**London: City of Cities**. By PHIL BAKER. Pp. 280 + 108 illustrations. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. £14.95. ISBN 978-1-78914-218-1. Hardback.

*London: City of Cities*. The title sounds like a boast. A claim that London is the definitive, the superlative city. Many Londoners would agree. But the title, as Phil Baker explains, is in fact a gesture towards the multiplicity of London. It is a city made up of cities: a kaleidoscope in which London becomes *Londons*, and different versions of the capital jostle against each other, displacing, erasing, morphing into each other. It is this city, a city that exists as much in the mind as in physical reality, that Baker seeks to describe.

*London: City of Cities* is part of Reaktion’s Cityscopes, a series that offers an ‘overview of a city’s past as well as a focused eye on its present’ (2), and that occupies the generic intersection between history and travel. This hybridity is reflected in the format. The book is comprised of an ambitious history that runs from Roman origins through to the present day; a series of short and lively travel essays that reflect on parks, pubs, museums, graveyards and the heritage industry; and lists of recommendations for restaurants, shops and galleries – the ‘hidden gems’ of London. This variety of materials and styles is undoubtedly one of the book’s strongest elements, and Baker handles the transition between them with dexterity. His writing has pace, punch, intelligence and humour – it carries the reader through his spirited narrative of the city, and it does this effortlessly.

Writing a complete history of London in 160 pages is a considerable challenge, especially when those pages are crowded with lavish illustrations that eat into the word count. But Baker does not disappoint, and there will be something for the scholar and the aficionado as well as the newcomer who is feeling out the city for the first time. The story he weaves is luminous, packed with curious etymologies and salient details, and enlivened by the voices of literary London: Jonson and Boswell, Dickens and Gissing, Orwell and Graham Greene – these and many more throng the pages, forming an expressive (if decidedly masculine) chorus. The book is also filled with pleasing anecdotes. My personal favourites include an anarchist shootout in Sidney Street; a necropolitan railway running from Waterloo to Brookwood Cemetery (one-way tickets for the deceased); and a Victorian time capsule containing newspapers, razors, coins and photographs buried beneath the base of Cleopatra’s Needle. Who knew?

But despite Baker’s evident affection for the city, his narrative takes a darker turn when he reaches the twenty-first century. In his version of events, the vibrant and authentic culture of London, a great reef-like structure that has taken hundreds of years to form, has recently come under sustained pressure, and now faces collapse. ‘The character of London is being erased’, he tells us, ‘Time was up for the Routemaster bus and the Protein Man of Oxford Street, but small shops, pubs, old-style cafes and second-hand booksellers have also been disappearing at a disastrous rate’ (160). And later: ‘the effect of unchecked modern building is an erasure of character, leading to the wastelands along Euston Road and Victoria Street which could be almost anywhere’ (176).

Such melancholy sentiments, which will be familiar to readers of Iain Sinclair, should be handled with caution. Nostalgia and reminiscence have long been quintessential to London writing. In *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), arguably the first London novel, Daniel Defoe described a city – a twisted patchwork of courts, lanes and alleys – that no longer existed: it had been burned down by the Great Fire of 1666, and had been largely rebuilt and greatly expanded by the early eighteenth century. Charles Dickens, too, although now synonymous with Victorian London, routinely set his novels in the pre-railway era of Georgian England. And Virginia Woolf, writing in the 1930s, bemoaned the loss of the nineteenth-century city. In her essay ‘The Docks of London’, she noted the incongruous sight of ‘an inn with swelling bow windows’ standing on the shoreline of the River Thames: ‘Now pleasure has gone and labour has come; and it stands derelict like some beauty in her midnight finery looking out over mud flats and candle works’, she wrote.

With its narrative of decay, and its revelry in a fading, perhaps forgotten city, Baker’s history-cum-travelogue seems to belong as much to this literary tradition as to the ranks of metropolitan guides and history books. While remaining true to the historical record, one of the great strengths of the book is its sensitivity to London’s cultural fecundity and its capacity to inspire different versions of itself, sometimes simultaneously. Those in search of the ‘authentic’ city might be half a century too late, as Baker suggests, but its imaginative legacy is still very much alive. And the city of the mind is just as eccentric and curious and enjoyable as ever.

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