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Book Reviews



THE IMPACT OF THE RAILWAYS IN THE EAST END: 1835-2010. HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY FROM THE LONDON OVERGROUND EAST LONDON LINE. By Emma Dwyer. Pp. 117, Illus 131. Museum of London Archaeology, 2011. Price: £14.00. ISBN 978 190199 298 4.

The impact of main line railways on existing townscapes and their influence on later urban development has been the subject of much research and discussion, most notably in J. R. Kellet's 1969 volume on *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities*. At first glance, Dwyer's monograph seemed to present a welcome opportunity to test the assumptions and theories aired in the last forty years against actual archaeological evidence. Despite an articulate text and high-production values, the book sadly promises more than it delivers, and in this reviewer's assessment, makes a disappointing contribution to a seminal subject.

The book deals with archaeological investigation (c. 2003 to 2007) in advance of the extension of the East London line. It consists of: an introduction to London's railways; recording and discussion of the excavated remains pre-dating the Eastern Counties Railway (ECR) around Shoreditch High Street; a history of the ECR railway, with a record of the remains of Shoreditch Station; recording and discussion of a selection of structures in Dalston; and the republication of an earlier discussion of the 'modern archaeology' of the area (E. Dwyer: *Underneath the Arches: the Afterlife of a Railway Viaduct*, in A. Horning and M. Palmer (ed.), *Crossing Paths or Sharing Tracks?*, 351–64, 2009). The volume is attractively produced and fluently written, and in the layout, number and balance of illustrations (photos, plans and maps) appears to present a thoughtful and complete consideration of the subject.

Unfortunately, an attempt to use this monograph to gain an archaeologically informed view of the influence of the main line railway on this part of the East End of London, and thus to draw wider conclusions on the subject, is likely to fail. Close examination shows that the book contains a number of problems of presentation and interpretation, and that the impression of detail masks a disappointing lack of archaeologically significant information or pertinent interpretation. For example, the discussion of Shoreditch Station, forming almost a quarter of the book, is largely straightforward description, with little information relevant to the development or function of the complex. Where material of archaeological interest occurs — the remains of the hydraulic system, or the railway stables in the viaduct — this is either mentioned in passing without analysis, or dubiously interpreted; most obviously, in the speculation that a surveyors' mark in figure 49 showed the 'particular injuries' the horse in that stall had suffered (p. 43).

The sections on below-ground investigation appear to suffer similar difficulties of interpretation, and additional flaws in documentation. No clear attempt seems to be made to engage with larger issues posed by the material culture, such as whether the nature of the finds at 3–7 Lee Street — effectively luxury goods — confirmed or contradicted the impression of the area’s character gained from other sources (Chapter 6, p. 87 ff.). Due to a number of presentation problems, neither is it easy for the reader to draw independent conclusions. The text and illustrations must be searched carefully for clues regarding such basics as trench location and orientation. In the most extreme case, the Lee Street trench simply cannot be located using the available information.

The author makes a commendable attempt to provide social context for the archaeological information. Unfortunately, rather than furthering discussion of the evidence, this material largely overshadows any attempt to draw conclusions from the archaeology which then lead to an understanding of the railway’s influence on the area. This is a puzzling lapse for an organization of MoLA’s stature, and a clue may lie in the book’s length. At just over one hundred pages, it is unusually affordable for a publication of this type. However, it is also unfeasibly short for the sheer scope of the material it tries to cover, and this ambitious attempt has evidently led to composition and editing flaws which readers would not expect to find from such a source. A valiant bid to pack in the maximum amount of sometimes widely divergent information (including discussions of graffiti and racial tension) has regrettably resulted in a missed opportunity. More judicious use of the archaeological evidence and the available secondary sources might have resulted in a more useable and valuable volume.

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