

***THOMAS
BURKE***



***LONDON
IN MY TIME***

Thomas Burke

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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SPRIT OF CHANGE

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Diamond Jubilee. . . . Sixty Years a Queen. . . . The Longest Reign. . . . The roofs and windows of London are rippling with red-white-and-blue; even the poorest dwelling shows its three-hap'ny flag. Every street-organ is playing and every boy whistling, Leslie Stuart's *Soldiers of the Queen*. Schoolboys are wearing in the lapels of their coats enamel portrait-buttons of the Queen and the Royal Family. One is taken round the main streets at dusk to see the "illuminations"--just fairy-lamps of candle, oil or gas, but lighting the London of that time with the superlative of carnival blaze. London is celebrating the Record Reign and sixty years of what it thought was Progress, never guessing that more progress was to be packed into the next thirty years than the whole previous hundred years could show.

That is the London I saw and felt when I first became consciously aware of London. I had been running about it for some years before that, but it is from the Diamond Jubilee that I date remembered detail. It was a London that still held many of the fixtures and much of the atmosphere of what has come to be known as the Dickens' London. A London of horse-trams with halfpenny fares, and of hansom cabs; of crystalline bells and spattering hoofs. A London with winters of slush and fog of a richer sort than any known to-day, and summers of dust and clam; the slush and dust being its heritage from the horse-traffic. A London of silk hats, frock-coats, beards, curled moustaches, "choker" collars, leg-of-

mutton sleeves, veils, bonnets, and, threading through these gigmanities, as herald of revolt, an execrated vixen in bloomers riding a bicycle. A London of solid homes, which regarded the introduction of flat-life as something Not Quite Nice; in fact, Fast. A London in which the head of the house still carved the joint at his Sunday table in the presence of his six or seven sons and daughters. A London of low buildings against which Queen Anne's Mansions was a skyscraper. A London of lost corners; of queer nooks and rookeries; of curling lanes and derelict squares, unknown to the rest of London, and often, it seemed, forgotten by their local Councils. A London which, away from the larger streets, held pools of utter darkness, and terraces of crumbling caverns, and infinitudes of mist which called one as surely as the ranges to penetrate their fastness. A London whose roads were mainly granite setts, and therefore a London of turmoil and clatter. A London in which the more prosperous business men drove to their offices in their broughams. A London in which the first cars were appearing, to the puzzled scorn of the majority of the brougham-owners. "Never make a Do of those things. People never give up horses for *those*." A London in which particular trades and callings still wore particular clothes, and which still nourished public "characters" and eccentrics. A London in which strong language, of a strength that would blanch these outspoken times, was used by certain men of all social classes. A London where entertaining in restaurants was just beginning to displace the more pleasant but (for the hostess) more troublesome custom of entertaining at one's own table. A London in which paper

money, save in the five-ten-twenty series, was unthought of. A London in which a golden sovereign would give you a quiet evening's entertainment of a kind which five pound-notes could not buy to-day. A London which, as befitted a great metropolis, had nine evening papers against to-day's meagre three. A London which was the centre of an Empire, and knew it. And a London which, in a few of its nerves, was beginning to be aware of the end of an epoch and of the New this and the New that.

Districts then were emphatically themselves; little islands washed by various alien waters which never penetrated inland. East was East and West was West. The foreign quarters *were* foreign. Soho was beginning to be anybody's country, but ordinary Londoners were seldom seen in the Italian streets of Back Hill, Eyre Street Hill or Warner Street; or in the recesses of the Ghetto, or in Limehouse or the Dutch streets of Spitalfields. Few of them knew the inner courts of Notting Dale and Hoxton, and artists and poets were never seen in the taverns of Bankside or Shadwell. All these places were then enclosed communities. So were many of the central districts. Chelsea was Chelsea and Streatham was Streatham. Cromwell Road knew nothing of Barnsbury, nor Stratford of Dulwich Village; and only a few cyclists had ever discovered the end of Finchley Road. Regent Street was then an "expensive" street, and even Oxford Street had not yet become the rendezvous of suburban housewives. Each district had its own perceptible key and maintained it. If a man lived in a mews he was a working-man, and if he lived in Mount Street he was a man of quality. If he lived in Bloomsbury he was hard-up, and if

he lived in Prince's Gate he was wealthy. Kensington was notably Kensington and had little to do with the other side of the Park, the not-quite Bayswater; and a young man of Jermyn Street would not know of the existence of a place called Islington. The West End was still the West End. Change was being felt, and, in a small way, its seclusion was, by its own invitation, being invaded by people who could be "used." But commercial establishments had not disrupted the stateliness of its squares and streets. A suggestion that trams should run along the Embankment and buses along Park Lane; that one might open a theatre in Whitehall, cheap tea-shops in Bond Street, offices in Carlton House Terrace, entertainments of "animated photographs" in Curzon Street, and the world's chief wireless station in Portland Place, would have been too facetious to evoke even a smile.

It is a habit with the middle-aged--almost a symptom of middle-age--to hold that things in their youth were superior to things of the present; and it is true that in just a few matters the London of the early years of this century did have some points on the London of to-day. But only a few. Physically, it was dingy, and the general scene was by no means so fluent and coloured as it is to-day. It had far fewer pleasures and public amenities; most of the "gaiety" that one hears about took place within doors, and the public places caught only its aftermath in the form of reeling and uproarious young men. It was a city of extreme wealth, solid comfort, and extreme poverty; and these three estates agreed that things always had been like that and always would be. Often the third lived within a stone's-throw of the

first, but in mutual indifference, never crossing each other's boundary. The Social Conscience, spurred by the Fabian Society, was then only beginning its first efforts at closing the cleft between them.

But the spirit of the people was more at ease. They had not then been crushed by blows at Imperial prestige and by forebodings of economic collapse, and if they had fewer pleasures they had fewer worries. You would not have guessed it by their faces. They were a stolid-looking, self-centred lot, and made no display of their content. They did not go about crying "Let's be gay. Let's make whoopee." Life was sufficiently agreeable without manufactured festivity. They were wedged in security, and had no need for war-cries or for songs urging them to keep their hearts up. Those "cheery" songs we are hearing to-day are a symptom of our condition. When a man asks in a loud voice: "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" there is but one answer to the question. The fact that the question is asked supplies the answer, which is: "*You* are." In those days there was no big bad wolf on the horizon, and the wild party was not thought of, either as amusement or as despairing resource. There was no demand for a brighter London. They thought, the poor dears of those days, that their dingy London with its isolated cylinders of social life was already bright. George Edwardes was giving them the new light entertainment of "musical comedy"; the opera was an apparently immutable fixture of the London year; the Empire and Alhambra supplied them with traditional ballet-spectacle; the "halls" were in full flower; the park bands were playing Sousa's Marches; and

Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus were key-notes of "frivolity"--a word of the period.

As for night-life, that was an indulgence for well-to-do young men and their seniors, and a few "daring" girls. There were decent nightclubs for those of ample means, and others of a wholly disreputable sort. There were none for the middle-classes, and if they had been started it is doubtful whether the middle-classes of that period would have patronised them. They might have felt them unnecessary, since licensing regulations were not what they are to-day. Most restaurants served after-theatre suppers, and were open till one in the morning, and in the days before taxis and cars that was late enough for the somewhat heavy folk who had offices to attend.

For the rest, the amusements of these folk of about the end of the century would seem to the present young of a simple order. They stood between the *Yellow Book* period and the postwar period. Their appetites were normal, and they did not cry "for madder music and for stronger wine." When they went out to dinner they did not ask the restaurateur to add to his duties those of music-hall manager, M.C., and clown. They asked him to supply an agreeable, well-served meal, and sound wines. Any other pleasures they supplied themselves. In those days people still talked. They used, not interjections and repetitions of Society's latest epithet, but conversation; and in most restaurants they could talk in a level voice and be heard. A few of the bars around Leicester Square--Provence, Café de l'Europe, Gambrinus, etc.--had orchestras, but they were not found in many restaurants. Even at the pioneer middle-class

night-club, which arrived a few years before the War, when Austin Harrison and Mdme. Strindberg opened the Cave of the Golden Calf, even there, talk was mainly the thing. The term night-club had to wait a decade or more before it became synonymous with overcrowding and lack-lustre racket. Elderly people were complaining of the pace of London life, as elderly people have always been doing from the time of John Lydgate. Actually it was as it always is when regarded in relation to its period--just a little slower than it should have been.

The great spread in recent years of public pleasure and outdoor entertainment is an overdue development; but, coming so suddenly, it has had the effect of leaving people, when they cannot get this public pleasure, in mid-air and at a loss. They do not know how to amuse themselves. The modern provision of mass-amusement, and the mechanical inventions which bring it almost to their doors, have distracted them from the effort of providing their own. Six people making merry in a drawing-room or parlour, if they know how to do it, will always be individually merrier than any one of six hundred people sharing a common merriment in a restaurant or hall. But indoor, self-made amusement is now regarded as "too much bother."

In the past, people were more independent, ready to be themselves instead of seeking to be a matrix of everybody else. Sober as they were in their dress and their setting, their blood, I think, was richer and their nerves stouter. They were more ebullient than their children of to-day. Bread and circuses have made us tame; amenable to all sorts of direct and indirect propaganda. Our London is much younger and

brisker in spirit than theirs, and wears a brighter countenance. But in relation to theirs it is as cocktails and sherry to Margaux and Chambertin.

Even when I began to be an active atom of London life--in the early nineteen-noughts--this Margaux and Chambertin tone prevailed, and I came to manhood in a London of stolid security and sanguine outlook. A century, in its social and spiritual significance, seldom begins at its calendar point; and the early years of the twentieth century were infused by a strong hang-over from the nineteenth. Just as the nineteenth century did not begin until 1840, and spent its childhood with the last vapours of the eighteenth, so the twentieth century took some time to adjust itself; though it took only half the time taken by the nineteenth. The early years were an interregnum between the rule of the old and the new. The death of Victoria brought a sudden release of bottled-up ideas and activities. Much of it led nowhere; it was a sort of out-of-school burst; a manifestation of "*now we can do things.*" And through the Edward decade people did things. But those things were mainly a trying-out; we were not really in the twentieth century. Too many fashions, tastes and prejudices of the nineteenth remained with us to prevent our really going ahead into a new century and a new life. There was a fresher and freer tone in London life, but it did not carry any reconstruction or redistribution of values. It was merely an easing and brightening of the old. The austere schoolmistress was gone and had been replaced by a genial, easy-going master; but the school was much the same. Victoria's death was not the end of the nineteenth century, nor was Edward's. The true end of that

century, and the beginning of the twentieth and of new-age growing-pains, was the end of the Great War. Not until 1920 did London enter upon its new era of structural and spiritual change.

Thus, in writing of London before the war one has a feeling of writing of the London of last century. And really one is. In talking to young people about London and London life before the war, and the things we did in that London, I find that they cannot regard them as part of twentieth-century life. *They* are twentieth century, and the London they know is the only twentieth-century London. We middle-aged folk, who started our boyhood ramblings about the London of 1904-5, they regard as stragglers from the Victorian age; which we are. Still, we had the privilege of witnessing the changeover, and it is something to have seen. As I began looking at London in 1897, and, save for holidays, have been constantly in attendance upon it, I have had London under observation through nearly four decades. Those years have been years of such radical and violent change in London life and the ways of the Londoner that no similar span of its long life can have known such a transformation. The differences between the London of the year of Diamond Jubilee and the London of 1934 are, I think, even more marked than the differences between the London of James II and the London of the Regency. Certainly they are of wider variety and scope than the memory of any Victorian centenarian could embrace.

The processes by which these differences have arrived have been so stealthy and so minute that to the constant Londoner, like myself, who has lived through them, they are

often untraceable. A few of the larger junctions which register departure-points for change stand out, and among these I would set:

The Underground Railway.

The electric tram and motor-bus.

The making of Aldwych and Kingsway.

The spread of service flats.

The coming of popular cafés and popular hotels.

The opening of Selfridge's.

The new social amenities of streets and parks.

The use of tarmac and re-inforced concrete.

The brightening of Sunday.

But the sources of the change in social behaviour and outlook remain as obscure as the sources of the seasonal change in women's dress. Mode arrives among us, nobody knows whence. We find ourselves doing the same things and saying the same things, and no person or group of persons is responsible for this. It is an immigration from the invisible. Social history is a record of these immigrations, and not even the philosophers can decide for us the wherefore.

In the past forty years we of middle-age have witnessed many of these abrupt swerves from mode to mode, and because they are general and affect us all we do not notice their clean break from the recent mode. From the same cause we do not notice the abrupt changes in the London scene, and it is only when we look back that we realise how many changes have happened under our eyes. We have seen Society in its well-conducted, almost demure period; in

its inane Bright-Young-Thing period; and within the last year or so we have seen it swerve again from the Mrs. Merrick note to the sensible and responsible. We have seen music-halls go, and movies arrive and develop to talkies. We have seen women's fashions pass from the bonnet and trailing skirt, through the hobble skirt and Merry Widow hat, the shirt-blouse, and bee-hive hat, the knee-length skirt of the twenties, the Eton crop and the shingle, to the bare legs and beret of the thirties. We have seen girls in the parks, at one time shrouded from neck to ankle, and at another in little but bathing-slips. We have seen the last days of Rosherville and the first days of the Lido. We have watched the blurred pageantry of the Votes for Women processions, and have seen women reach Parliament and all other departments of the nation's councils. We have seen London Pride, which went into decay for the greater part of the nineteenth century, reassert itself. We have seen streets of smoky brick become streets of glistening concrete. We have seen the outward thrust of business from the centre of town do as much in a few years towards slum-clearance as had been done in the previous fifty. We have seen commerce dress itself with dignity, and endow London with the Kubla Khan domes and towers of the P.L.A. building, the Shell-Mex building, the I.C.I. building, Transport House, and the new hotels of Park Lane. We have seen rural villages become suburbs. We have seen spots that, in our childhood, were "in the country," become part of the route of central London buses. We have seen our London, which had its limits at Barking, Shepherd's Bush, Croydon and Finchley, grow to a

London which is London until you are beyond Romford, Uxbridge, Epsom or Watford.

Every Londoner, I think, will agree with me that it is as hard to say when or how the change happened as to say when a plant increased from six inches to seven inches. And will agree with me that the chief material agents, acting under our very noses, were undoubtedly petrol and electricity. The electric tram, the motor-bus, the extension of the Tube railways, the cheap private car--these widened man's radius and gave an acceleration to his natural desire for movement. From this power of swift and frequent change sprang all the developments in physical London and its tempo, and in the Londoner's home habits, outdoor habits, and amusements.

Some of these developments, as I say, the born Londoner hardly perceives. He accepts them as having always been, and is not aware, until he definitely considers them, that they are key-points of a new order. For a true appraisal of these developments one must look elsewhere. One must use the eye of a returned Londoner who went into the wilderness at the end of last century, and has had no news of London or of any other great city. First, one might puzzle him with a little examination-paper on London features. Something like this:

What is a Corner House?

Where is the Ritz?

What is Wardour Street noted for?

Define a subway, an escalator, a news-theatre, a Labour Exchange.

Where is the North Circular Road?

What is Croydon chiefly known for?

Where is the Garden Suburb?

What is the quickest way from Charing Cross to Edgware?

What is a flatlet?

From what point does the night coach leave London for Newcastle?

Where is the London Lido?

When he had given up most of these, as he would, one could set him wandering. What would first strike him? No doubt he would turn, as most homing exiles do, to Piccadilly Circus, and if he reached it at night he could be excused for thinking he had taken the wrong turning. But before he could reach it he would have taken a random eye-cast at the general face of London. If he arrived at Waterloo, and looked upon London from the other side, he would see a very different scape from that which he last saw. Some of the old points would reassure him--Big Ben and Victoria Tower; Cleopatra's Needle; Somerset House--but he would be as astonished by the staring brilliance of the new buildings of the Embankment as one of us would be if he were transported to Mr. Wells' City of the Future. Yet with all the difference he would know it for a *London* scape. It has set itself between river and sky with the air of having always belonged there. It is still London, but London rejuvenated. A more vigorous London; no longer solid and complacent, but challenging and thrusting. A London of firmer line and harder feature. A London no longer keeping its brightness to private display, but bringing whatever it has to the streets. A London that lives no longer in splendid mansions, but in

flats; that follows personally the simple life and showers magnificence into the common stock. Formerly London's beautiful buildings were private homes, and for public buildings anything was held to be good enough. This custom is now reversed, and public and commercial affairs are transacted in halls of marble whose faces shine with civic dignity.

In a casual glance at this new London, one petty detail would perhaps give evidence of the passing of years more strongly than any major factor. There is one section of the London scene which affects us more than we know, though we see it only as we see the paving we walk on. As many people subconsciously remember a first tour of France, not by any star of the guidebook's constellation; not by some great château or bridge or cathedral, but by the face of that baby who, this quarter-century, has been haunting the French sky-line for the benefit of the soap of M. Cadum; so one of the mnemonic notes that call up London to the Londoner is its public advertisements. My first childish impression of London was not of a city of people, but of a city of lamps and the lit windows of shops. My second was of a city of advertisements. I am told that it was a habit of mine, as soon as I had learned to read, to spell out all the advertisements when riding in trains and buses and trams. So, when I recall the London of my childhood, almost the first entrants in the troupe of memories are--Nixey's Black Lead; Reckitt's Blue; Hinde's Curlers; Sapolio; Epps' Cocoa; Brooke's Soap Monkey Brand; Frame Food; and Whelpton's Purifying Pills.

Many of the commodities whose names, forty years ago, were truly household words, are still announcing themselves by the newest trans-Atlantic methods, but our homing exile would miss a number which were to him a fixed feature of the London scene, and would miss everywhere the restrained, almost bashful note of their advertising. The pictorial side of that advertising was commonly painful; the influence of James Pryde and William Nicholson and Steinlen was limited in its range, and it was long before commerce generally had followed the lead given by those who employed these artists. The letter-press was usually a blunt claim of superiority--"Drink Somebody's Cocoa. It Is The Best." Or "Somebody's Soap. Good For The Complexion." In its place he would find a deft thrust at his weaknesses. In the new stones and forms of London he would be able to perceive the solid city of his youth, but on its face--that part of it rented for advertising--which he had left demure, he would find grins, grimaces, pouts, leers and winks. Only the presence of Eros, the London Pavilion and the Criterion, would reassure him that he really had found Piccadilly Circus. In his day it was known as "the centre of the world." To-day it is known to a too-large and too-clamant section as the Premier Publicity Site. Such advertising as it carried in his day was no more than a gentle gesture of the hand indicating the excellence of this or that over other kinds of this or that. The whole Circus now is a series of ear-racking screams and eye-smiting gyrations against which the extreme contortions of the Jack Puddings of Bartholomew Fair would be almost modest. Yet it still manages to remain Piccadilly Circus, and for this generation of London boys it

will be what it was for their fathers and grandfathers. The Strand, too, he would hardly know, for changes here have been more violent than in any other one street. Forty or fifty of the features which made the Strand of his youth are gone. Lowther Arcade and Exeter Hall, prominent features of his time, were in their last gasp when I began work in 1902; I just remember seeing them. Aldwych and Kingsway were in the pangs of birth as a heap of ruins, and the new Gaiety Theatre and Gaiety Hotel were only being thought of. Notable points that he would miss are Morley's Hotel, which was round the corner in Trafalgar Square; the Golden Cross; Haxell's little hotel in Exeter Street; Terry's Theatre; the old Strand Theatre; Wych Street; the old Tivoli; the Hotel Cecil; and perhaps Burgess' Fish Sauce Shop, the old tongue-twister. The Gaiety Hotel came and went before we had time to get used to it.

When I first knew the Strand the project of widening it was not even talked of. With that widening the whole structure of the street has changed within the recollection of those who are still in their teens. As I say, it has throughout its life been marked for constant change. As the High Street, reflecting always the contemporary taste of everyday London, it is never settled for long. The Strand of the nineties is now almost obliterated, and the Strand of even a later period has suffered so much pulling about that for the middle-aged it is a new street. Very little of that Strand of 1909, which the music-halls of that year were inviting us to go down, remains to-day, and the little that does appears in a new dress.