

The great stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the cleansing of the Victorian metropolis.

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The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Metropolis (review)

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REVIEW

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Book Review

The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Metropolis

***The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Metropolis*, by Stephen Halliday**; pp. xiii + 210. Phoenix Mill and New York: Sutton, 1999, £19.99, \$36.95.

Sir Joseph William Bazalgette (1819-91) was the respected chief engineer who designed and supervised construction of the London main drainage system, massive embankments along the Thames riverfront, and scores of new streets and parks for the crowded capital. Unlike his contemporaries Robert Stephenson and I. K. Brunel, however, he was not immortalized.

Stephen Halliday intends to restore Bazalgette's reputation by showing how he transformed London as surely as G. E. Haussmann transformed Paris. His projects cleaned a polluted environment (epitomized by the Great Stink of 1858, when a hot, dry summer drew sickening miasmas from the sewage-choked Thames) and ended the threat of cholera. A biographical focus, journalistic style, and numerous illustrations create a lively text out of carefully researched material. The portrait of Bazalgette is more problematical: consumed by his engineering projects, he left almost no evidence of personal relationships. Over forty years of reports, Parliamentary testimony, and official correspondence reveal little about his character. Family papers released in the 1980s resulted in a short memoir by Denis Smith for the Newcomen Society (1986-87), which Halliday has expanded for an opening chapter. But he has come little closer to Bazalgette's personality, concluding only that he must have been "a man of heroic patience and exemplary persistence" (11) to deal with the frustrations inherent in public improvement projects.

The numerous books and articles examining those projects during the past quarter-century are barely noticed in Halliday's account, which relies instead on his own extensive archival research. Anthony Wohl, David Owen, Bill Luckin, Gloria Clifton, John Doxat, and Christopher Hamlin are all listed in the bibliography, but minimally cited. Their work is not incorporated without credit; rather, it has been virtually recast from the original records, with a new emphasis on personal achievements by interesting characters.

The book begins with a review of London's water and sanitation facilities prior to 1850. By that year an exploding population, using the new water closets and draining their old cesspits into the Thames river, had polluted the water supply. Cholera epidemics prompted efforts to find fresh water sources and to "flush" sewage downstream, but Edwin Chadwick, distrusted by local vestries and professional engineers alike, failed to solve the problem. In 1855, Parliament reluctantly established a Metropolitan Board of Works--not a real government, but a makeshift consolidation of hundreds of vestry and district utility boards. The MBW was charged to construct an integrated system of sewers to carry London's sewage far down the valley and discharge it beyond the limits of habitation. Joseph Bazalgette became chief of the MBW's new engineering department.

Halliday chronicles the official commissions that sorted out designs for the London main drainage, the infighting between the MBW and government agencies, the impatience and ridicule of the public as streets and old drains were dug up, and the acclaim earned by Bazalgette and the MBW as the system began to prove itself. Government parsimony led to foreseeable problems: the metropolis spread beyond the original discharge points, and the MBW was criticized for despoiling the river. Halliday examines various schemes for converting sewage into agricultural fertilizer and, in a pair of useful postscripts, outlines recent innovations in sewage treatment that answer Victorian difficulties. A **[End Page 530]** chapter on cholera covers familiar ground from the miasmatic theory of disease through Chadwick and John Snow to the

gradual acceptance of germ theory. Halliday credits the eradication of cholera to Bazalgette's main drainage system and to the MBW's insistence that local water companies find clean sources. He also celebrates Bazalgette's five-mile embankments along the Thames waterfront, which turned a filthy stretch of coal wharves and mud-strewn ferry...

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