

Book Reviews

Pre-1800

STEPHEN ALFORD. *London's Triumph: Merchants, Adventurers, and Money in Shakespeare's City*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017. Pp. 299. \$25.20 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2017.183

The title of Stephen Alford's book—*London's Triumph: Merchants, Adventurers, and Money in Shakespeare's City*—encapsulates his main thesis: during the course of the sixteenth century, London not only grew, it triumphed over insignificance. Until the mid-sixteenth century, this city had been but “a satellite,” on the edges of Europe's trading world. However, by 1620 it was “impressive in its mercantile glory” (247). Just how this happened provides the narrative thread of Alford's book. Between 1500 and 1600 the city's population quadrupled and its geographic size expanded accordingly. By 1600, London had a population of about 200,000, making it the largest city in England by far. While it had been the sixth largest city in Europe in 1550, it was second only to Paris by 1650 (13). This phenomenal growth was due to one key factor: sustained immigration. Alford points out that if baptism and burial records are anything to go by, there were more deaths than births between 1580 and 1650. Epidemics constantly cut a swathe through London, decimating its population as in 1563, when plague killed 20 percent of the city's population (14). With its position on the Thames and its concentration of “money, mercantile dynasty and privilege” London wielded political power (15). This meant that, as it needed more people to function as a growing metropolis, it lured in people from all over the British Isles and from Europe. Many immigrants were, as they are today, refugees. While some were fleeing crop failures and starvation in the English countryside, others were fleeing religious persecution across the Channel. Alford makes it clear that London benefited from conflict in Europe as it not only drove skilled migrants to London but also took its toll on the “great entrepôt” of Europe, Antwerp. This allowed London to catch up, extending its global reach and eventually cementing its reputation as a mercantile center.

Merchants, voyagers, and explorers are central to Alford's story of London's success. He makes it clear that their achievements were often based on misconceptions and failures, as

in the founding of the Muscovy Company. In 1553, London merchants had made contact with Russia purely by accident after Willoughby's voyage to Cathay ended in disaster and the fleet's navigator, Chancellor, ended up sailing into the freezing waters of the White Sea (75). By the time the Hakluyts got involved in promoting the push into foreign lands, it did not matter that discovery had been a hit and miss affair for, by then, the impulse "to find, to describe, to trade, to map and eventually to dominate" had become more than a mission for London's merchants, it had become their kingdom's (152). Most of the merchants who fueled this ambition, had acquired their trading expertise in European ports. Richard Gresham and his son Thomas, for example, had done so in the markets of Antwerp (41–51). At a time when even the shortest of voyages were fraught with danger, Thomas Gresham, sometimes accompanied by his household, traveled forty times in two years between the Low Countries and the court of Edward VI (59). Antwerp, and another of the great foreign trading centers London's merchants looked to, inspired the naming of two of the three galleries in London's Royal Exchange (built by Thomas Gresham and completed in 1567): "New Venice" and "the Pawn," the latter derived from the name given to the cloisters and arcades of the great Antwerp marts. These galleries were piled high with goods of all kinds and buzzed with different languages (109–10). Those in the galleries—perambulating in the latest fashions, brokering deals, manning stalls, swindling, pickpocketing, or begging for coins—encapsulated the make-up of London society at large.

Alford's Tudor London is as fearful as it is dynamic. I was reading about this complex city, "always shifting and fluid" (115), in June 2017 as news surfaced of people being attacked by a van and men with knives on the Southwark end of London Bridge. This made me think about both how much London has changed and how much it has not. London today is a city reliant on immigrants to run its transport systems, hospitals, and businesses. Moreover, it is a cosmopolitan city, and its population may be more tolerant because of its long-standing links to Europe and the wider world than the rest of the Britain, hence its resounding rejection of Britain's exit from the European Union. Yet, while many of today's Londoners accept immigrants, others are as fearful of the influx of "strangers" as Londoners were five or four hundred years ago.

Alford's book highlights other parallels. Today, as in Elizabethan times, there is "anxiety about poverty and crime" (111). Although England currently has a welfare system, visitors enjoying the sights of London cannot help but notice its poverty and, as one mid-sixteenth century English diplomat put it, its filth (20). Londoners today may lament at how time-poor they are and how they rely on takeaway meals at the end of long commutes, but then many sixteenth-century Londoners got their sustenance in similar ways. The city, then as now, was full of inns, beer gardens, and taverns, and those who could not afford utensils or were traveling relied on "hot fast food" from "cookshops" (18).

Alford certainly succeeds in his big picture aim of presenting London as "a place of formidable dynamism" (256). However, what I like most about his book are those instances when he swoops down into the teeming crowd and extracts an individual—sometimes a rich and influential merchant and sometimes a lowly apprentice or single mother, for example—and presents the reader with their potted life story. In doing so, Alford not only brings his narrative alive for the general reader, but he flags opportunities for his fellow historians. I recommend this book to those interested in exploring London's history at the micro level, who have yet to target their research, and to those simply wanting to learn more about London and its place in the early modern world.

Heather Dalton
University of Melbourne
hdalton@unimelb.edu.au