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Land of Cockayne

by [Alexandra Mullen](#)

On *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England, 1600-1770* by Emily Cockayne.

Emily Cockayne

Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England, 1600-1770.

Yale University Press, 335 pages, \$35

Ever since Cain founded the first city, cities have the reputation of being havens for murderers, crooks, and conmen, snobs and hairdressers, brothels and bars, restaurants and coffee houses. All the pleasures, really, with the only serpent in sight being municipal government. Cities have also given rise to the pleasures of indignation. Here, for example, is an ancestor of the famous Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells, “disgusted of Manchester,” on a day at the races:

To display that *Scene of Iniquity* in its proper colours, would sully the imagination and taint the minds of men afresh ... the representation of it only, is so odious, that no pure Eye can see, nor modest Ear can hear, without *Horror* and *Astonishment*; ... [blasphemy and obscenity was] so shocking to the Ears of every modest person, as to make them tingle.

Disgusted of Manchester appears in Emily Cockayne’s enchantingly icky new book, *Hubbub*. He is unusual there not because of his distaste but because of his refusal to color in the sensory outlines (his most vivid physical word—“tingle”—describes his reaction rather its source). Cockayne’s period was not known for mealy-mouthedness, and she obviously suits it; her book is chockablock with hair-raising contemporary descriptions and illustrations of “filth, noise and stench.”

Scholarly writing stares dispassionately into the distance, and Cockayne, a historian, can deploy the telescopic tools of scholarship: fifty pages of notes, twelve single-spaced pages of bibliography. Appropriately, however, her anatomy of disgust is guided by, let us say, an awareness of gritty humanity: “So what upset the senses of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century citizens? What made eyes water, ears ache, noses wrinkle, fingers withdraw and mouths close?” Her answers range from the reek of rotten offal to the bumpy cobblestones that made Samuel Pepys’s testicles hurt.

How to organize and survey such an *embarras de richesses*? One way is by geography: Cockayne concentrates mainly on London, then Manchester, Oxford, and Bath. Another is by sources: She repeatedly returns to a group of “inperfs”—actual human subjects who dodged urban pigs, picked their way through dung, cat-shopped against infestations of rats, and so forth. Well-known figures include Pepys, Anthony à Wood, Margaret Cavendish, Robert Hooke, Bernard Mandeville, and Tobias Smollett. Less well-known figures include Mary Chandler, a Bath milliner and friend of Pope; the clergyman James Woodforde; a Manchester wig-maker, Edmund Harrold; the London

satirist Ned Ward; and a vegetarian London hatter, Thomas Tryon. (One can only sympathize with his desire to avoid the privies of the time, for health as well as aesthetic reasons, and yet fastidiousness can be carried too far: Tryon died of “the Strangury or Retention of Urine.”) Finally, she parses the various soupçons of the disgusting: chapter titles run the gamut from Ugly, Itchy, and Noisy to Grotty, Busy, and Gloomy.

Cockayne hopes that her book will prove more than a litany of bygone woes. Inevitably, however, there is an element of “Good Lord, deliver us” as we read. Fortunately, many medical conditions and occupational hazards either no longer prevail or are easily curable. “Itchy,” on skin diseases and parasites, describes eczema, impetigo, scabies, chilblains, ringworm, and pimples, plus the charmingly named scurf, black morphew (leprous or scurvy skin), tetter (sores and spots), and—my new favorite—psorophthalmy (eyebrow dandruff). The “Ugly” chapter details physical disfigurements such as smallpox scars, birth defects like harelips, and rotten or missing teeth from malnutrition. Hazardous occupations included tailors and shoemakers, for instance, who “could be identified by their rounded shoulders and crooked backs as their work necessitated stooping for long periods.” Other jobs required using poisonous substances in enclosed places—“gilders risked being dazed, deafened or made dumb by breathing the vapours of their trade, while the fumes inhaled by pewterers were thought to make them paralytic.” I knew tanneries stank from urine, but I did not know that woad balls, used for blue dyes, “emitted such a disgusting sulphurous stench when fermenting that Queen Elizabeth banned woad processing within five miles of a royal residence.”

Some attempted cures had worse consequences than the original conditions. Rich people trying to conceal pock marks used cosmetics containing toxins. Poor people trying to stay clean used soap made from rancid fat and alkalis that was “greasy and irritated the skin.” A problem affecting everybody in cities was food. As cities expanded, food had to travel over longer distances to get to them. Fish often came from over a hundred miles away: Pepys’s stomach turned when he was faced with a sturgeon out of which were “very many little worms creeping.” Eggs from Scotland and Ireland would often arrive rotten. Meat on the hoof could walk itself to London from Yorkshire to be killed on the spot, but that didn’t guarantee that the meat the butcher sold you would be fresh—he could paint “stale flesh with fresh blood” to trick out meat that had already spoiled. Pigs foraged in London itself, but they might prove “measled pork” on your plate from infestations of tapeworms and bladderworms. Forget preserved meat: recipes included salprunella, a combination of charcoal dust and nitre, the active ingredient in gunpowder. It’s not only a carcinogen, but will turn your skin blue. Even locally cooked food could be dangerous—bread adulterated with alum or chalk, and, as we all suspect, “all kinds of horrors could be concealed in a pie.” If you did, against all odds, come home with fresh and healthful food, your own cooking pot might leach poisons into it.

But surely, although the details might change, gross stuff has always been with us. What makes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century nastiness new or worth writing about?

London, Manchester, Bath, and Oxford all experienced huge growth spurts during this period. London in 1600 had already overflowed its medieval walls with a population of 200,000; the population tripled by the end of the century as the city swallowed what had once been outlying villages. Manchester in 1600 had only 2,000 inhabitants, a dozen main streets, and one parish church. By 1773, it had 29,000 souls—fourteen times bigger—and had a handsome pink sandstone church to cure them in. It is not too much to say that the period marked the end of the medieval city and the beginning of the modern one. Old solutions to people living in close proximity to one another began to fail, and new ones had not yet been thought through and implemented.

Waste disposal—garbage, animal dung, and human sewage—affected everybody. Cockayne helpfully provides what might be called insalutary reminders: “In London the Thames was the main outlet for liquid waste. It was also a major source for the supply of water.” Some older solutions were adapted to new conditions. Goungefermours (gunge farmers, or dung scavengers), who had

worked independently at their pongy profession, began to be hired as city employees “for carrying away of all soyle, filthe and ordure in and aboute the streets and before men’s houses and doores.” Even though Manchester, for instance, had nineteen scavengers and two scavenger overseers by 1615, such measures proved no more than a stopgap as the flood of people increased and their productions piled up.

Some improvements led in turn to new problems: By 1736 London streets were lit by 1,000 oil lamps. Better lighting helped the public safety—not tripping over paving stones, not being run over by carriages, not being robbed by cutpurses are all good things. Perhaps they even helped with employment, since all those lamps had to be trimmed, filled, lit, and extinguished. At the same time, however, the lamps added both to the increasing smoke pollution and to the temptations of city workers to skim a little off the top. Sometimes disasters could be turned to some advantage. Housing was much improved by the Great Fire of London in 1666, which did away with many shambolic and unsafe neighborhoods. The 1667 Act for the Rebuilding of the City of London set down standards for building materials and wall thickness, which in turn created more aesthetically uniform, private, and quiet dwellings. Still, in the haste to rebuild, many new structures were shoddily constructed.

One of Cockayne’s key observations is that development and filth were companions. As Alexis de Tocqueville commented after a visit to Manchester, “here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish.” A hundred years earlier, Cockayne notes, Bernard Mandeville “connected the condition of the streets to economic development and urban population increases, which in turn sucked in more raw materials and spewed out more waste products.” In all these cases, infrastructure—sewers, roads, bridges—needed to adapt. Changes on this scale are not possible without dedicated planners, skilled engineers, and fairly centralized government agencies, and we have to wait another half century for the likes of Edwin Chadwick, Joseph Bazalgette, and Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

It was at the end of Cockayne’s period, in 1777, that Dr. Johnson said, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.” After reading Cockayne’s accounting, we can newly appreciate the high value that Johnson placed on his experiences. Ignorance of the health consequences of filth, noise, and stench might help people to be willing to put up with them. As Cockayne says, “humans generally cope.” But still, why would people even want to move in? Cockayne offers two possibilities. One was economic, especially opportunities for entrepreneurial self-determination. Another was social; in London you could find company congenial to your particular tastes rather than having to accommodate the company you found yourself in wherever you happened to be placed by birth. And perhaps, she posits, there was another reason: escape. Surely, city life, no matter how horrible, had to be better than life in the country surrounded by “clownish, lubberly, untaught, barbarous, ignorant, blundering, plain ... rude, slovenly, absurd, boysterous, blustering” rustics. Once you’ve gotten rid of Abel, why hang around with the Reubens?

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