

## REVIEW ESSAY

### How Derek Morris and Kenneth Cozens are rewriting the maritime history of East London North of the Thames: a review

Derek Morris, *Mile End Old Town, 1740-1780: A Social History of an Early Modern London Suburb*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 2002; 2nd ed., The East London History Society, 2007; a new edition in process to be extended back in time to cover from 1660;

Derek Morris and Ken Cozens, *Wapping, 1600-1800: A Social History of an Early Modern London Maritime Suburb*. The East London History Society, 2009;

Derek Morris, *Whitechapel 1600-1800: A Social History of an Early Modern London Inner Suburb*. The East London History Society, 2011; £12.60 and £3:50 p&p (overseas \$18.50), <http://www.eastlondonhistory.org.uk>

In three books published to date, two London-based researchers, Derek Morris and Kenneth Cozens, have set about the task of challenging many deeply-held stereotypes of London's eastern parishes in the eighteenth century. With meticulous attention to detail, and with sure control of a wide range of archives, they have produced three highly-recommended works.

The books *Mile End* and *Wapping* are in very short supply, if not by the time of this review, only available on the second-hand market. In *Whitechapel*, with the completion of the first phase of their research, they have ignored the restrictions imposed by parish boundaries: they have begun to draw conclusions about the nature of society in these areas in the eighteenth century. This is welcome for a number of reasons. But chief among these is that for too long historians have relied on a series of stereotypes with the emphasis on poverty, crime and "dirty industries," to portray these eastern parishes, when in fact the emphasis should be on the important role played by local entrepreneurs in London's growing economy and worldwide trading networks.

Eagerly awaited, and expected in 2014, is their fourth book on these eastern parishes. The title will be *Shadwell and Ratcliff: 1600-1800: A Social History of two Thames-side Communities*.

East of the Tower of London and the eastern boundary of the City of London (that compressed power of financial wealth that remains to this day a nodule of world commerce and global influence) lie a series of older communities and parishes. They are now bundled into the title for local government purposes as Tower Hamlets. Included in this broader name are such places as Whitechapel, Wapping-Stepney, Shadwell, Ratcliff, Limehouse and Poplar, all on or near the River Thames. To the north are situated, almost

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in a great arc and from west to east, Bethnal Green, Stratford Bow and Bromley. Mile End Old Town is built around the famed street of Mile End, which, if travelling eastwards, leads to Essex. South of the river lie equally interesting municipal jurisdictions in Surrey and Kent. But the three books given notice here are about Mile End East London, Wapping and Whitechapel.

It bears repeating that for all their attention to the particular, these books reveal remarkable evidence concerning the role of these locales in the history of the City of London, in global commerce, naval contributions, and in the history of exploration. I enlarge upon particulars below, but first permit me to explain how I came to know about these important books, works of distinguished historical scholarship published by a self-sustaining local history society, books that deserve better attention than they have heretofore received.

In the course of research trips to London and Greenwich in pursuit of my own interests in the maritime history of the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I met Kenneth Cozens. He was then a prize-winning student doing an M.A. under Professor Sarah Palmer in the Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich, housed in the magnificent buildings of the old naval college. Cozens had taken a B.S. (Hons.) in social sciences with the Open University. He has had a lifelong interest in London's eighteenth century economic history, sociology and voyages of exploration, particularly in respect to the Asia Pacific region. At one time, he worked as a freelance travel photographer in these seas. After other activities in banking and the corporate world, he took early retirement to get into history. At Greenwich he completed a dissertation "Politics, Patronage and Profit: A Case Study of Three 18<sup>th</sup> Century London Merchants." This explored the networks of Wapping-based men of commerce. Much of this work grew into the book on Wapping, noticed above. But the dissertation was only the beginning point. Cozens brought Trinity House Ballast Office officials and East India Company officers and merchants notably (Thomas Fitzhugh) to the fore. Likewise, he featured merchant groups such as Camden, Calvert and King, who operated a shipping business on a global scale. His knowledge of that shadowy figure of the sea otter trade of China and the Northwest Coast of North America, Richard Cadman Etches, is extensive.

Conversations with Cozens led me to the work of Derek Morris, and many subsequent conversations with the two proved revelatory. After studying geology, physics and geophysics at London University, Morris worked as a geophysicist for the UN, EU, oil companies and mining concerns. His bibliography is impressive and can be found at [www.singsurf.org](http://www.singsurf.org). He tells me that it was his interest in the history of exploration, and James Cook in particular, that led him to look at Mile End, where Cook and Mrs. Elizabeth Cook had a house.

Morris and Cozens have the fire of true researchers, and they are excited by their findings. They work in tandem rather than as a strictly-harnessed team. Nonetheless, they share the same belief that it is in the hitherto unexamined records of the state and of commercial concerns where the true features of London's history are to be found.

At the outset, Morris had concentrated on Mile End as the focal point of the eighteenth-century history of Stepney and Tower Hamlets. On one occasion, he laid out

before me on a table a view he had drawn for me showing Mile End Old Town looking out eastwards to the Essex countryside. Beginning at the intersection of Ireland Row and Assembly Row, you could see neat houses standing on either side, while on the south stood St Dunstan's Church, with the Red Ensign flying. Every student who has looked at the history of Mile End knows that Mrs. Elizabeth Cook lived here and raised a family while her famed navigator husband sailed the seven seas under instructions of the Admiralty (guided by the requirements of the Royal Society). So, yes, Elizabeth Cook's house was shown on Derek's drawing. But then I learned that Francis Holman, marine artist, lived here. He had done an oil painting of Cook's *Resolution* but did not sail in her. Then I learned that Sir Joseph Banks, the presiding genius of British natural science and who had sailed with Cook on his *Endeavour* voyage to Tahiti, had brought seeds from a James Gordon that were planted in Tahiti. Gordon, with premises here in Mile End, was the great nurseryman of the age, and not far from him lived none other than Laurence Sullivan, the fixer of the East India Company. Admiral Abraham North, who was on the committee examining Cook for his lieutenantcy in 1768, lived nearby. There were connections with Whitby, Yorkshire. Curtis Distillery and wine vault was specifically important in this. There are also connections to the Fitzhugh family, so celebrated in the East India Company and its activities in China. While down the south side, and of particular interest to me, was the residence of John Binmer, a senior employee in the Surveyor's Department of the Royal Navy. He is a name I would ordinarily have missed, but Morris brought to my attention the fact that Binmer was in essence guardian or benefactor of Captain James Colnett. Colnett had gone with Cook on the second voyage. Then he had got into the merchant trade especially in sea otter pelts, sailing for the London firm that eventually became part of what is generally known as the John Meares Syndicate. It was Colnett who was outraged at what he regarded as the high-handed actions of Esteban Martínez, the Spanish officer, at Nootka Sound, Vancouver Island, that nearly sparked a war between Britain and Spain. Colnett who spent most of his years at sea (and some time in Spanish captivity) sadly recounted that when indeed he did return to England forever all of his friends had died in the meantime. His, I note, is a life yet to be written. But all down this famed street, which is now but just a thoroughfare to towns beyond, lived powerful merchants, navy officials, distillers and nurserymen. It is the connections among them that Morris has tracked down so assiduously.

*Mile End Old Town* contains, besides the administrative and legal histories, a chapter on rope making and brewing. There is another on merchants and yet another on the poor and their care. The star in the piece is naturally James Cook, and a chapter is devoted to him and to his connections. And in this same chapter we find discussion of the Royal Navy connections, not least the story of Colnett and Binmer in connection with the exploration of New Albion and the progress of the sea otter trade. Rich in bibliographical references, with thoroughly valuable indexes, inventories of estates, and excellent illustrations, some in colour, make this book a treasure trove and a delight to read. It opens up to view so very much: of an outwardly expanding community at the threshold of empire, hard by the bustling commercial activities of the River Thames. One can almost imagine what Joseph Conrad might have written about it had he lived a century before. The work is based on numerous documentary collections, all dutifully

listed. We leave this work with this quotation in the Preface, written by Dr. Stephen Porter of English Heritage: “By concentrating on a forty-year period of the eighteenth century, he [Morris] has been able to complete an intensive study, looking at many aspects of the fabric, economy and society of this substantial and surprisingly varied community near London. This is an invaluable book, for those interested in this fascinating area, for historians of London, and indeed for urban historians of the eighteenth century.” He might have added that it is of interest to all studying the mercantile and naval influence of Britain on and over the seas in that same age.

*Mile End Old Town* was, so to speak, the curtain-up, the eye opener. And here the methodology is explained. The focus is on merchant groups; whose importance and status is shown in land tax records and wills. It is on the basis of careful study of these records for significant numbers of persons that conclusions can safely be drawn.

To some degree, *Wapping 1600-1800* by Morris and Cozens is a parallel work. But here, as I understand it, the emphasis is more on the mercantile and the business of shipping, international trade, the coastal trade, victualling and supplying the Navy. Cozens’ main effort has been to locate archives and to use the internet to its fullest capability to identify, cross-reference and expand our knowledge of the meagre mercantile records of the eighteenth century that are available. The use of family history sources is another unique factor that has allowed the authors to build-up better biographical information on merchants and their operations. Cozens is interested in merchant connections. His links at the Greenwich Maritime Institute have given him association with scholars focusing on the maritime world. He is now regarded as the lead authority of information on mercantile contacts, and has placed him at the head of a network of scholars sharing a mutual interest in the global history of merchant networks. Collaboration with Gary L. Sturgess of the University of New South Wales has led to important discoveries on Anthony Calvert, noted ship owner engaged in convict transport. Like Morris, he is assiduous in his efforts, and leaves no stone unturned in his search. Like Morris he is imaginative, bringing together a vast web of connections—who traded with whom, and who supplied what to whom. So we discover that he is interested in instrument makers and retailers of Wapping, ironmongers and ship owners, those who refined sugar, and those who did the workaday efforts of empire and global commerce. Sir William Curtis, MP, and his brother Timothy operated a vast provisioning service, supplying, for example, dried peas and flour for the first Convict Fleet. East India Company ships were hired for this service. Other traders were in the North America timber trade, particularly in New Hampshire. There are China and Baltic links, ties with the slave trade of West Africa, links to trade with the Levant at Aleppo and Constantinople. The coal industry makes its appearance, linked as it was to Newcastle. The Navy needed biscuits and meat: they were provided for by Wapping interests. There were booksellers here, stocking the up-to-date works on seafaring and voyages. There were charity schools and many kinds of adherents to the faith, not least Quakers. Here was a world before the welfare state, one in which parishes, almshouses and workhouses, and charities looked after the needy. The era is long before what was later described as the horrific poverty of East London, which Robert Hughes actually misdated and misconstrued in *The Fatal Shore* (1986). It was a world of merchant networks, a time

when the Thames and the British Isles constituted the hub of British trade and commerce. Shying away from any quote from say, Daniel Defoe or Benjamin Franklin, Morris and Cozens have gone back to the data to recreate the world now lost of Wapping. Here is presented, as Professor Michael Port of London University said of *Mile End Old Town*, “a markedly different picture from that traditional one of East London still presented in a dismissive paragraph even in well-reputed histories.” It is a story of family-based business partnerships. Merchants of Wapping created wealth for the British state through foreign trade. Their activities contributed mightily to the raising of tax revenue that supported the Navy. And the authors correctly make the claim that these merchant links helped finance a lasting British maritime supremacy, one enabling a global British Empire. When completed, the long-term project compiling databases of London merchants will be a great contribution to historical studies.

We now turn to the most recently published book of the series. In *Whitechapel*, which covers the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Morris, assisted by Cozens, has attempted to answer the question of what the area was like. It places an emphasis on the people who lived and worked in Whitechapel. The search embarked on was to report on their origins, education, occupations, social and commercial networks and religious connections. Other themes such as crime and punishment, medical services and hospitals are similarly attended to. How parishes were obliged to meet the requirements of the Settlement Act (to prove local residency) so that workhouses might be managed efficiently, with vagrancy controlled by this measure, is a poignant reminder of how earlier administrations attempted to deal with the indigent, destitute, deserving poor, and unemployable. The detailed tables, figures and references suffice to give clear demonstration of the authenticity of the research. The whole shows the colourful development of Whitechapel over two centuries, not as a grand portrait, but as a series of historical pictures.

Clearly most of the maritime industries, especially those servicing the thousands of ships and vessels making their way to the Port of London had to be based on the north bank of the Thames. (The great state military functions—Deptford naval yard, Woolwich with its guns, Chatham with its docks and repair facilities, even Greenwich with its seamen’s hospital—were on the south bank.) Just a few hundred yards inland on the north shore were the gunsmiths, sailmakers, ropeworks, coopers, shippers, breweries, distilleries, sugar refineries, together with a myriad of ancillary industries: all servicing the maritime industries but not needing to be right on the river bank. The defence of the Tower of London resided, by state provision, in Tower Hamlets Militia, and the coverage of this subject for the English Civil War forms a whole chapter in *Whitechapel*. This chapter and others deserve attention by readers. I was personally struck by how these separate themes or sub-subjects can stand alone; but equally remarkable, when taken altogether, they portray a functioning society that is energetic and creative, productive in commodities and services, and, above all, components of worldwide influence. War and peace favoured the participants in turn, and the vast British military and naval state, which was after all the biggest component in the national economy, had to be serviced. Whitechapel and the others rose on this imperial and military tide.

As other readers have noted with satisfaction, the final chapter, written by Morris with Cozens, draws a number of conclusions for the area as a whole. It was time, as they say, “to ignore the parish boundaries and to begin drawing conclusions about the nature of society in these areas in the eighteenth century”(149). Four main factors enabled the processing industries of these parishes to flourish: London’s growing demand for a wide range of services and products; the ability of finance to fund sugar refining, brewing and shipping; men with energy and managerial skills to take advantage of the growing markets and financial expertise available in the City of London; and a plentiful supply of labour as men and women moved into London from Essex and East Anglia. Prominent business partnerships developed across London’s eastern parishes. Local sources of finance aided this process but intelligent and skilled persons active in marine industries and activities benefited from this—and spread the networks. The spreading of risk by investors in the “shipping interest” of the East India Company enhanced individual wealth and credit, enlarging the connections of East London merchants and traders. Their discussion of these issues is linked to the existing literature on London’s history; they reveal how unique these parishes were at that time. By doing so the challenge is laid down that the authors call “many traditional stereotypes” of London parishes are incorrect. The value of this conclusion, with its many appreciations of the new state of historiography that embraces their own published work (and work in progress), will be of immense value to future researchers. Professors and students of urban history are going to have to wake up to these new realities. The activities of the merchant and merchant classes, often strangely sidelined, now receive the beginning of the attention they deserve. As John S. Galbraith, the dean of historians who study the great chartered companies, remarked, the expansion of the British Empire was largely motivated by the energies of the mercantile class, and far more important to the shaping of British Imperial policy than the secretaries and bureaucrats of state often credited with its formation were hundreds of men of the commercial community, most unknown to history, who created the conditions upon which that policy was based. After a further volume is published on Shadwell, Ratcliff and Poplar, a summary volume will be necessary, which in its own way will be a guide and compendium to the whole set. Perhaps, too, that will be the greatest challenge of all.

These books are well worth the serious attention of any scholar undertaking an analysis of merchant activities in that particular age of British global reach. They are a credit to their authors and to the hard-pressed local history society that is publishing them. These books are also a model of what local history can reveal: far more than the bricks and mortar. Human society is about connections, personal, corporate and institutional. Here we have excellent examples of worlds now sadly lost but well worthy of recreating in these distinguished histories.

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