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A better London

by Benjamin Riley

On Nairn's London & the career of the British architecture critic.

One of the dangers in writing about Ian Nairn, the architectural critic who died in 1983, is his quotability. No page goes by in Nairn's *London* without a veritable zinger, the sort of quip that should be reproduced endlessly in anthologies of quotations. A piece on Nairn could easily degenerate into an infinite list of Nairn's best lines, of which there are naturally too many to relate in a single space. But even with this word of warning stated, one must quote Nairn liberally to give a sense of his gift: a clear-eyed, often withering wit.

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His biographical credit, almost certainly written by himself, states that Nairn "was brought up in a part of Surrey that produced a deep hatred of characterless buildings and places . . . he [took] a bad degree in mathematics and [was] a pilot in the raf." These are the rough outlines of a man whom an architectural historian friend of mine

(and fellow Nairn devotee) is fond of calling, in a paraphrase of Jonathan Meades, "almost defiantly red-brick." Indeed, there is a touch of the Angry Young Man about Nairn, a point the Nairn acolyte Gavin Stamp makes in his afterword to the reissued 2014 edition of *Nairn's London*.¹ Nairn was disgusted by the pretension of most modern architecture, which presumed to tell people in what kind of buildings they should want to live, work, and worship. A 1966 polemic entitled "Stop the Architects Now," written for the *Observer*, disparaged modern architecture as "just not good enough . . . beneath the buildings of quality there is a soggy, shoddy mass of half-digested clichés, half-peeling façades, half-comfortable rooms, untested preconceptions about what people want." In a sense Nairn was a forerunner of the "New Urbanism" movement, which sought to create sensible developments based on traditional principles. But Nairn can't be pigeonholed so easily—his tastes were admittedly subjective, and he never approached architecture with a moralizing framework in the way that Jane Jacobs did. He merely wanted to see the decent, old buildings of England left alone, and not be subsumed into an indistinct mass, endlessly repeatable but never memorable.

His *London*, then, is a sort of bleary-eyed love letter to the buildings that define the city. When the book was published in 1966 Nairn had only lived in London for ten years, and yet he had perceived something essential about the place, namely that it was the quirks that made it grand.

Any discussion of Nairn, and architecture in England generally, must at some point make reference to the late Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, whose guides to the buildings of England remain the principal reference works in any architectural historian's library. Including all of England's counties, with six books on London alone, the Pevsner guides achieve a remarkable comprehensiveness and seem to strive towards objectivity, both in content and tone (though aesthetic judgments are buried in the histories). In this way, they stand as the apparent opposite of Nairn's work—ice-cold, assured, and unequivocal, they have no taste for the giddy metaphors that pepper Nairn's accounts. To wit, Pevsner on Soane's Chelsea Hospital stables: "its stock brick front the most elegant of minimal designs, just three concentric arches." And Nairn: "a clear, Euclidian proof of the argument of this book, that $2 + 2 = 5$." But this easy contrast obscures the muddled truth of the matter. For one thing, Nairn was a great admirer of Pevsner, saying that "for architectural information there is nothing to beat *The Buildings of England*." Nairn got his own chance to contribute to the Pevsner guides with the 1962 edition for his home county of Surrey. The working relationship between Pevsner and Nairn seems to have functioned well enough, though it must have been slightly uneasy, with Nairn working on half of *Sussex* before declining to continue the partnership, citing the necessity of providing detailed descriptions as too taxing. Nonetheless, a level of mutual respect existed between the two, with Pevsner freely admitting that Nairn "writes better than I could ever hope to write."

Perhaps the foremost joy to be had in reading Nairn is to survey his comments on one's own London area of operations. On Belgravia, the area directly north of my flat: "some of the richest, the wickedest, the oddest of London is to be found in the square mile between Knightsbridge and Victoria." He singles out a favorite pub of mine, the Grenadier, on the site of an old Guards' Mess: "untouched by half timber, leaded light, chromium plate, or Festival of Britain lettering. It is the old servants' pub that has short-circuited to become a local for the rich mews-dwellers, rich enough to appreciate the shabbiness and leave it alone." Nairn had a keen social eye, and he continues his description with an obscure, but percipient truth: "The English ancien régime had and still has a lot of faults; but one of its great virtues was that it was really prepared to tolerate eccentricity." This was made clear to me one night when, in another pub at the nexus of Chelsea, Belgravia, and Pimlico, a man dressed in full shooting attire—plus-fours and matching tweed jacket—walked in. No one blinked.

But there are treats to be had farther afield, too. Nairn is particularly good on churches. St Paul, Wilton Place is "one more lean nineteenth-century church, religion on the cheap"; St James, Piccadilly is "Wren's favourite church and no wonder. This is as far as the Wren virtues can take you, as good of its kind as it could be . . . a parallel to Inigo Jones's idea of plain exteriors and rich interiors" with a superb Grinling Gibbons reredos: "like a Chardin still-life, this fruit is more fruity than the real thing." Of Jones's own ecclesiastical work at St Paul, Covent Garden—and to my eye,

his best—"a box with a lid on it; but 'box' and 'lid' never mean quite the same again." Moving on to the City, Nairn reserves his highest praise for Hawksmoor's endearingly odd St Mary Woolnoth, immortalized (as if it needed it) in Eliot's *Waste Land*—"A crowd flowed over London Bridge/. . . Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,/ to where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours/ With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine." For Nairn, St Mary Woolnoth is "the one City church you must go in. By comparison almost all Baroque churches on the Continent seem overloaded and hysterical. . . . It feels like being on the hot end of a burning glass . . . for the price of a bus ticket to the City, the super-reality of the mystics of mescaline." Westminster RC Cathedral, where I occasionally take in an organ concert for its superb acoustics, comes in for a bag of critique: "almost accidentally, a superb religious warehouse" where "the great domed bays, built of yellow bricks which have gone almost black [now, totally so], are a true nineteenth-century equivalent to the austerity of the Cistercians." The original plan was to face the brick in marble and Nairn lamented the ongoing process, while allowing that "in the face of such devotion, how can I say that it is misplaced?" He would be gratified to know that, fifty years on, the marbleizing has not gotten very far. Despite his apparent lack of religion, Nairn had a great feeling for churches, not in Larkin's "Church Going" sense, but for their architectural possibilities. The greatest summation of London's ecclesiastical patrimony is reserved for its grandest—Westminster Abbey. Nairn calls it "the perfect governmental report on the French Gothic; prepared, as it were, to see if the European style was suited to the English practice. Level-headed, solving all of its problems, translating them correctly into meticulous English."

But what really delighted Nairn were the seedier bits of London, those particular joys of urban living. Soho was "the free port that every city must have. . . . If you want the wickedest place in Britain, you can find it; if you want a cosmopolitan village in the city, with village shops and pubs, it is there also." This potent admixture, with both the *haut* and *bas* elements set into higher relief by the contrast, is Soho's charm, and Nairn's affection for the scene is clear, if tinged with wist: "The tarts are off the streets now. Instead there are traffic wardens, taking up the same kind of stance but not looking nearly so inviting. If you want a lady, ring on doorbells marked Marie or Sabrina; and good luck." He saw London as it is: a city of villages, each with its own high street and own specific flavor. Shepherd Market, situated enviably in W1 behind Piccadilly and before Mayfair, was "Mayfair's original village"—according to the recent signage appearing there—and to Nairn its "most determined and unexpected. . . . [Shepherd Market] is still rough; or rather, rough and very smooth at the same time. The two seem to get on." In Shepherd Market, where still today a Polish-Mexican restaurant trades across from one of London's most exclusive members clubs, "The whole pack of humanity is dealt to you, knaves and jokers included. Anything can happen to you, but it is your own choice." Nairn saw and relished the unlimited potential of the organic city, which always was at its highest in the liminal spaces. There is no reason Shepherd Market should continue to exist—it is surrounded by the most expensive real estate in London, where houses run into the tens of millions of pounds. And yet it does still, illogical as always, a stubborn hold-out against development, an always buoying warren of streets where the squalid and high society not only coexist but feed off each other.

A better London can, at the very least, be evoked.

Nairn did, however, anticipate the way most of London would become too dear for the average citizen, with the finest buildings often turned into embassies. Of Kensington Palace Gardens: "A Victorian Millionaire's Row . . . a motorist's

shortcut from Notting Hill to Kensington High Street—if you can outface the formidable guardians at either end. Yesterday's money-power has given way to today's much more sinister political power. . . . It is quite a relief to go downhill to Kensington Palace where normal people like Princess Margaret live." But even he could not foresee the towering ascent of London's property market. In 1966 he could still write that Belgravia was "the equivalent of pre-war Mayfair." But no one gives dances in Eaton Square anymore, and many of the leases in SW1X are taken by hedge funds and other more insidious businesses. The lights tend to be dark at night, and in February a group of anarchist squatters commandeered an unoccupied terrace house for a few days before the police dispatched them; throughout the saga, the absentee Russian oligarch owner could not be reached for comment.

My sympathy for Nairn may be instinctual; he lived, as I do now, in what Anthony Powell called "a vast, desolate region of stucco streets and squares upon which a doom seemed to have fallen." Pimlico, our little corner of Stuccovia, is no longer so gloomy—like the rest of London it's been smartened up—and the shabbily genteel (and often plain-shabby) early-Victorian terrace houses of Nairn's day have been scrubbed and refitted. The pub where Nairn drank himself to death is now—like many old London boozers—genericized, and owned by a group with nearly eighty pubs to their name, all simulacra of authentically "ye olde" British public houses. Time moves on without concern for the minor figures populating its sweep; the planners—or, as Betjeman called them, the "plansters"—have won. In another twenty years' time, London may be unrecognizable. As I write this the cranes have descended on "Nine Elms," a fake neighborhood sitting on the remains of Battersea Power Station where the American Embassy will move next year. Those who keep an eye on such things have noticed London is becoming more like New York—tall buildings for tallness's sake, with a wanton disregard for history. In the introduction to his guide, Nairn, with characteristic self-effacement, wonders "whether this grandiose programme has achieved anything more than a collection of subjective maunderings." I fear he may be right. Preservation remains a tenuous goal, forever pushed aside by perfectly legitimate yet callously ugly and unfeeling projects. Some of the buildings Nairn wrote about are now gone; more will follow in turn. As long as Nairn's London stays in print, however, a better London can, at the very least, be evoked.

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