



London: A Social History

Roy Porter

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This is a one-volume history of the city of London from Roman times to the late-20th century. London grew from a backwater in the Classical age into an important medieval city, a significant Renaissance urban centre and a modern colossus.

London: A Social History Details

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Elena González says

Bastante detallado aunque... para mi gusto saltaría páginas ;;;pero mi conciencia me lo ha impedido!!!
Completo y objetivo.

Philip Zyg says

After reading Porter's volume on XVIIIth century England, I purchased this one and never regretted it. From the origins to Thatcherism, the book looks at London from various perspectives (personally I skipped the strictly economic one, I hate figures!), always keeping at safe distance from ideologies. Perhaps I would have liked a warmer approach, but it would have been a different book; Porter specialized in the history of medicine and only occasionally took interest in other subjects, so you have to accept his cold, at times "clinical" point of view. A huge load of research went into this volume, nonetheless.

Tessa says

I'm an Anglophile, and I love how Porter structured and wrote this book on London's history. He discusses everything from it's very beginnings to the London of the present.

Frank Stein says

Overall, Roy Porter has some great insights here that are unfortunately marred by excessive, unedifying lists and unnecessary editorializing.

Porter does discover a lot of great quotes about the city from a lot of great writers. Many know of Samuel Johnson's "If you are tired of London you are tired of life," but who knew a mere sight of London from Highgate Hill made James Boswell "all life and joy." Many today also know that pre-modern cities were death-traps that could not even replace their own population through natural births, but I didn't know that as early as 1774 a London physician could claim that "Great cities are like painted sepulchers." Lord Shaftesbury, the pioneering Tory founder of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, claimed that "The strength of the people rest upon the purity and firmness of the domestic system. If the working man has his own house, I have no fear of revolution." 100 years later William Levitt in America would say basically the same thing.

Porter also finds some great quotes by French women commenting on the wonders of London fashion shops and their "great glass windows," behind which, "absolutely everything one can think of is neatly, attractively displayed." This was a shocking experience at the time.

Through these quotes and anecdotes, the classic tools of the social historian, Porter does manage to give a sensation of lived life in London through the ages, but too often he merely goes through endless series of

lists. At one point he spends twenty pages going over every new development in 1600s London (one fun fact, though, while early and modern US suburbs were named after trees, shrubs, and bucolic landscapes, the British showed a propensity for aristocratic family names whose "townhouses" they replaced - "Bloomsbury Square," "Berkeley Square," etc.). At times it seems Porter is almost impelled to write down every new cordage or blacksmith business that starts in a certain neighborhood, but all to what end?

Also, the last part of the book is one extended screed against Thatcherism combined with a lament for the impending death or destruction of London. Porter notes that many other false prophets had predicted the city's collapse before, but he ignores his own history and goes ahead with another jeremiad. Of course, given the success of the city in the 15 years since the book was published (1995), this rant was proven wrong earlier than he could possibly have imagined, making the whole book seem oddly dated.

Melanie says

A well-written history of London, full of details that put the city's growth in a meaningful context.

Laura Jane Thompson says

Only read it because I have to for History

Candy Wood says

Porter's social history of London seems more grounded in facts than Ackroyd's "biography," but that makes it less interesting as general reading. Many chapters turn into long lists: items manufactured or traded, new streets, docks, and suburbs created, names of inner-city areas degenerating into slums. The lack of a coherent central government is a running theme, leading Porter to the conclusion that while "London was always a muddle that worked," it may not be possible to hope that will continue. It's interesting, though, that since 1994 when the book was published, many of the negatives he identifies in "Thatcher's London" have been addressed, or at least are beginning to be--for example, the redevelopment of the King's Cross area that is following after the construction of the British Library and St. Pancras International Station. He's especially good on medical history in the 19th century, much less detailed about London in wartime, a subject amply covered elsewhere.

Emily says

Porter breathes life into London's past effortlessly!

I bought this book when I moved to London to study British History and I picked it up whenever I had a bit of free time.

I love Porter's writing. His style is easy to read, and can be personable and fun! I have also found that I have learned so many random fascinating bits about my favorite city! I may not be able to remember them all, but

I will certainly try!

Towards the end of the book, when Porter was discussing more modern times, it kind of became harder for me to read. Mainly because that's where my own interest in British history isn't as strong. Yet I was still able to learn more than I already knew, and some of it was genuinely interesting information.

I did find it hard to follow some of the long list of statistics Porter has a tendency to write out. He's definitely one for numbers.

The last few chapters became a bit gloomy, as Porter admits himself. Now this book was written in the mid-90s, a time where London had no overarching governance, and a time of genuine hardship in the capital. So it is not hard to understand where Porter's gloom stems from. Sadly, we don't get to hear what Porter would think of everything that's happened since his death in 2002. We don't get to hear his thoughts on the Greater London Authority (granted this began in 2000, a quick google search didn't bring up anything of Porter discussing its creation as a government for London). We also don't get to hear his thoughts on the London Eye, or the resurgence of development in Canary Wharf, or the expansion and changes in the Tube or other public transport since 1994, or even the resurgence in terror attacks in 2005 and 2017. I would also be fascinated to hear his take on Brexit and it's impact on London's economy and its financial businesses.

It is unfortunate that we will never be able to find out his insights on these subjects. Truly a great Londoner and Historian, Porter has written a great tome about London's social history that should be mandatory for anyone with an interest in London and its history!
