

London's Marginal Histories

Nicholas Rogers

Volume 60, Fall 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/lt60re01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rogers, N. (2007). Review of [London's Marginal Histories]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 60, 217–234.

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

London's Marginal Histories

Nicholas Rogers

Clive Bloom, *Violent London. 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson 2003)

Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London and New York: Hambledon and London 2004)

Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *Tales from the Hanging Court* (London: Hodder Arnold 2007)

Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob. Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and New York: Hambledon and London 2004)

THE ONE THING THAT CAN BE SAID about London history is that it has staying power. There was a time in the 1970s when community studies were all the rage, when a concern for region, province, and even *pays* threatened to cast English, and perhaps even British history in a more Annalesiste mould, at the very least to highlight the divergent histories of the island. Within this prospectus London threatened to lose some of its supremacy as a premier site for historical investigation and as an exemplary site for historical trends. But times have changed. Although there continue to be some good micro-histories of communities, local history seemed to thrive best when social-science-inflected history was to the fore. With the shift to cultural history, to post-colonial history, to the histories of alternative sexualities or of consumerism, Cobbett's "Great Wen" has made a comeback.

In the latest clutter of metropolitan histories stand these three books. Two of them, those of Professors Hitchcock and Shoemaker, flow out of a larger project in which they have been engaged, the Old Bailey Proceedings online. This is a massive digitalization of the printed proceedings of London's central criminal court from 1674 to 1834, comprising over 100,000 trials. From any part of the internet, researchers can call up the names, places, crimes, canting

discourses, and capers that came up in the Old Bailey archives; and in its associated records, such as the Ordinary of Newgate's Account, which provide fascinating biographical details about those who were hanged at Tyburn. For those with a quantitative bent, there are now online opportunities to create your own pie or bar chart of sex or occupational-based crimes, or the pattern of punishment decade by decade. It is a very impressive resource that was impressively funded as well, with grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Britain, the New Opportunities Fund, and EnrichUK, that is, a grant from the British lottery, not to mention the two editors' own universities. It is a research council's dream, training new scholars who did the dog work to get the project up to par, and accessible not simply to academics but the wider public. It won the 2003 Cybrarian Project Award for its "outstanding effort and contribution towards the accessibility and usability of online information."¹ When I first worked in what was the Middlesex Record Office, now the Metropolitan London archives, Australians used to drop in to see if they could trace their ancestors who were transported Down Under from the Old Bailey. Now it can be done within minutes from Sydney.

Hitchcock and Shoemaker are among the academic impresarios of Britain's new enterprise culture. They were both awarded personal chairs for their project. They are there to make history trendy and relevant, and to pump up the volume.² When the project was launched at a conference at the De Havilland campus of the University of Hertfordshire in July 2004, there was a lot of heady talk about a "New History from Below" as if the old "history from below" of Thompson, Rudé and Hobsbawm was somehow passé. It was not at all clear to me what was exactly new about their project. If the essence of history from below was the positive re-evaluation of the agency of ordinary people in the making of their own history, beginning with a sensitive evaluation of their experience and life chances, then much that flowed from the Old Bailey project fell within that framework. To be sure, the classic historians from below were primarily interested in popular political agency, in dramatic episodes of popular intervention in history that served as a counter-history to the reigning orthodoxies of fair-minded elites attending to and accommodating new social forces. Yet the aspiration to democratize history, to expand the range of conventional historical subjects, was extended into fields of less political agency, and consequently to the predicaments and institutional terrains that court records like the Old Bailey might address beyond their self-evident usefulness as a chronicle of crime: topics such as illicit economies, unconventional family formations, social deviance, violence and conflict resolution, or poverty and welfare. Moreover, there did not appear to be any significant methodological departures in the papers offered at the conference. Indeed,

1. See www.oldbaileyonline.org/about/#fundingbodies

2. Hitchcock and Shoemaker have recently published a volume that is directly related to the project, entitled, *Tales from the Hanging Court* (London 2006).

some of the papers showed a disturbing tendency to make the digital Delphic, to privilege online sources simply because they are accessible, without considering how they stand within the ensemble of texts available to historians and what their limitations might be.

It cannot be said that Hitchcock and Shoemaker fall prey to this tendency in the two books under review. Tim Hitchcock's book on down-and-out London in the eighteenth century flows out of his doctoral work on workhouses and his engagement with the Old Bailey project, as well as some youthful Jack Kerouac-like enthusiasms for living on the margins; hoping, he tells us, that by "living poor" he "would purchase real freedom" and avoid "the ever slaving maw of work and responsibility." (xi) No doubt his early adventures on the road account in part for the up-beat temper of this book, which is less concerned with desolation, disease, and death than with the resourceful strategies of survival among the destitute and the role they played, or might have played within the casual labour economy of London. Whereas previous histories had tended to see the destitute and homeless as the victims of parish tyranny, or enduring the lash for vagrancy, Hitchcock argues that it was possible to eke a living on the streets of London, to avail oneself of the various welfare agencies on offer, and through threats, menaces, and pleadings, prey on the conscience of the middling sort for small change and victuals.

In the last chapter of the book Hitchcock lays out his strategy for making this case. He sees his work as a sort of literary venture, fictionalizing his varied texts into a complex multifaceted whole; in his own words, "to use each of these sources to form one lens in an insect-like compound eye." (236) Hitchcock doffs his hat to Hayden White's belief in history as literary artifact and seems to take on board much of the relativity of the linguistic turn. But he also seems to tie himself in methodological knots. He talks of texts as offering no "clear and knowable truth" beyond the "self-referential" but he doesn't offer any guidelines as to how he moves from the self-referential to the contexts that historians find important: through proliferating forms of intertextuality? through distinguishing discursive from non-discursive sources in the manner of Roger Chartier? through the use of a dialogical analysis in the manner of Mikhail Bakhtin, whereby the language of the text is unpacked to reveal its social dynamisms and antimonies, its implicit conversations?³ There are gestures towards the latter in the statement that authors "deploy images and ideas in such a way as to preclude readings and rereadings that are at odds with an authorial intent" (237) but it is not developed any further. This is a pity, because a dialogic reading of many social pamphlets about the vagrant poor could reveal an increasing anxiety among reformers that the public still favoured personal over public or institutional charity in addressing the

3. Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff. History, Language and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore and London 1977), ch. 1; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana 1984).

problem of indigence. This kind of evidence, which Hitchcock uses casually rather than systematically,⁴ could have buttressed his argument about the persistence of public sympathy for the less fortunate, even in a town of strangers like London.

This is not to suggest that Hitchcock skimps on his sources. Far from it. The range of materials he uses is impressive, including a raft of London-based manuscript sources, the Old Bailey proceedings, ballads, poems, travel guides, novels, and prints. The 39 prints on street life are nicely integrated into the book, although Hitchcock cannot seem to make up his mind whether to treat them principally as representations, with due attention to genre and moral perspective, or simply to mine them for their arresting detail. The early chapters on "Sleeping Rough" and "Pauper Professions" swing in the latter direction, but chapter 9, "A Beggar's Mask," very helpfully looks at representations of street folk in terms of the picaresque and the sentimental genres. To my mind this is one of the most impressive chapters of the book, offering insightful detail into the cultural production of mendicity in the metropolis.

Hitchcock understands the difficulties of finding agency among the desperately poor, people whose voices are largely obscured and heavily mediated by the official record. Even in the Old Bailey Proceedings, which were initially taken down in shorthand during the business of the court, Hitchcock recognizes that the language of defendants, witnesses, and prosecutors was largely sanitized for a middle-class audience and certainly cured of its racy, irreverent cant. Still, wherever possible Hitchcock strives to construct a pastiche of mini-narratives to demonstrate that the poor did have some agency in negotiating alms and relief, and that they did prey successfully on the conscience of the rich by playing the card of Christian charity and crying up an epitome of their calamities. Much of this evidence is drawn from the few autobiographical accounts of beggar boys, or from elite reminiscences about encounters with beggars, but others, such as the story of Paul Patrick Kearney, a well-educated shipwright who fell on hard times, come from the Old Bailey proceedings and the chain of manuscript sources and reveal Hitchcock's purposeful detective work.

The problem with this sort of evidence is its typicality. Can one really use Kearney, or some other pre-Dickensian character of his ilk, as a metonym for the London destitute? We have always known there were colourful characters among the vagrant population, picaresque tricksters such as Bampfylde-Moore Carew, but so what? In writing a history of the very poor, whose vulnerability did not give them much bargaining power, who were often shunted about and processed by authorities, one eventually has to assess the institutional response to marginality and the sociological patterns of destitution, its links to

4. There is no reference to Henry Fielding's social pamphlets, for example, or to many pamphlets on vagrancy in the Goldsmith-Kress Collection housed in the University of London library and accessible by e-resource.

the economy, or warfare, or family breakdown. And sooner or later one has to count, to offer some thoughts on the scale of the problem and the institutional efforts to resolve it. Hitchcock refuses to broach these issues comprehensively, seemingly on the grounds that quantitative data are "bald and uninformative" and detract from "the humanity of the people being studied." (237) This is a bit perverse. One cannot really offer meaningful thoughts on London destitution and migratory street life unless one begins to grasp the scale of the problem. And nowhere in this 250-page book is this addressed. We never know how many beggars besieged London at any one time, and whether the problem lessened or deepened as the century wore on. Moreover, despite his aversion to numbers, Hitchcock is quite willing to make quantitative statements when it suits him, such as his unsubstantiated contention that "most beggars were Londoners born and bred." (7) This statement really requires hard evidence, for the data collected by the Mendicity Society in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars suggests that native Londoners comprised only 20 per cent of the beggars in the metropolis.⁵ A further 30–40% came from other parts of England, and 25–33% from Ireland.

The problem with Hitchcock's impressionistic approach emerges early on, in his one brief foray into counting. Here he establishes that the majority of poor people in need in the metropolis were women, not men. He recognizes this fact, and notes that women used the institutional agencies of welfare more than men, who were more able to survive on the street. (5–7) But there is no systematic analysis of why and in what circumstances women were forced on the streets, or had to apply for relief from the parish authorities. This is inadequate. There are plenty of parish examinations that disclose the predicaments that poor women faced, and, because the main import of these examinations was to establish entitlements to relief, much circumstantial evidence emerges about work records, labour mobility, places of origin, and dates of marriage or cohabitation. There is also a good run of vagrancy examinations that could be exploited to the same effect. These records would show that the men arrested for vagrancy were often 50 years of age or over; they included veteran servicemen, broken-down tradesmen and artisans, and men who had always eked out a living by casual labour. The women, by contrast, were more evenly distributed by age, revealing that female vagrancy was often the product of limited employment opportunities, of women's economic dependence on men, and of demographic circumstances that might place unbearable strains upon a family in a harsh and perhaps unfamiliar urban environment. Instructively, a significant proportion of the women found begging on the streets or apply-

5. The evidence can be found in the annual reports of the Mendicity Society. For 1818, 1819, and 1821 the figures for London-born beggars are 21.9%, 18.2%, and 20.2%. The numbers interviewed were 3284, 4682, and 2339. Hitchcock offers some figures in a previous essay of 49% Londoners, but for the City of London only in the years 1738–1742. He doesn't disclose the size of his "sample." See Tim Hitchcock, "The Publicity of Poverty in Early Eighteenth-Century London," in J. F. Merritt, ed., *Imagining Early Modern London* (Cambridge, 2001), 178–9.

ing for parish welfare in wartime were deserted wives with children, whose male partners had escaped family responsibilities for the relative anonymity of the armed forces.⁶ Sometimes they were forced on the streets in a matter of months after the disappearance of male earners, especially if they had small children and babies to care for.

Hitchcock is aware of these issues, or at least he lists articles in his bibliography that address them. But he does not follow them up, perhaps because they detract from his campaign to restore agency to the poor. The result is that he presents us with a very skewed view of the homeless and destitute in London, and one that does not really get to grips with either the relationship of destitution to war or to the precarious labour markets in London. As a historian of sexuality,⁷ Hitchcock is a little better on the question of poverty and prostitution, although we really need to know more about the circumstances that pushed young women into prostitution, and how far the trade drew in vulnerable female strangers in town rather than London women who already inhabited criminal sub-cultures. Yet once again Hitchcock passes up an opportunity to explore the relationship between sex and destitution in the shape of the female servant, despite the fact that he has written one brief article on the subject of vulnerable women and pregnancy in the parish of St Luke Chelsea.⁸ It is a pity Hitchcock did not develop this topic further, for his essay contains some well-constructed narratives of how abandoned women and their children fared in this particular parish.

Similarly, the petitions of the Foundling Hospital offer some very insightful evidence of the circumstances in which young female servants were seduced and abandoned upon pregnancy, and the limited resources that they could muster at their disposal. Like Natalie Davis' pardoners, they allow us to look at the terms in which servants constructed their tragic narratives and negotiated the shoals of respectability on which the governors of the Foundling set so much store before they would admit unwanted orphans.⁹ Thus Mary Griffiths, a servant from Soho, who claimed she was seduced by a young man "upon promise of marriage," assured the governors of the Foundling Hospital that

6. See D.A. Kent, "'Gone for a Soldier': Family Breakdown and the Demography of Desertion in a London Parish, 1750–1791," *Local Population Studies*, 45 (Autumn 1990), 27–42; Nicholas Rogers, "Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century London: The Vagrancy Laws and their Administration," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, 24, 47 (May 1991), 127–147.

7. Tim Hitchcock, *English Sexualities 1700–1800* (London, 1997). Chapter 7 deals with prostitution.

8. Tim Hitchcock, "'Unlawfully Begotten on her Body': Illegitimacy and the Parish Poor in St Luke's Chelsea," in Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe, eds., *Chronicling Poverty. The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (London 1997), 70–87.

9. Natalie Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford 1987); on servants petitioning the Foundling, see Adrian Wilson, "Illegitimacy and Its Implications in Mid-Eighteenth Century London," *Continuity and Change*, 4/1 (1989), 103–64.

despite her moral relapse and pregnancy, she had a "character...in every other respect irreproachable" and would be able to procure a new position if she could "be relieved of the expense of maintaining the child." She had an apothecary in Cavendish Square back up her story and intent.¹⁰ Given Hitchcock's interest in the self-presentation of the unfortunate, one would have thought this source essential; but it is inexplicably ignored.

The failure to use the Foundling Hospital records to reveal how out-of-place female servants negotiated one of London's new charities points to another lacuna in Hitchcock's book: the absence of any sustained discussion of how shifts in social policy may have affected the administration of the migratory poor. Unlike Donna Andrew, who was interested in seeing how shifts from traditional alms-giving to neo-mercantilism to political economy affected attitudes to charity and, indeed, the popularity of some philanthropic ventures,¹¹ Hitchcock presents an unchanging picture of beggars successfully working the network of relief facilities available to them. He believes, moreover, that the system of parochial and private relief was "extensive, expensive and remarkably comprehensive;" in a phrase, responsive to the needs of the destitute. (132, 179) In a previous essay he even stated that the 18th-century system of welfare offered more social provision for the really destitute than the modern welfare state.¹² All of these statements are highly contentious and offered without supporting evidence. How would Hitchcock account for the fact that the Foundling Hospital rejected many applications? Or that some Lying-In hospitals required proof that expectant mothers were married? Or that watchhouses could be inhospitable hell-holes to those who could not afford the price of a drink? Or that infants left in institutional care had a two in three chance of dying there or in the care of some unscrupulous wet-nurse, and those that survived were separated from parents and sometimes sent to northern factories as indentured apprentices to quite merciless masters?¹³ As Hitchcock himself noted in his essay, if you were poor there was not much chance of being a single mother in eighteenth-century London.¹⁴ Indeed,

10. Metropolitan London Archives, Foundling Hospital applications, 1770–1771, A/FH/A8/1/1/2, no. 16675, 5 Dec. 1770.

11. Donna Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police. London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton 1989).

12. Hitchcock, "Unlawfully Begotten on Her Body," 77.

13. On infant mortality in care, see Ruth McClure, *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (London 1981), appendix 3, and Hitchcock, "Unlawfully Begotten on Her Body," 77; for factory apprentices, see Mary B. Rose, "Social Policy and Business; Parish Apprenticeship and the Early Factory System, 1750–1834," *Business History*, 31,4 (1989), 5–32. On watchhouses, see M.Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1966), 291; Mrs. Bennett, *Juvenile Indiscretions*, 2 vols. (Dublin 1786), ch. 31; *The Midnight Rambler, or Nocturnal Spy* (London 1772), 65–71.

14. Hitchcock, "Unlawfully Begotten on Her Body," 77–78.

London's welfare agencies were sometimes accomplices to a policy of killing the kid to save the servant.

Despite Hitchcock's claims to the contrary, the authorities were far from welcoming to the roving poor. The City of London developed a policy of driving vagrants from their precincts into the poorer areas to the west and east. The county of Middlesex, dissatisfied with the ways in which the different parishes shirked responsibility for handling the homeless migrant, sent many to short terms of hard labour in a house of correction and hired contractors to ship the rest out of the county.¹⁵ Some of these may well have drifted back, but one gets the impression vagrants were often driven from pillar to post amid the particularism of London's services, and only begrudgingly given casual relief. Indeed, the very high levels of child and typhus-ridden mortality in London, higher than in other urban centres, suggest that homelessness had its fatal downside. As Fielding once remarked, and as a Bow Street magistrate he was in a position to know, the poor "starve, and freeze, and rot among themselves" even if they "beg and steal and rob among their Betters."¹⁶

Certainly a case can be made that the swarms of beggarly poor imposed themselves on the parish, and that the general fear of epidemic contagion (something that Hitchcock ignores) forced concessions from niggardly officials. Fielding's social pamphlets could be read in this light. But rather than read this as a success story, as Hitchcock does, it would be important to set it within the contentious terrain of social policy. For there is substantial evidence that Londoners tired of indiscriminate charity. In the 1740s there was a significant shift away from the conventions of Christian stewardship which obligated the propertied to subsidize the poor to a notion that charity was personal and a matter of choice. By the 1770s charity was increasingly considered useless unless it fostered self-reliance and independence, an attitude that inevitably struck hard at the roving poor.¹⁷ In fact, there were calls to fine parishes that tolerated casual begging, and demands that the migratory poor be policed more intensively so that the idle and profligate could be distinguished from the deserving. These calls for a stricter policing of vagrants, voiced by Henry Fielding in the 1750s and Jonas Hanway twenty years later, may not have been heeded immediately. Hanway's solution, in fact, called for a significant redistribution of resources from luxury-living residents to resolve the problem of itinerant poverty. It probably induced London's wealthy to continue to salve their consciences with casual handouts and to endorse the policies of occasional relief from local parishes.¹⁸ But the dramatic increase in Poor

15. Rogers, "Policing the Poor," 130–131.

16. Henry Fielding, *A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor* (London 1753), 10; for London's demography, see John Landers, *Death and the Metropolis. Studies in the Demographic History of London 1670–1830* (Cambridge 1993).

17. See Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, passim.

18. Fielding, *A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision*; Jonas Hanway, *The Defects of*

Law expenditures, which rose threefold in the period 1770–1820 amid higher prices and heavier taxes on consumer goods, eventually eroded confidence in discretionary welfare regimes; and one suspects that the longer hours worked by ordinary Londoners made them less sympathetic to those who pressed them for charity, especially if they looked as though they were work-shy. By the turn of the century, there was a greater statutory and administrative vigilance towards the roving poor and a growing inclination to incarcerate vagrants or whip them if they were male.¹⁹ This tougher stance against vagrancy is ignored by Hitchcock, who paints an unchanging picture of charitable relief over the century, sustained by a strong tradition of charitable doles on festive occasions, despite the fact that there is evidence that such seasonal handouts became more commercialized and selective over time.²⁰ The result is a romanticized vision of what it meant to sleep rough in London and a benign view of how the authorities responded to the casualties of London's constant in-migration.

Robert Shoemaker's book on violence and disorder in London offers a different methodological approach to studying London history. Whereas Hitchcock constructs mini-narratives of the poor and offers a textured impressionistic portrait of what it meant to sleep rough in the metropolis, Shoemaker is a serial historian interested in trends over time. Essentially Shoemaker charts the decline of popular violence and insult in London over the course of the 18th century, the gradual elimination of shaming punishments such as the pillory and the stocks, and the famed procession to Tyburn. He also assesses the disposition of Londoners to use legal instruments to resolve conflicts rather than defamation and fisticuffs, believing that they became less enthusiastic over time. Despite this, the overall picture is one of the march of civility, of sharper boundaries between public and private life, of the decline in the importance of neighbourhood reputations, and of the sublimation of violence into spectator sport or more ritualized and less lethal duels. As far as crowds are concerned, and the book is a little misleadingly entitled *The London Mob*, Shoemaker sees an overall decline in riot and crowd assemblies, whether that meant hue and cries after street criminals, festive crowds, or rioting ones. "The mob, which had become a significant feature on metropolitan streets only a century earlier," writes Shoemaker, "had lost its central place in London public life." (152)

Shoemaker offers an important corrective to the sort of riotous London that was portrayed in George Rudé's *Hanoverian London*, which concentrated on

Police, the Cause of Immorality (London 1775).

19. Rogers, "Policing the Poor," 142–147. On longer hours, see Hans-Joachim Voth, *Time and Work in England 1750–1830* (Oxford 2000). This study is primarily based on the Old Bailey Proceedings (before it was digitalized) and is therefore accented towards London.

20. Charles Phythian-Adams, "Milk and Soot: The Changing Vocabulary of a Popular Ritual in Stuart and Hanoverian London," in Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe, eds., *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London 1983).

the purely political riots that punctuated the metropolis to the exclusion of festive crowds or those that gathered in smaller settings to duck deviants, or to arbitrate street and marketplace disputes. Using different sources, principally the recognizances found in the Middlesex sessional rolls, Shoemaker is able to get closer to the pulse of street life in the metropolis. At the same time, there is a downside to such an analysis, a tendency to homogenize or flatten "riot" in ways that are not always very helpful. If one is interested in the interface between society and politics, and Shoemaker is not particularly so inclined, then one needs to consider which riots or demonstrations have a real discursive charge, which offer a compelling notion of public opinion, or in contemporary parlance, a "sense of the people," to which politicians had to come to terms. The perspective is important, if like Rudé, one is interested in implicit comparisons between capital cities and in what circumstances popular insurgencies could topple regimes and contribute to revolutionary movements; as in Paris but not in London. Shoemaker ignores this angle. Even on the most dramatic riot in London's history, the so-called Gordon riots of 1780 when the mob ruled the streets for almost a week, he doesn't offer much political context about either anti-Catholicism or the disaffections that flowed out of the American war. Nor does he say much about what Elias Canetti and others would call "reversal crowds," the tendency of crowds to spill out and use their momentary advantage in an unpoliced society to move beyond their original objectives, to square accounts with the rich or simply the unpopular. In the case of the Gordon riots, there has been a lot of discussion about the insurrectionary intent of rioters who broke into jails, smashed toll-gates, and threatened the Bank of England. Whiffs of these issues can be found in Hitchcock and Shoemaker's latest book, *Tales of the Hanging Court*, but here Shoemaker sticks strictly to his script: the decline of crowd action over time and the introduction of new political spaces, the platform, and the association, to replace them. The Gordon riots are really only of interest to Shoemaker as the last major episode of crowd action, and one which was a watershed in the transition to more peaceable forms of protest.

Shoemaker's treatment of the Gordon riots underscores one of the problems with the book: its obsessive linearity. Historians are in the business of change, but the constant quest for long-term trends can pose problems. Unfortunately Shoemaker's own longitudinal series prevent him from looking at fluctuations in levels of violence. His sample of recognizances from the Middlesex quarter sessions, a sample that drives his analysis of public insult and violence in London, is based on one session per year, examined every other year. It is always a summer session, and consequently makes no allowances for seasonal fluctuations in contentious street life. Moreover the figures, like those designed for statistical forays on the Old Bailey website, are always bunched by decade. This research design causes problems.

It does so because Britain was at war one in every two years during the long 18th century (1690–1815), two in every three from 1740 onwards, and wars

do not fall neatly by decade. As the largest city and port, London was always at the centre of war-time recruiting, and in the aftermath of wars sailors ventured there by the thousands to pick up pay and prize money. Historians have long asserted that the rhythms of war and peace had an important impact on levels of crime and violence and indeed precipitated moral panics about social disorder.²¹ Shoemaker is aware of this literature, and once edited a book that addressed these issues. But he doesn't address them here although they are crucially important to his topic. In the aftermath of the War of Austrian Succession, for example, that is from 1749 to 1752, indictments for theft, theft with violence, highway robbery and homicides (excluding infanticide) at the Old Bailey all rose quite dramatically, and as far as one can tell from extant sources, much of the increase can be attributed to demobilized servicemen. Moreover, judging from the very recognizances that Shoemaker uses, the homecoming of many young men seems also to have had an impact on everyday street violence, for there is a noticeable rise in the proportion of street assaults perpetrated by men upon men in the years 1749–1750.²²

Perhaps the most striking instance of how war might have an impact upon levels of violence occurs in the context of press-gang affrays. London was the major recruiting centre for the navy throughout the 18th century and over 10 press gangs were involved in picking up homecoming and straggling seamen. In the newspapers there are routine reports of the gangs sweeping the Thames for men, sometimes picking up 2–300 at a time. Many of these drives were confrontational. According to my own tally, there were over 170 significant affrays in London during the years 1738–1805, in a third of which men were killed or badly wounded.²³ Little of this registers in Shoemaker's book for which there are only three references to press-gang affrays. Partly this has to do with the sources Shoemaker uses, for the press-gang casualties rarely turn up in the Old Bailey Proceedings despite the fact that witnesses often claimed that press-gang violence was a troublesome problem. But partly it has to do with Shoemaker's angle of vision, in which long-term trends blot out significant short-term variations.

Shoemaker's longitudinal analysis also leaves a number of questions unanswered. On the question of the decline of violence, for example, he has some

21. J.M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England 1660–1800* (Princeton 1986), 213–45; Douglas Hay, "War, Dearth and Theft in the Eighteenth Century: the Record of the English Courts," *Past and Present*, 45 (May 1982), 117–60; Nicholas Rogers, "Confronting the Crime Wave: The Debate over Social Reform and Regulation, 1749–1753," in L. Davison, T. Hitchcock, T. Keirn and R.B. Shoemaker, eds., *Stilling the Grumbling Hive. The Response to Social and Economic Problems in England 1689–1750* (Stroud 1992), 77–98.

22. This observation is based on a search of the Middlesex sessions rolls for 1746–47 and 1749–50, Metropolitan London Archives, MJ/SR 2857, 2858, 2867, 2879, 2920, 2942, 2947, 2948.

23. See my forthcoming book, *The Press Gang. Naval Impressment and Its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London 2008).

useful things to say about the fall in homicide rates and the kinds of homicide that declined, specifically deaths resulting from resistance to the law and those involving an explicit defence of male honour. He also shows that an increasing number of bystanders attempted to intervene in violent disputes, drawing his evidence on these matters from the Old Bailey proceedings. The trends he attempts to establish from the recognizances of the sessions rolls are more problematic. The source, to begin with, is trickier to interpret, since the alleged offences recorded in the recognizance depend in some measure upon the whim of the justice or his clerk, and some are decidedly ambiguous to interpret. In March 1746, for example, Ann Jones was ordered to appear in court to answer the complaint of Jane Sears for "attacking her in a furious outrageous manner in the street, insulting and grossly abusing her, raising a mob and tumult about her."²⁴ How is this to be counted? As a riot? As a public insult? As both? Readers may think this an arcane matter, but when one is attempting to establish definitive trends on small samples they can crucially affect the figures.

The thinness of Shoemaker's sample emerges in his conclusions on female violence. He has some insightful things to say about the kinds of weaponless violence with which women were involved. Women tended to bite, scratch, tear clothes, throw dirt and offal, or beat with their fists; they did not normally use pokers, canes, or knives to attack their victims, nor like Joseph Day, a gentleman in Long Acre, just off the Strand, level a gun at his opponent "flashing the powder in the pan and putting him in fear of his life."²⁵ But his assertion that "female violence was much less common" (169) is contestable, at least at the level of non-fatal offences. Using the same source but a slightly different jurisdiction (Westminster) Jennine Hurl-Eamon has found suprisingly high levels of female assault.²⁶ So, too, have I using the Middlesex series used by Shoemaker. In four of the six sessions I investigated between 1746 and 1750, women accounted for 40 per cent or more of all the recorded assaults, in one case over 50 per cent, and these attacks were not simply women on women. In a third of all cases, women assaulted men and were called to account for it. Clearly we can no longer use the old adage that women abused with their mouths and men with their fists. We need to rethink the gendered dimensions of street violence.

One of the themes that really does need investigating is the geographical dimension of street violence. Which streets? Which neighbourhoods? Are there troublespots that come up time and time again? One gets the impres-

24. Metropolitan London Archives, MJ/SR 2857, rec. 189.

25. MJ/SR 2857, rec. 149.

26. Jennine Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence in London 1680–1720* (Columbus, Ohio 2005).

sion, and John Beattie noticed this in his recent book,²⁷ that the policing of eighteenth-century London was partial, that the better-off, better-illuminated, and commercial streets were the ones that the watch policed most successfully, leaving the little alleys, passages, and courtyards off the main thoroughfares, particularly the "Alsatias" or "rookeries" of London, as potential zones of violence. Certainly there was a renewed concern with "lawless" rookeries in the early 19th century, in which broils, thefts, and dog-fights were common. Anticipating *Oliver Twist*, there was something of a panic about juvenile delinquency breeding a new generation of recidivists.²⁸ None of this literature squares with Shoemaker's contention that public violence declined in 18th-century London. Quite apart from his very dubious decision to exclude pub and tavern violence, whether physical or verbal, from "public" disputes, there is the nagging question of which outdoor spaces we are discussing. Everywhere? On the main streets? In a previous essay Shoemaker does concede that private quarrels may well have continued in the smaller yards, alleys, and courts,²⁹ but these critical qualifications disappear from the book. Here neatness is the name of the game.

Neatness may be attractive to a small high-street press like Hambledon and London, and clearly this book was intended for both general and academic readers. But neatness also has its problems. Shoemaker offers a socio-cultural explanation for the trends he detects. He wants to see the decline of street contention as linked to gender identity, with the rise of politeness, with new forms of masculinity and femininity and new aspirations towards privacy and individuality influencing the demise. In a sense Shoemaker wants to relate the shifting tempo of London streets to broad changes in sentiment and religion associated with the Enlightenment, Evangelicalism, and the cult of sensibility, although he balks at stock concepts like the "civilizing process" despite the fact that Norbert Elias' work could be adapted to the eighteenth century context.³⁰ This broad explanation works reasonably well for the elite and middling classes of the metropolis, but it falters for the bulk of the London working population for whom politeness and new definitions of privacy were not necessarily compelling or attainable goals. Despite the fact that Shoemaker wants to stress

27. J.M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660–1750* (Oxford 2001), 206–207.

28. Heather Shore, "Mean Streets. Criminality, Immorality and the Street in Early Nineteenth-Century London," in Tim Hitchcock and Heather Shore, eds. *The Streets of London* (London 2003), 151–164.

29. Robert B. Shoemaker, "Public Spaces, Private Disputes? Fights and Insults on London's Streets, 1660–1800," in *The Streets of London*, 66.

30. Elias did argue that the middle class had a role in the civilizing process; he did not assign it all to changing manners among court elites. He also argued that the "compulsions arising directly from the threat of weapons and physical force" gradually diminished with the growth of self-control. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York 1978), 48–9, 186.

that “all social classes contributed to the decline of public conflict” (295) he doesn’t come up with any viable “bottom-up” explanations as to why this was the case. Gestures towards the decline of neighbourhood and its consequent effect upon public reputations remain gestures. To make the case a richer social geography of London is required.

One of the problems that is not addressed flows from his figures. Charts 2 and 3, which record the recognizances for defamation and riot over time, show a really precipitous decline in the 1750s. Why is this? Shoemaker doesn’t offer a solution, and there is a real disjunction between the tempo of decline and the broad socio-cultural explanations he offers for them. Perhaps the rapid decline of recognizances for riot and defamation has to do with the growing concern with trading justices cashing in on other people’s misfortunes through court fees; perhaps more business and conflict-resolution is done in petty sessions, short-circuiting the paper trail of complaint. Perhaps the long-term changes in the watch and street lighting charted by John Beattie and Elaine Reynolds³¹ were beginning to bite, making people warier about quarrelling on the street. If any of these conjectures hold, then it is clear that institutional changes in London’s policing and law enforcement, broadly defined, had some impact on the transformation. Shoemaker opts for a trendier explanation related to notions of self and gender identity, but he cannot exactly pin it down.

On the third book under review, Clive Bloom’s *Violent London*, not a lot needs to be said. The study is pretentious and superficial. Bloom, a professor emeritus of English and American Studies at Middlesex University, now offering courses on critical studies in NYU’s London program, somehow believes that the history of London as a site of opposition politics and insurrection has never been written. Blithely ignoring much of the work that has been done on London’s insurrectional past since the 1960s, he embarks on this “hidden” history of over 2000 years, beginning with Boadicea (or Boudicca as she is now fashionably known) and ending with Britain’s response to 9/11. Bloom clearly has a keen interest in Britain’s first warrior queen, but in this selective romp through London’s history, there is a lot of flash and anecdote, but not much substance. The book is loosely organized around a number of major themes – racism, religious bigotry, republicanism and parliamentary reform – but very loosely. Essentially the book is really mapped out chronologically, and it moves fast, hopping from Boadicea (AD 60) to the Peasants’ Revolt (1381) to the Gunpowder Plot (1605) in a mere 50 pages. On the last episode, Bloom does offer some domestic and international context as to why Catholicism was seen as a threat to the Tudor and emergent English identity, but he misses the opportunity to talk about the regime’s “counter-insurgent” apparatus, a theme one would think important for a book ending with the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In actual fact the government’s spy network had Guido Fawkes

31. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment*, ch. 4; Elaine A. Reynolds, *Before the Bobbies. The Night Watch and Police Reform in Metropolitan London, 1720–1830* (London 1998), chapters 3 and 4.

on file, but never discovered his participation in the plot to incinerate leading parliamentarians and the royals until he confessed under torture after its discovery. He was allowed to operate as the servant of Thomas Percy, a kinsman of the northern baron, the Earl of Northumberland, who had been involved in Catholic intrigues and rebellions before. Equally alarming, the government allowed Percy, one of the main conspirators, to rent a cellar right under the Lords chamber, and seemingly took no notice of the thousands of pounds of explosives brought there by the easy river route, until it was tipped off by Lord Monteagle, a former Catholic turned Protestant, whose secretary also happened to be one of the chief conspirators. After all these security lapses, one can see why the discovery of the plot was considered providential.

Bloom isn't interested in counter-insurgency, although it would have been an interesting theme to have developed through telling examples. Nor is he interested in how London's development as a site of government *and* commerce created the sorts of spaces where new ideas about political rights and discussion might emerge. As a cultural critic, one might have thought this a pertinent and intriguing theme to explore. But no, Bloom ignores virtually everything that has been written about the clubs and coffee houses, the press, the Habermasian "public sphere," the development of new forms of political association in the eighteenth century, the transformations in communicative practices that have been brilliantly traced by historians such as Judy Walkowitz and Jonathan Schneer for imperial London.³² He just races on, trying to find an "Irish connection" between Guy Fawkes and the IRA,³³ and some sort of lefty connection between the British Communist Party and Ken Livingstone (the latter discussed, or perhaps more accurately, linked chronologically in 15 pages). For Wilkes and Gordon, he ignores Rudé's major works; for the 1790s and beyond, Barrell, Epstein, McCalman, and Thompson.³⁴ The Queen Caroline affair, one of the most spectacular popular mobilizations of the 19th century, is ignored completely. One could go on, but by now I think readers will get the message.

The most satisfying chapters are those that deal with the mobilization of prejudice, whether anti-Catholicism or racism. As an author of books on Gothic horror and Stephen King, he does capture the pathology of right-wing

32. Judy Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago 1992); Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven and London 1999).

33. This effort to find a link emerges clearly in Bloom's interview with Andrew Stevens in *3A.M. Magazine*. See www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/oct/interview_clive_bloom.html

34. John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide* (Oxford 2000); James Epstein, *Radical Expression. Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (New York 1994); Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld, Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge 1988); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968).

social movements such as British fascism and the National Front, and says some interesting things about their operations in London. But the lack of any conceptual clarity to the themes that are broached – what is alternative London? what modes of political activism tended to prevail in London and for what reasons? – makes it a rambling disappointing book. Bloom should stick to pulp fiction, because writing history is clearly not his forte.

One just hopes that Pan MacMillan will not be tempted to get Bloom to add an afterword in the wake of the bombings of 2005. One can just see some publisher salivating at the prospect of cashing in on violent London. Bloom's book suggests that publishers are currently convinced that London's histories do sell, provided of course they are served up a little sensationally and made "relevant." Hitchcock and Shoemaker avoided that tendency in the two books reviewed here, although in attempting to make their books accessible to a general audience there are signs that they did "dumb-down" a little. This is clearer in their new co-authored production, *Tales from the Hanging Court*, where some of the pacy narratives are glossed and even inaccurate.

Let me give two examples from chapter 2, "Crimes of Blood." In this chapter Hitchcock and Shoemaker chose two noteworthy episodes from the aftermath of the war of Austrian Succession: the bawdy-house riots of July 1749 and the duel between Captains Clark and Innes, two naval officers in March 1750, when Clark, using a longer and rifled pistol, killed Innes and was indicted for murder at the Old Bailey. In the former Hitchcock and Shoemaker give the details of the actual riots with reasonable accuracy but they overlook the two critical pieces of information which could have allowed them to thicken their narrative in instructive ways. The first concerns the debate which followed the execution of one of the two men indicted for the riot, Bosavern Penlez. The pamphlet which openly questioned the execution of this young wigmaker was written by none other than John Cleland, still in hot water with the authorities for writing his pornographic novel, *Memoirs of a Lady of Pleasure*.³⁵ Reading this work against the pamphlet, which indicts prostitutes for diseasing the youth of the nation, is a wonderful example of how writers could happily pen contrasting perspectives on the sex trade, or, if you will, the degree to which the *Memoirs*, aka *Fanny Hill*, is a constructed fantasy. Either way, Cleland's intervention in this affair would have enabled Hitchcock and Shoemaker to say a little more on contemporary attitudes towards prostitution and brothels.

The second piece of information that Hitchcock and Shoemaker ignore is rather closer to their well-funded research project. It concerns Henry Fielding's defence of the government's decision to hang Penlez,³⁶ and the quite laboured

35. John Cleland, *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ed. Peter Wagner (London 1985), 13. Cleland's pamphlet was [A Gentleman Not Concern'd], *The Case of the Unfortunate Bosavern Penlez* (London 1749).

36. Henry Fielding, *A True State of the Case of Bosavern Penlez* (London 1749). Both Cleland and Fielding's pamphlets were published in November 1749.

point in his pamphlet that Penlez could have been hanged for theft, had he not been indicted under the unpopular Riot Act. What Fielding chose *not* to disclose, and what our duo overlook, is that fact that the young man who was reprieved, John Wilson, could also have been indicted for a property theft that would have sent him to the gallows, a silk petticoat worth 40 shillings.³⁷ This discovery places Fielding's pamphlet in a very partisan light, compromising efforts by literary scholars to defend his position on this matter.

On the duel between Clark and Innes, Hitchcock and Shoemaker's narrative begins vaguely. It notes that the duel flowed out of disagreements among naval officers over the conduct of a battle off Cuba; it does not note that some of the frustrations that flowed from this encounter stemmed from the fact that the battle, on 1 October 1748 off Havana, was technically conducted after the signing of the peace, although the combatants did not know it at the time. This meant that Knowles and company did not get the prizes they hoped for, including the Spanish ship, the *Conquestador*. The issue is of some importance to the subsequent dispute between Admiral Knowles and Captain Thomas Innes [not Clark as the *Tales* narrative states] because Knowles accused Innes of failing to pursue the *Conquestador* in a vigorous fashion, and basically insinuated that Innes, among others, was cowardly in the exercise of his duties. This led Innes and three other officers to demand courts martials to clear their names, and to retaliate by court martialling the admiral for not forming a firm line in battle.³⁸ The duel between Clark and Innes came about because Clark gave testimony at Innes's court martial that backed up the admiral's account of what happened. Innes let it be known that he thought Clark a "scoundrel and rascal," and once Clark heard of this, he issued the challenge.

Hitchcock and Shoemaker misrepresent the allegiances of the officers, and they do not do enough, once again, to thicken the story. In fact, after the duel, the king put all of the naval officers involved in this factional dispute under house arrest and waited for tempers to cool before he reprieved Clark. Moreover, Hitchcock and Shoemaker do not seem to appreciate the extent to which this story hit the news. The *Derby Mercury*, for example, ran an account of the trial at the Old Bailey that took up half an issue, while *Old England* published a comment on duelling, which, while sympathising with Clark for the way in which his reputation had been sullied, also recommended that duellists should be dispossessed of their property, that the crown should not have the power to pardon such men, and that duellists should not hold office.³⁹ If that recommendation had passed, then Britain would have either lost two prime

37. LMA, Middlesex sessions, SR 2924, indictment 79.

38. In addition to the printed material cited by Hitchcock and Shoemaker, see the Ms. courts martial. The National Archives, Adm 1/5293, especially that of Captain Thomas Innes on 12–16 Feb. 1750.

39. *Derby Mercury*, 8–15 June 1750; *Old England*, 12 May 1750, reprinted in the *Bath Journal*, 21 May 1750.

ministers (Pitt the Younger and Wellington) or it would have avoided the anxiety of seeing them take up pistols to defend their honour.

The problem with *Tales from the Hanging Court* is that it lets the Old Bailey Proceedings do too much of the talking; it makes the digital imperial; it doesn't follow all the possible leads in the stories that could make them interesting. If the evidence of these two cases is any criterion, the book falls short of producing satisfying and comprehensive microhistories. Is this a publicity venture for the Old Bailey project? Is it a quickie, a prerequisite for the next big grant? Like Tony Blair, Hitchcock and Shoemaker are masters of spin. It is a pity there isn't a bit more substance.