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The Smoake of London: Two Prophecies

By

JAMES P. LODGE, JR.

Elmsford, New York: Maxwell Reprint Co. 1969.

Pp. xii, 56, \$5.00.

England, the first nation to enter the industrial revolution, was also the first to experience the deleterious effects of an unbridled industrialism fueled by coal. Still, it comes as something of a surprise to discover in this fascinating little book that the first anti-pollution tract was written as early as the seventeenth century, and that a Scottish short-story writer forecast the London Killer Smog of 1952 a half century before the event.

Dr. James P. Lodge, Jr., program scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research at Boulder, Colorado, has a nose for history as well as for air pollutants. After reading his book, ecologists might well adopt John Evelyn for their patron saint, with Robert Barr as his prophet. Though separated by two and a half centuries, both men shared a common nightmare: that unless some means were devised to abate smoke pollution in London, the capital could become a wasteland or, worse yet, a tomb. They used the pen to sound a clarion call, one addressing a petition to his king, the other writing a frightening short-story. Their pleas fell on deaf ears, only to be dusted off and reprinted years later when the environmental crisis has reached world-wide proportions.

Evelyn, a staunch royalist in the Civil War, pinned his hopes for a cleaner London on the recently-restored Charles II. In an essay addressed to the king in 1661 entitled, *Fumifugium: on the Inconvenience of Aer and Smoake of London Dissipated*, he called upon the Stuart monarch to rescue his subjects from "that Hellish and dismal cloud of seacoale" that rotted men's lungs and befuddled their minds. The area around St. Paul's, he wrote, was so poisoned with the fumes from furnaces that ". . . I have hardly been able to pass through it, for the extraordinary stench and *halitus* it sends forth. . ." An amateur horticulturist and proponent of reforestation, Evelyn saw an ominous sign in the withering of plant life in the London area. Orchards which once flourished in the heart of the city now barely survived under hot-bed conditions. And even when these emaciated trees did blossom and bear fruit "it was bitter as the Apples of Sodom." Yet Evelyn recalled that when the Scots laid siege to Newcastle in 1644, cutting off London's supply of soft coal, these same gardens produced bumper crops of succulent fruit.

The diarist did more than protest; he offered solutions. First, the worst smoke offenders—the brewers, lime-burners, dyers, salt-makers and soap boilers—should be removed at least six miles down river. Second, London should be ringed by plantations of sweet-smelling trees, shrubs and herbs to perfume and purify the air. Perhaps it was just as well for Evelyn's reputation that this aspect of his plan was not put to the test since it is highly doubtful that the trees would have survived. Conditions, of course, grew worse in the eighteenth century and, when *Fumifugium* was reprinted in 1772, the editor took the occasion to cite the harrowing statistic that half the children bred and born in the metropolis died before their second birthday. The chief culprit: foul air. Parliamentary committees were empaneled in the next century to examine the problem, but *laissez-faire* attitudes prevailed and no enforceable legislation was enacted at Westminster.

When Robert Barr, editor and co-founder of *The Idler*, sat down to write "The Doom of London" in 1894, industrial smogs had become commonplace in Britain. Projecting himself into the mid-twentieth century, Barr described what happened to the world's largest city when a moderate smog coincided with an extended period of atmospheric calm. For seven days London's thousands of chimneys poured soot into the chill atmosphere. At night new fog was created at ground level, but the clouds of coal dust held it down and filtered through it. The sun's rays could not penetrate the blackness to dissipate the thickening cover and, on the seventh day, candles flickered out and London's millions suffocated for lack of oxygen.

Frightening fiction, yes, but fifty-eight years after the story was published, the conditions described by Barr were almost, but not quite, duplicated in reality. In December, 1952, a black smog settled over southeastern England as the winds dropped. Londoners gasped for breath, some with respiratory ailments died, while cattle at the Smithfield livestock show had to be revived with whiskey and eucalyptus. This time the message struck home. In 1956 Parliament enacted the first Clean Air Act with teeth in it. The burning of soft coal in the metropolis was banned. London, thank goodness, has not been the same since.

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