry Hyndman’s famous comment that slumming merely represented “the bourgeoisie exercising their guilt.”

The fruits of Kelley’s re-examination are illustrated by a rich vein of visual material accompanying the text, providing a pictorial representation of the development and evolution of London’s street markets. Kelley’s study is at its strongest in its analysis of this visual inheritance. Indeed, the book is at its most confident in its adroit assessment of the world of material culture manifested in the second-hand clothes, foodstuffs, cheap ornaments, and “beads and baubles” on sale at these markets. As Kelley comments of London and the circulation of cheap goods in the capital: “its productive basis was more complex, more relationship-based and less overtly ‘formal’ than that of many other centres of manufacturing” (p. 68). A growing field in historical scholarship, the study of material culture reveals the insights that can be gleaned through the prism of these “Victorian things” as Asa Briggs called them.

In a work of this scope there are inevitably some omissions. Despite Kelley’s excellent treatment of the transition of the East End costermonger from the street to the music hall, the exact significance of the “Pearly Kings and Queens” remains elusive, other than as a symbol of a recent “invented tradition.” A very efficient summary of the literature on this subject is presented here, but no overall conclusions are reached. Did the “Pearlies” represent an authentic strain of street culture or was their existence as a comedy turn a way of softening and blunting the traditional view of poverty by a resort to humour and satire? It still is not clear.

East Enders are often depicted as victims, as representatives of “outcast London.” In this excellent study, they are active agents navigating and negotiating the culture of poverty and producing a lively environment and proletarianized space of their own as a strategy for coping with low wages and exclusion.

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