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Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION: London's Importance

Between 1550 and 1750, London became Europe's largest city, a world-bestrident economic and cultural center, and the crucible for many of the hallmarks of modern life. This book presents London's history during the period when it rose to global prominence and came to dominate the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the British Isles as never before, nor, it will be argued, since. *London: A Social and Cultural History, 1550–1750* synthesizes recent work in urban history, testimony by contemporary Londoners and tourists, and fictional works in which the city plays a part to trace London's rise, its role as a harbinger of modernity, and the ways in which its inhabitants coped with those achievements. One of those inhabitants, Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), famously said “there is in London all that life can afford.” Indeed, to evoke the full range of Londoners' experience, it is necessary to traverse the whole of the metropolis, from the splendid galleries of Whitehall and St. James's to the damp and sooty alleys and courts of the City outparishes, along the way braving the dangers of plague and fire; witnessing the spectacles of the lord mayor's pageant and the hangings at Tyburn; and taking refreshment in the city's pleasure gardens, coffeehouses, and taverns. Having spent some years making this trek ourselves, the authors trust confidently that, at its end, readers will find themselves, to echo Johnson again, no more tired of London than they are tired of life.

### LONDON'S IMPORTANCE

In 1550, as this book opens London was already the most prominent city in England, containing its principal harbor; its largest concentration of population, wealth, and culture; and its capital, in suburban Westminster.

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[More information](#)

But England, sitting on the periphery of Europe, the military equivalent of Denmark, the economic inferior of Flanders, was not a terribly important country. In fact, it could be argued that London's greatest significance in 1550 was as the funnel through which the ideas and products of other, more powerful European states passed into England. Two centuries later, much had changed. London was still the seat of government and greatest city in England, but England was now the dominant country in the British Isles, a leading player in Europe, and the proprietor of a worldwide empire. Indeed, by the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, the Union Jack flew from Canada to India, and from Gibraltar to Tahiti. London was not only the capital of that empire, but the continent's greatest port, its financial and banking center, and its largest city, inhabited by about 675,000 people. That population had long ago overflowed London's ancient walls. Although many Londoners still lived in the heart of the old City, even more had expanded the metropolis to the west, populating the West End and Westminster, south across the river to Southwark and beyond, and northward to the suburbs of Marylebone, Hoxton, and Islington. Suburban growth and better roads and coaches meant that prosperous Londoners could now have the best of city and country life by commuting, working in London but living in Surrey or Hertfordshire.

Indeed, one of the problems for the historian of early modern London is that it is sometimes difficult to figure out where it ended. Given its commercial reach across the English Channel to Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Lisbon, and the Mediterranean, and the tentacles of trade and government London came to extend across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, one could argue that it never really did end. By 1750 London had surpassed Amsterdam as Europe's financial and banking hub and become the great entrepôt for Europe's most desirable products: sugar and tobacco from the Americas; fabrics, spices, and tea from the Indies. It was a cornucopia of culture anchored by a vibrant commercial theater and concert life and a thriving and relatively free press, to which would soon be added great public institutions like the British Museum and the Royal Academy of Arts. This economic and cultural synergy generated immense real estate and entertainment opportunities, and helped catapult Britain to the front rank of nations. But much of London's commercial wealth depended on the expropriation of foreign lands and the transatlantic sale and exploitation of Africans slaves, the last bitter episode in the greatest forced migration in history. At home, London's voracious prodigality produced massive problems and anxieties: like Los Angeles or Singapore

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

today, London in 1750 was a shock city of palaces and slums, concert halls and gin joints, churches and brothels, possibility and fear.

Clearly, London's growth was neither easy nor inevitable. During the period covered by this book, Londoners endured the usual urban problems of overcrowding and disease, crime and poverty, isolation and alienation. Moreover, they endured two changes of royal dynasty, two revolutions, one successful restoration and one that nearly succeeded; incessant constitutional crises; frequent plots and counterplots; repeated wars and insurrections, some of which (in 1554, 1601, 1642–1643, 1648–49, 1658–1661, 1667, and 1688) were waged in or near London's streets; repeated deadly visitations of plague and an array of other diseases; innumerable fires culminating in the Great Conflagration of 1666; high taxes; repeated reputed crime waves; the Gin Craze of the 1730s; and the world's first major stock market crash, the South Sea Bubble of 1720. Individual Londoners died at alarming rates, yet London itself could not be stopped. It was replenished, rebuilt, and flourished. Londoners rose to ancient challenges like poverty, disease, and crime with proto-modern solutions like the London Foundling Hospital, possibly the world's first incorporated charity, and the Bow-Street Runners, a primitive municipal police force. It was in London that many of the hallmarks of modernity got their start, received their perfection, or were popularized for the Anglophone world, including constitutional monarchy, participatory democracy, modern government finance, an effective civil service, a relatively free press, the first commercial music concerts, the first viable commercial theater since ancient times, novels, newspapers, clubs, insurance, decent street lighting, three-piece suits for men, and on and on. With the possible exception of Amsterdam, no other city on the planet did more to catalyze modernity.

### LONDON'S UNIQUENESS

As should be obvious, London was very different from the small towns and villages its immigrants came from and was therefore not typical of the experience of most Englishmen and women, either in 1550 or 1750.<sup>1</sup> During the early modern period, most people did not live in cities: perhaps only 10% of the English population in 1550, a little over 20% in 1750. Most who did so lived in relatively small cathedral cities, county seats, and market towns like Salisbury, Hampshire; Dorchester, Dorset; or Richmond, Yorkshire. Compared with London, these towns were not really very urban at all: a thousand or so people living in just a few streets

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 LONDON: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY, 1550–1750

---

huddled around a cathedral or market square only a few yards from open fields. The largest cities beyond the capital were Bristol, a western seaport on the River Severn; Norwich, a cloth town in East Anglia; and York, the most important city in the north. All were important regional centers, virtual provincial capitals, but even their populations stood between 8,000 and 12,000 in 1550 – barely one-tenth the size of London. Indeed, by the end of our period, some outlying London parishes would be larger.

Throughout our period, most English men and women lived in rural villages of as many as 500 or as few as 50 inhabitants. In the rugged north and west of England, the settlements tended to be even smaller, consistent with the sheep-farming and forest economies that prevailed there. Even in the more fertile and populous manors of the southeast, where arable farming was practiced, villagers had to pitch in to survive a bad harvest or a harsh winter. Isolated, small, and poor, dominated by the local landlord and clergy, with no choice of religious denomination, these communities tended to be hierarchical and close. The sort of freedom, privacy, and personal space that we moderns expect was unheard of. Rather, people occupied small, flimsy wattle-and-daub or wood-frame thatched houses, packed closely together to keep out cold winter winds. That meant that every member of your family lived his or her life close to each other; every neighbor knew your business, your parents, and therefore your social rank. That would have important implications for your mental and social outlook, or what historians call *mentalité*.

The Church was the early modern institution that attempted most consciously to shape *mentalité*. Physically, the village church was usually its most prominent, and often its only stone, building. It was officially the religious center of the village, because only the state Church, an uneasy mix of Protestant and Catholic practice in 1550, was tolerated before the 1640s. This was where Sunday services were held, holidays (Holy Days) celebrated, and all the important rites of human passage solemnized: birth (baptism), marriage (matrimony), and death (funeral and burial services). The weekly sermon was also the major source of news in the village. Given the importance of religious belief and practice to early modern life, it should come as no surprise that the church was also the social center of the village, its churchyard the site of holiday feasting and church-ales, Sunday and holiday sports, wedding receptions and wakes.

Perhaps the Church's most important function in early modern life was to bolster a concept of order based on a strict, God-ordained hierarchy. When sixteenth-century men and women thought about the universe,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: London's Importance*

5

they assumed that it had been created by God, and that He had arranged it according to a master plan. Physically, they still tended to think of the Ptolemaic universe, with the Earth at the center and the moon, sun, planets, and stars orbiting around it. When considering the inhabitants of that universe, they liked metaphors, such as that of the body politic: the state was like a human body, with the king as the head, the aristocracy as the arms and shoulders, and the tenant farmers and poor as the legs and feet. Other popular metaphors for the English polity included a tree, a ship, a building, and even the strings on a lute. Perhaps the most comprehensive and powerful such metaphor, however, was what later historians have called the Great Chain of Being. In this scheme, God had arranged the universe's creatures in a hierarchy, from top to bottom, as follows: God (who dwelled everywhere); angels (who traversed the heavens, between God and man); man (who dwelled on the Earth); animals (Earth); plants (Earth); and stones (Earth). At the core of the Earth, farthest from God, were the damned souls in hell. Each rank was further subdivided, with those at the top given their supremacy by God: thus medieval theologians had divided angels into nine ranks, beginning with those closest to God, the seraphim. Similarly, the animal hierarchy was headed by the lion, king of the beasts; plants by the mighty oak; and stones by the regal diamond.

So also with Man: the king was at the top of the human chain, the fount of honor, God's personal representative on Earth. He was followed by the titled nobility (dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons), a tiny elite of about 60 families in 1550 that nevertheless owned 5% to 10% of the land. The male head of each noble family sat by right in the House of Lords. The gentry came next, consisting of about 10,000 to 15,000 knights, esquires, and plain gentlemen in 1550. The most prominent sat in the House of Commons, after having been nominated for election by their peers. Thanks to the recent decision of Henry VIII to confiscate and sell monastic estates (1536–1548), this group now owned perhaps one half of the land in England. Land was power in early modern England, and so, despite amounting to less than 1% of the population, this newly expanded gentry joined with the nobility to form England's ruling elite. Moreover, because of their extensive holdings, worked by armies of servants and tenants, they themselves need never do manual labor. Indeed, the ability to *not* work was one of the criteria for gentility in early modern England and formed the most important dividing line between the people who mattered and those who did not. (This would play oddly in London: see later discussion.) Below this level, the yeomanry were substantial farmers

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 LONDON: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY, 1550–1750

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who might do manual labor themselves but employed additional laborers to do the really heavy work on the farm. Husbandmen were small farmers, probably renters from a bigger landowner, who could afford only a handful of servants. Cottagers rented a cottage with no farm attached and were constantly on the edge of subsistence. Laborers had no home of their own; they lived and worked on someone else's farm. During the winter months or in old age, when work was hard to come by or beyond them, they might shade off into the poor, who might or might not have a permanent residence but could not make ends meet.

Each of these ranks was made up of families whose members were themselves ordered by gender and age as follows: father, mother, male children (in birth order), and female children (in birth order). Fathers, like kings, were thought to have been given their authority within the household – their kingdoms – by God. Their wives were considered by the law to be *femes covert*s: they could own no property and make no contracts without their husbands' permission. A substantial householder – say a yeoman farmer in the country or a merchant or tradesman in town – governed not only his wife and children but also live-in servants and possibly apprentices.

Perhaps the aspect of the chain of being most alien to us moderns is that it was not a ladder: because it was God's plan, because everyone was placed in his or her rank by the Supreme Being, because all authority came from Him, it was a grave sin to attack the chain, to disobey your superiors, or even, in theory, to try to rise to another rank. Thus, English society in 1550 valued order, not opportunity; conformity, not originality; community, not individuality. English people were terrified of disorder and chaos, because if hierarchy and order were the hallmarks of God, surely their opposites were those of Satan. Still, when we consider that the top three ranks of the human chain represented less than 1% of the population of England, yet owned perhaps 70% of the land and nearly 100% of the power, we might well ask why the other 99.5% put up with all this? One reason is that the harshest potential effects of inequality were mitigated by two related beliefs: paternalism and deference. Paternalism was the belief, also taught from the pulpit and embodied in royal proclamations and parliamentary statutes, that people placed at the top of the chain had a responsibility to look after those below them. Kings and aristocrats were enjoined to watch paternally, as did God the Father for whom they deputized, over their flocks by providing military protection in time of war, justice in royal and manorial courts, jobs and economic assistance in hard times, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

hospitality at holidays. The mayor, aldermen, and livery companies of London also believed in paternalism, but their ability to fulfill its dictates was increasingly compromised by the sheer magnitude of London and its problems. In return, people in the lower ranks of the chain were supposed to provide deference, that is, allegiance, obedience, and respect. They did this by attending church on Sunday; paying their taxes and tithes; keeping the king's law and Church or canon law; and by showing both obedience and respect to their landlords, masters (employers), and fathers.

So, in theory, every single creature in God's universe had a master and could be placed precisely in this hierarchy. Generations of royal proclamations and Sunday sermons reinforced this idea and taught everyone what was expected of them. Throughout the Middle Ages, however, repeated baronial and popular rebellions, most recently the Wars of the Roses, had threatened order and hierarchy (see later discussion). Moreover, in 1550 and for many years thereafter, religious reformation and economic change posed an even greater threat to the certainties of the chain. But perhaps the greatest challenge to traditional notions of hierarchy in 1550 came from London.

In theory, the ancient walled City of London, defined by its royal charter, was every bit as hierarchical as the rest of the country, administered by a lord mayor and the aldermen of its 26 wards, the masters of its 80 or so livery companies, and the vestries of its 111 assorted parishes. The City's freemen, journeymen, apprentices, and (in the first two cases) their wives and children were supposed to live out their deference and inferiority daily by following the orders of their masters, paying dues to their livery companies, dressing modestly and sitting in church according to their respective ranks, bowing, curtsying, tipping their caps, and "giving the wall," that is, stepping into the street (which doubled as an open sewer) when meeting a social superior out of doors. In practice, however, London was more than just the chartered and walled City. This wider, metropolitan London was arguably the place in England where the Great Chain of Being was most consistently under attack and least likely to work. First, there was its sheer size: London had long ago expanded beyond its walls and was throughout the period growing out of all proportion to the rest of England. At the beginning of this book, greater London's population of about 120,000 was ten times larger than its nearest provincial rivals. Over the course of the next two centuries it would grow fivefold, to about 675,000, whereas the population of England and Wales would only double, from about 3 million to nearly 6 million souls in 1750. London

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Robert O. Bucholz and Joseph P. Ward

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 LONDON: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY, 1550–1750

---

grew by in-migration, draining the countryside of people to the tune of 6,000 a year in the late sixteenth century and perhaps 8,000 a year by the early eighteenth. No wonder that in 1616 James I complained, “With time England will onely be London, and the whole countrey left waste.”<sup>2</sup>

To further complicate matters, London had its own chain, in fact many intersecting chains, that were hard to place within the overall scheme of king, nobles, and gentry. There was the City of London’s government, headed by the lord mayor, the chamberlain, recorder, sheriffs, and other great officers, the Court of Aldermen, Common Council, and Common Hall, and assorted lesser officers, shading off into the wards and parishes (see Chapter 3). Nearly all these luminaries were members of the London livery companies, themselves ranked (twelve great companies and about seventy lesser companies), divided into liverymen, householders, journeymen, and apprentices (see Chapter 2). They were followed by everybody else. On the one hand, these hierarchies, based on wealth and achievement, gave London some sense of order and coherence. On the other, they did not fit neatly into the main chain, which was essentially rural and based on birth, nor even sometimes with each other. Where did the lord mayor of London, almost always a wealthy merchant, fit in the Great Chain of Being? Did he rank with a gentleman? He was usually lower born, yet often wealthier and more powerful, a veritable merchant-prince worth over £50,000 by the mid-eighteenth century, more than all but the greatest aristocrats. What of a rich merchant generally? A prosperous attorney? A struggling tailor? The Great Chain of Being said nothing about them, partly because the source of their status did not fit its principles. They worked for a living, yet the chain said that those closest to God did no work. They were successful because of their labor, their skills, their credentials, and their wealth, but the chain ranked people according to birth.

Indeed, although most of the popular metaphors for the English polity rested on the principle that one’s personal status was assigned by God at birth and remained frozen over time, London was famous for its social mobility, its inhabitants growing rich or poor, rising or falling in status, very quickly. That was the very point of one of the most famous nursery rhymes taught to generations of English children: the story of Dick Whittington. According to a legend dating to the early seventeenth century, Whittington was a poor scullion from the country working for a wealthy London merchant. Discouraged by his prospects, he decided to return home with

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: London's Importance*

9

his cat, but on his way out of the city, at Highgate Hill, he heard the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow (Bow Bells) calling to him:

*Turn again, Whittington,  
Once Mayor of London!  
Turn again, Whittington,  
Twice Mayor of London!  
Turn again, Whittington,  
Thrice Mayor of London!*

So Whittington turned back and reapplied himself to his apprenticeship. There are different versions of the tale from this point; nearly all involve his faithful cat, who was so good a mouser that he won Whittington a fortune, enabling the erstwhile kitchen boy to marry his master's daughter, become a prosperous trader himself, and, eventually, lord mayor three times.

In fact, there really was a Dick Whittington (c. 1350–1423), and he really did become lord mayor three times. At his death he left several important charitable bequests, some of the fruits of which are still aiding Londoners today, including Guildhall Library. But when historians researched the roots of the tale, they found that he was not a scullion at all, but the third son of Sir William Whittington (d. 1358), owner of extensive estates in the west of England. Thus, his real story illustrates not so much how a poor boy could make good in London, but how the rich tended to get richer and how its mayors and aldermen were drawn from prosperous families. Still, what matters here is not the reality, but that English children grew up being told that there was endless opportunity in London if only they worked hard and persisted. London's most famous myth could only play havoc with the notion that God placed people in immutable ranks.

Perhaps even more threatening to the Great Chain of Being, London's sheer size made it a place where newcomers could lose or reinvent themselves. In the village, everyone knew everyone else. In fact, social stability depended on people knowing each other, knowing who your father and mother were. Your rank and status were enforced by your fellow villagers: to put on airs was an unforgivable social sin. But in the human ebb and flow of London it was much harder to tell who was who, or who belonged to whom. It is true that London had its own hierarchies; social rank was reinforced, especially in the first century of our period, by special clothing (liverymen and vestrymen wore gowns; poor pensioners wore badges). Guilds, parishes, and neighborhoods provided community and could be

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

nearly as close-knit, even claustrophobic, as the village, but they could not possibly absorb, sort, and assimilate easily or quickly those 6,000 to 8,000 newcomers arriving every year. Put another way, if you found village life stifling, one way to escape from your place in the rural chain was by going to the city.

This might have been especially true for women. Contemporaries noted, often ruefully, that in London more than anywhere else in the kingdom, women had opportunities to work and play beyond the domestic sphere usually accorded them in the countryside. In London was the court, where aristocratic women like Anne Boleyn (c. 1500–1536) in the sixteenth century or Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744) in the eighteenth achieved position and power undreamed of elsewhere. Below this level, there were female apprentices and inn, tavern, shop, and bawdy-house keepers. Upper class women paid each other visits and went shopping in the Royal or New Exchanges (see Chapters 1 and 2), while their maids and kitchen staff roamed the entire city on errands – delivering messages; buying bread, meat, and milk; fetching water – all unchaperoned. Women were active in the law courts as plaintiffs, witnesses, and defendants, and some even tried to evade the limitations of being *femes covert*s by forming informal financial networks. It should be obvious that the economic and social fluidity of London threatened to make nonsense of the Great Chain of Being.

Early modern London gave birth to a burgeoning public sphere of stage plays, street musicians, taverns, and (later) coffeehouses, brothels, and pleasure gardens, not to mention the busiest printing presses in the nation. None of this was good for the chain, if only because so many of these institutions paid little respect to birth rank and involved dissimulation or faking identity. Actors pretended to be other people; broadside sellers and balladeers sold truth, lies, and rumors about celebrities without distinction; authors wrote under pen names or anonymously (see Chapters 4 and 5). Foreign trade and exploration brought contact with other cultures, which might embrace different principles of hierarchy, whereas the luxury goods so traded enabled Londoners of middling and lower rank to ape and even impersonate their betters (see Chapter 2). Indeed, the migration of people and goods from across the British Isles, Europe, and the ocean helps to explain why early modern London was home to more religious and cultural diversity than other parts of England and Wales (see Chapters 2 and 4). London's wealth and size also made it prone to crime and riot (see Chapters 6 and 7), traditional threats to those in authority. Finally,