

London's Game of Chance

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WHEN a man is tired of London, Dr. Johnson is reported to have said, he is tired of life. Well, that was all right for him somewhere around 1775 talking about his London, a mere fraction of what it is today and very much quieter. What would he say about it today? I venture to suggest it would be more explosive and less flattering.

For some time now I have maintained that when things get bigger they seldom get better; as examples I quote children, local authorities and cities. Simon Jenkins in his new book* tells how London grew and became the big problem it is today. He begins the story at the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII. As far as architectural gems were concerned, and there were many, this was vandalism with a vengeance—and I mean the phrase literally—by Royal decree. Almost all the land was surrendered to the Crown, and subsequently dished out in large lumps to Court favourites, other portions went to the newly established Church, and all in due course became fully-fledged rentier capitalists.

The next two hundred years seem to have been spent by these landowners vying with each other in improving and enlarging their estates and their fortunes by means of marriage. It is odd how so few of them managed to provide themselves with a male heir. Hence the arranged marriages of wealthy heiresses with young men similarly well-heeled, these unions thus resulting in a mere handful of families in possession of large slices of some of the richest land in the world.

All the cards in this mighty game of Happy Families are here in this book: Audley, Russell, Berkeley, Cadogan, Grosvenor, Jermyn, Portman, *et al.* We may also read how the Jokers managed to enter the pack: Cotton, Clore, Levy, Samuel, Hyams, and so on, their introduction necessitating

(and sometimes following), for better or worse, certain amendments to the rules, so that all the players, and most of the onlookers, may at least be aware of who takes most of the tricks.

Even after many disasters and upheavals including the Civil War, the Plague, the Great Fire, economic depression, two World Wars, and adverse changes in estate taxation law, it is amazing how many of these old families still retain a grip on valuable freeholds.

During all this time, of course, there was the problem of the poor—that is the landless. When gentlemen of means build town houses and set out to live like gentlemen, they must be served by those who are not so fortunate and must work for a living, and so the traders and servants *will* come and they *will* demand some sort of accommodation, and since such houses were regarded at best as necessary evils, evils they soon became. The slums were ignored until such time as it became convenient to clear them away, then the process would begin all over again.

The worst clearances were carried out to make way for the coming of the railways, about 100,000 people being evicted with little or no notice and no compensation. This deliberate devastation of working class homes would have been much less, and less costly to the Railway Companies, if they

had all agreed to run their trains into a single terminus; but such a common sense arrangement a century or more ago would be hard enough to imagine, let alone find favour with all concerned.

Not until the middle of the nineteenth century was any serious attempt made to do anything about the plight of the poor (with the exception of the valiant philanthropic few such as Shaftesbury, Peabody and Octavia Hill), by which time they had had enough, and it is my belief that it was bad housing as much as the so-called capitalist exploitation which spawned and fed the Labour movement and its claim to represent the interests of the working class.

Today things are much better for all concerned, but the stigma attaching to private land ownership still persists and has now overspilled into the property market generally. And London still has its slums, and all politicians should by now realise that just as private monopoly in land is the mother of all monopolies, bad housing is her daughter and the mother of many social evils.

Here is a history of London, full of romance, grandeur, intrigue, follies, mistakes, and in the concluding chapters a promise of better things to come, provided we learn from past errors and ensure that we are allowed to discuss and criticize plans for the future with those who propose to carry them out, before they are carried out. London is no longer merely a private family affair; it is the concern of each and every one of us who lives or works in it.

**Landlords to London*, Simon Jenkins, Constable & Co., £4.50.

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