

A Mighty Capital Under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800–2000. Edited by Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim. *History of the Urban Environment*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. 282 pp.

This collection of ten papers covers the major urban environmental changes in London over the past two centuries. The British capital was the first global city: the explosion of population growth and the concentration of the population in a smaller area during the nineteenth century presented previously unprecedented challenges. At these times, as was true in many countries in Europe, Central Europe, including the Hungarian capital, followed the technical and scientific innovations introduced in London in response to urbanization. From the 1850s onwards, London made several environmental improvements in order to enhance the living and health conditions of its citizens. Alongside news and publications, word was also spread by the flow of British professionals to Europe. Their role in the major infrastructure projects in Budapest (e.g., the Chain Bridge, the water and sewerage networks, etc.) also makes this volume of studies of particular interest to specialists in the history of Central Europe.

The book is introduced by a substantial editorial foreword, which provides insights into the historiography of urban environmental history followed by a brief overview of the last two centuries of London's environmental history and the major crises and problems the city faced.

Jim Clifford's study ("Greater London's Rapid Growth, 1800–2000") describes the city's growth over the last two centuries and the changes that have occurred, drawing primarily on a comparative analysis of maps. Defining (the boundaries of) the city is extremely difficult. The administrative boundaries do not cover the whole of the city's surroundings, and local government in this period operated quite independently of the (otherwise weak) central leadership. This and the following study, in its concluding remarks, draw attention to the increasingly serious and urgent need to address the continuous risk of flooding as a result of climate change and the city's expansion. The second paper, by Christopher Hamlin ("Imagining the Metropolitan Environment in the Modern Period"), examines the history of London as an environment, with a specific focus on the human aspect of how contemporary people understood the city as a physical and social medium.

Anne Hardy's study ("Death and the Environment in London, 1800–2000") examines the problems we have seen so far from demographic and

epidemiological perspectives. Rapid population growth in the nineteenth century presented environmental challenges to housing, and mortality rates were extremely high. The city authorities were unable to cope with these issues until the second half of the century. The problem was linked first to pollution and poverty and, from the middle of the century onwards, more specifically to the quality of air, water, and geographical locations and to periodic outbreaks of epidemics (e.g., cholera and typhoid). Environmental improvements were sought as a solution, and a slow decline in mortality did indeed begin. Contemporary and historical observations have described London as an environmental death trap, but this picture is much worse than the actual situation was. According to Hardy, this could be explained by poor central control, as the various historical studies have always been concerned with the administration of a given local borough, and thus the London-wide context is not really known.

Christopher Ferguson (“London and Early Environmentalism in Britain, 1770–1870”) examines the relationship between early environmentalists and London. The individuals and associations that fell into this category sought to understand the various impacts of urban growth on the environment with the aim of protecting and improving human life and its values. In many respects, they were important predecessors to today’s environmentalists. Although the medical approach of the 1870s focused more on the human body than on the living environment in terms of the development of disease, the spread of the idea of prevention and control led many European cities to focus on environmental hazards in terms of public health.

Finally, a later study in the book by Bill Luckin and Andrea Tanner (“A Once Rural Place?: Environment and Society in Hackney, 1860–1920”) also belongs to this thematic unit. This paper is directly linked to Ferguson’s study through its examination of the relationship between sanitation and environmental practices in Hackney, an inner London borough. The paper reviews the environmental hazards associated with health problems already identified in earlier studies. By the 1920s, the influence of the sanitary movement, which linked moral conditions to health, was beginning to fade. This case study also reflects and supports Hardy’s demographic conclusions.

Peter Thorsheim’s study (“Green Space in London: Social and Environmental Perspectives”) looks into the evolution of green space in London and the uses of green spaces over the past two centuries. The notion of sustainability, in which environmental, social, and economic issues are inextricably intertwined, are traced in this study of the history of uses of green space.

Leslie Tomory's study ("Moving East: Industrial Pollution in London, 1800–1920") explores London's industrial pollution problems. The crises caused by industrial pollution in the nineteenth century were not as acute as the epidemics and pollution around dwellings, and they therefore have attracted less attention. Industry representatives also made it difficult for local authorities to regulate industries, and eventually they had to be regulated at government level. The city's air was gradually cleaner as factories moved eastwards, where they could operate under less regulated conditions, but it was not until the mid-twentieth century that real changes were made in relation to smog.

Two papers in this volume are dedicated specifically to a historical examination of the problem of water supply. Vanessa Taylor's study ("Water and Its Meanings in London, 1800–1914") examines the changing meanings and management of water in the long nineteenth-century London. The chapter provides a substantial chronological summary of the history of water supply in London. The paper then thematically reviews the city's debates about local supply, the relationship between changing conceptions of water and sanitation, and the changing forms and roles of domestic supply in everyday life. Increasing water supply in response to an elevated demand facilitated further population growth in expanding urban spaces. The possibilities and conditions of water availability for urban dwellers improved considerably, but major infrastructure decisions were made over their heads, and the ongoing debates about this in the nineteenth century were linked to London's governance mechanisms (e.g., the lack of central control and the strength of local government). There were conflicting priorities regarding urban rivers (the public was more concerned with water supply and sanitation, while the administration was basically interested in the function of rivers as a pollution removal system, although it monitored their deteriorating condition over time), but their "natural" state did not yet matter much. The idea of the river as an ecosystem had not yet been raised. The final chapter of the book also expands on the issue of water supply and the urban environmental history of London with a comparative study of New York by Bill Luckin and Joel A. Tarr ("Water for the Multitudes: London and New York, 1800–2016"). As Taylor does in his study, Luckin and Tarr examine the ways in which the growing population was supplied with water. Which proved more efficient, a privately controlled water supply or a publicly funded water supply? New York's system, established by the 1830s, solved the problem of supply through the use of sources far from the city. The water quality was better, but this meant regular conflicts with the locals, with whom a final agreement was

only reached in 1995. In London, the problems of municipal administration were seriously resolved in 1902, when water supply was transferred from private companies to the then Metropolitan Water Board, which significantly improved the situation.

The volume concludes with an extensive appendix of notes and an index to the studies. In the former, the authors have taken care to draw the reader's attention to a large body of additional literature on the various subtopics. The index is very rich, with names of persons, geographical names, and key terms. It is a particularly useful tool for the sub-topics that are covered by several studies from different perspectives (e.g., London's administration, different territorial definitions, environmental and epidemiological issues, etc.).

Most of the studies are well structured, and cross-references between the chapters help the reader find links within a given topic. Hamlin's study, which seeks to examine the global city from several angles, stands out somewhat. It fits in the volume in terms of its topic and ambitions, but it is more of an essay that raises thought-provoking points. Rather than dwell on the classic topics of urban environmental history, these papers offer a glimpse into the history of various complex debates (urban green use, the construction and control of urban space, the many different meanings of pollution and water, etc.). There is also a strong emphasis on the current and future impact of acute problems.

Ágnes Németh
Eötvös Loránd University / Budapest City Archives
nemeth.agnes.h@gmail.com