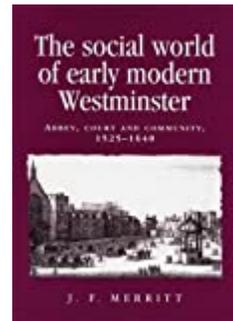


J. F. Merritt. *The Social World of Early Modern Westminster: Abbey, Court, and Community, 1525-1640.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. xiii + 378 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-4896-8.



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History from Above and Below (Again)

We often think of early modern Westminster as goliath London's next-door neighbor or its growing western spread. We rarely think of it as a living and breathing city in its own right, with multiple identities, complex administrative layers, and an acute sense of self. For good reason perhaps, because it was a city in name alone, not nailed down with a charter. The name came with legislation in 1540, and a coat of arms followed in 1601, with quarter sessions not far behind (1618). Westminster also sent members on the short walk to Parliament. A new ruling body—the Court of Burgesses—was set-up in 1585, but it was in some respects compensation for a failure to secure incorporation. Westminster remained in many ways three parishes: St. Margarets, St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and St. Clement Danes.

Changes during the early modern period altered Westminster's administration, population, and landscape for good. Religious reform turned the world upside down. The building of Whitehall Palace (1530-32) carved up roads, lands, and parish limits. And, like London, Westminster had to cope with swift growth, swarms of vagrants, soaring crime, and more dirt and grime, all at

a time when people lived under plague's heavy shadow. Migrants squeezed into shabby slums not far down the street from plush gentry homes. Westminster was many things at once, but not all change was for the bad. The growing royal presence boosted local economies, most notably bustling service sectors. And Westminster was also home to an emerging fashionable society of gentlemen and aristocrats, who spent large parts of the year there to be close to the royal court.

Westminster looked very different a century or so after it first got the right to call itself a city. By 1640, the Crown backed the idea of well-to-do estates circling its court and looked aghast at run-down places on its edges, where diseases waited to pounce along with thieves. In a few decades, large townhouses sprouted up along the Strand, high-end shops popped up to cater to gentry tastes with Britain's Bourse as their gleaming cathedral, and Covent Garden was taking shape nicely. Gentry numbers seesawed from one year to the next, but signs of gentrification were clear in spruce buildings and urban gentry cultures of sophisticated socializing, sports, and green spaces. But lacking their own enclaves for

a while, they rubbed shoulders with Westminster's hoi polloi, and complained about the sights and smells of brewhouses, mucky sea coal, or cheap housing. Worlds overlapped. Paupers mixed with well-heeled social "betters," serving, selling, or working for them. Many different Westminsters existed indeed: national politics, royal authority, gentry seasons, smart new West End developments, parishes, paupers, and, last but not least, the Abbey, always there despite the religious rollercoaster ride, dominating Westminster's silhouette along with the intrusive palace.

These things are well known, yet we have been waiting for a book on Tudor and Stuart Westminster for a long while now. Medieval Westminster has had its fair share of coverage; we also know quite a lot about Westminster over the "long eighteenth century." But the time sandwiched in between remains a royal story in the main, or one about the budding West End. (Jeremy Boulton is uncovering the worlds of the poor but not yet in a book.) Westminster crops up in every book on high politics or courtly cultures from an elite standpoint, yet we know little about the town's administration or people beneath these lofty heights. And so Julia Merritt's book is both timely and an opportunity to open up early modern Westminster for others after her. There is not a lot to surprise us in her book; not much is new in chapters on poverty or the West End, except depth and detail in new contexts, and a story from the town's point of view. Merritt has done solid spadework in archives, although her methodology is fairly traditional—long narrative passages, with not much conceptual thinking about crime, gender, or cities or their spaces.

In some ways this book is a tale of two parishes with sufficient records to rebuild social worlds: St. Margaret's and St. Martin's. A running theme is comparisons between bigger, poorer, and more conservative St. Margaret's that embodied interests of the old medieval "vill," and its more "open" neighbor, where more dapper gentry set up home and administration, and minds were more adaptable. Parish comparisons does not sound like a riveting thesis. More promising is the idea that Westminster developed a stronger independent spirit as spiraling growth made clear the need for tight government in testing times when Abbey, Crown, and townsmen all sought to get the upper hand. Merritt gives a blow-by-blow account of this tussle and concludes that the balance of power tilted towards the Crown through interventions to regulate its rowdier and more polluted neighborhoods, and the new office of high steward that gave it more muscle in the town. The Crown also backed the Abbey

when it tried to block incorporation; the Abbey had long thought of St. Margaret's as its patch. If successful, the 1585 incorporation, with St. Margaret's vestrymen at the helm, would have led to a lay controlled government across the city, something that the dean and chapter could not stomach. It turned out the other way around in the Court of Burgesses; the dean took the chair together with the high steward. The Abbey kept a tight grip on its secular powers and blocked a second bid for city status, in 1607, by townsmen who wanted to strip it of authority to pick burgesses and pass laws.

The Court of Burgesses was a response to the need for "good government" to keep on top of deeper disorder and poverty. Townspeople felt that they could handle this task better than the Abbey. But they did not get their own way and Westminster remained, in Merritt's words, "one of the greatest administrative anomalies" in the land (p. 101). The Court of Burgesses soon got down to the job of tackling vagrants, scrounging inmates, and banning building, immorality, and markets. But surviving records cover only six years (1610-1616), and, although we get close-up glimpses of the court in action, the court is hard to assess when the records leave us in the dark for so long. But Westminster's parishes stepped in to try and keep problems in check. Without incorporation, leading townspeople teamed up in vestries that had more clout and importance than most parishes elsewhere, even taking on powers that we couple with county or civic governments. True to form the parishes revealed differences. A vestry of middling men took control of St. Margaret's and its finances after 1575, a few decades before this happened in St. Martin's, and this had something to do with longer traditions of working solidarities in fraternities or the abbot's manor court. Two-thirds of burgesses came from St. Margaret's, and the parish identified more closely with civic identity and city status. This was partly because St. Martin's had a greater gentry contingent with a greater stake in comings and goings at court and a lesser stake in a parish where they spent half of the year. A vestry of "masters of the parish" was running things by 1600 with some gentry on board, although they tended to be squeezed out after 1620 when the vestry shrunk in size. Townspeople and gentlemen were also at loggerheads now and then: royal officials ducked parish duties or skipped paying rates, gentlemen begrudged snubs like middling men taking over "principall pewes," parishioners felt bitter that gentry in town for the season had half-hearted commitments to the parish.

All this Merritt shows in fine detail, and we know more now about the trials and tribulations of day-to-

day government in Westminster. Not for the first time, piety and poverty are the twin concerns of parish studies. Merritt constructs parish comparisons around receptiveness towards religious reform and patterns of poor relief. Conservative St. Margaret's was slower to respond to protestant evangelizing, as we would expect, with its tight ties to the Abbey and bustling fraternities. The dissolutions had a "devastating impact" (p. 46), but the parish was still buying images deep into the 1540s, forked out for a Prayer Book quite late, and stood firm against communion in both kinds for as long as possible. It had a sluggish response to the Elizabethan Settlement, and conservatism and ceremonialism remained hallmarks, something encouraged by a string of second-rate ministers—"dumb dogs" as puritans called them in 1585. The Abbey had some godly men in its ranks, but it is hard to find a robust godly core in the parish. It was a different story across the parish border. St. Martin's quickly turned itself into a parish that valued preaching, catechizing, and conforming without fuss to the letter of the law. It was open to change with its faster growing population and influx of godly gentlemen who linked up with pious vestrymen. One thing the parishes had in common was the speed in which each took Laudian innovations on board. St. Martin's vestry was thinking about new rails in 1626 before Laud changed everything, and new colored glass in church windows three years later was an attempt to make the church more "orderly and attractive," Merritt explains (p. 346). Some more explanation might be necessary, however, as she sees "conflict" in St. Martin's over Laud's tampering, about which we hear little, and she assumes that silences in sources suggest that changes were welcomed in conservative leaning St. Margaret's.

We learn about new contexts for religious change in these pages, but there is little interpretative freshness. It is important to know that one parish reacted with "quietly obstructive conservatism" and the other was "enthusiastic" when reformers came knocking at the door (p. 40). And the presence of well-to-do recusants and foreign ambassadors and their trains—who sheltered priests, heard mass, and took solace in the "catholic court" of the 1630s—adds another layer to social worlds. We know more about early modern Westminster now, and the influence of the Abbey is skillfully shown. But it will surprise no one to hear that ministers had impacts for better or worse on the course of change, that at least thirteen lackluster ministers in Elizabethan St. Margaret's hampered "hotter" evangelism, or that godly Robert Beste had a different impact in St. Martin's when the throne

changed hands four times in little over a decade. And it is not a bolt from the blue to hear that social and institutional differences had an effect on religious change in parishes, together with the unity or otherwise of the cream of the parish.

Nor do we learn much that is new about poverty or the Poor Law, except that we now have a better understanding of Westminster, an important addition given the powers of its parishes. Westminster's vestries handled sums of money that dwarfed most other collections elsewhere. Like religion, the two parishes differed in how they collected and dished out poor relief, and for similar reasons, like administrative traditions. It also made a difference that St. Margaret's had more hard-up paupers, one reason surely that it was quick to act in setting up something like a compulsory levy around 1560. Rates never took the place of private handouts, however, and were barely half of overall receipts in panic times when plague zipped through the city. Unlike St. Martin's, individual benefactors were a key source of charity. The poor rate was a larger slice of receipts there, but never tapped the potential for giving by gentry residents with homes elsewhere, who had shallower ties to the parish. The harsh reality for parish leaders was a shortfall in collections, even though they exerted tighter controls around 1610 when resource squeezes sharpened, roughly three decades after their neighbor. They also had a house of correction by then, although again a few decades behind the parish next door. Entitlement, morality, residence, and vagrancy were all more closely policed in both parishes with officials in the thick of the action, dishing out charity in "a discriminating manner" with "some flexibility" (p. 293), something we have come to expect from work on other cities.

In some respects Merritt has written "history from above." She is most interested in religion, the subject of her opening and closing chapters. Abbey, Crown, court, polished society, and the cream of the parish receive the lion's share of coverage. The chapter on poverty and plague is mainly about administration, policy, finance, and distributing charity; less than ten named paupers turn up in six pages on "recipients of relief." Westminster with its budding gentry season and centers of national power may not be the likeliest candidate for writing from "below." But this is also a question of choice of perspective and sources. A case in point is the chapter on the Court of Burgesses, subtitled "Neighbourhood, Disorder, and Urban Expansion." It focuses on the administration and make-up of the court; we hear little about social worlds of the down-and-out. This is not a chapter

on these pressing problems per se, but six years in the life and times of the Court of Burgesses. Sessions records survive from a little later, but there are only a couple of references in this chapter on disorder from this leading criminal jurisdiction, which also chewed over policy. There are five references from sessions records in the chapter on poverty and plague, which stretches to fifty pages. Yet these records are crammed with vagrants, beggars, thieves, tricksters, inmates, greedy landlords, street-sellers, irate paupers, walking sick and wounded, and many more poor and marginal characters and situations. There is conflict in these records, people at their wits end with nothing left to do but steal to stay afloat. Officers get the sharp end of tongues (some are beaten), as paupers make their feeling plain about policy and policing, now and then. We can say quite a lot about policing by linking sessions records to parish and central government materials and the six years from Burgesses' court. Policing is a missing element. Also missing are rich depositions from London Diocese, which bring long-gone Westminster's streets alive: women working, neighbors snooping, women getting their own back on abusive men, carts rushing along streets, and so on. More

could also have been said about houses of correction, almshouses, or "Greencoat" hospital from these records and others left behind by vestries.

Someone else might have written a different book on Westminster, just as legitimate as this one where some social worlds are left largely untouched. Gender relations might have been another starting point, as well as environmental regulation or crime. No single book can cover everything, needless to say. Choices need to be made. Subjects and sources must be selected with interpretations in mind. I do not get much of a sense of the nature of society on low social ladders in this book. Tensions are by and large between Johnny-come-lately gentry and middling men with Westminster roots. Deference and submission show up as desired outcomes of Poor Law practice, but the realities of this are murky in these pages. Westminster's disorders and the cut-and-thrust of everyday life does not get enough coverage for full evaluations of social worlds. This is all to say that there is much more to be done with Westminster's records. Merritt has set up a very good administrative framework for us to work with, and I hope that someone soon will write about Tudor and Stuart Westminster from "below."

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