

THE PEOPLE OF THE ABYSS

Review article by Stephen McCloskey

Jack London (2014) [1903] *The People of the Abyss*, London: Tangerine Press.

The descent

In the summer of 1902, the great American writer, journalist, and social activist Jack London undertook an immersive research project in the coalface of poverty in the East End of London, the belly of the first industrialised nation. Fresh from his adventures in the Yukon goldrush that would inspire his classic adventure novels *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, London's immersion coincided with the coronation of a new king Edward VII. The splendor and decadence of this state occasion only accentuated what he witnessed and experienced as a yawning and terrifying social gulf between the privileged and dispossessed. London's undertaking – thirty years before Orwell conducted a similar exercise in *Down and Out in Paris and London* – produced a searing, powerful and, at times, haunting account of raw capital colliding with the vulnerable poor to devastating effect. Working from court and press reports and official state data, he finds that one in four adults is destined to die on public charity 'either in the workhouse, the infirmary or the asylum' (120). Life expectancy in the East End is thirty years with 55 percent of children dying before the age of five (195).

From the outset, London presents his journey and that of his co-habitants in the East End as a 'descent' into a hellish, miserable existence – an abyss – from which there is no recovery or reprieve. As the film-maker and writer Iain Sinclair says in his introduction to this new edition of London's text: 'The people he encounters are Morlocks, creatures denied the light. They are as sullen and defeated like the deformed subterraneans depicted by H. G. Wells' in *The Time Machine* (n.p.). London's hesitant hansom cab driver feels that his passenger has lost his bearings and worries about his fare. London picks up a suit of rags and sews a gold sovereign into

the armpit of his jacket for ‘emergencies’ and takes lodgings on the edge of the abyss where he can return for sanctuary when needed.

Housing crisis

The devastating poverty witnessed here has obvious underpinnings: workers pay between one quarter and a half of their weekly income in rent and the rooms they occupy are unfit for animals, much less adults and children. London reports that there are ‘300,000 people in London, divided into families, that live in one-room tenements’ (161) and a total of 900,000 live illegally in an area less than 400 cubic feet (ibid). Should the Public Health Act be properly enforced, he suggests, 900,000 people would be served with a ‘notice to quit’ (162). He reflects here on a visit to a tenement: ‘there were seven rooms in an abomination called a house. In six of the rooms, twenty-odd people of both sexes and all ages, cooked, ate, slept and worked. The men sweated in one room measuring 7 foot by 8 making shoes in an area in which they could barely stand’ (57). They work ‘12, 13, and 14 hours a day’ with ‘tacks flyin’ out of mouth like from a machine’ and their teeth as evidence were ‘coal black and rotten’ (ibid). Poor light, sanitation, dampness, vermin, lack of ventilation and personal privacy created environmental squalor that destroyed the moral and physical conditioning of decent hard-working people.

A coroner’s inquest into the death of a 75 year old woman heard from a witness to her wretched condition:

“There she lay in the mortuary shell, so starved and emaciated that she was a mere bundle of skin and bones. Her hair, which was matted with filth, was simply a nest of vermin. Over her bony chest leaped and rolled hundreds, thousands, myriads of vermin” (165).

Such was the inadequacy of available housing stock, houses were ‘let and sub-let down to the very rooms with the working man paying proportionately more for his lodgings than the rich man for his spacious comfort’ (166). This sub-letting reached its ultimate extreme with the leasing of beds in ‘doss houses’ whereby a ‘three relay system’ leases a bed to three workers so that it

never ‘grows cold’. Each ‘tenant’ occupies the bed for eight hours before vacating it to another worker and so on. Health officers reported common instances of three people in a single bed and two adults sleeping underneath the bed in a room with a cubic capacity of 1,000 feet (ibid). But occupiers of rooms and beds were in so many respects the most fortunate of those encountered. London spends a night ‘carrying the banner’ or tramping the streets with no peace to be had in doorways or on benches. The law of the time forbade sleeping at night which meant that ‘coppers’ shone lanterns into every nook and cranny to rouse the sleeping homeless. On a wet night the homeless walker – soaked to the bone – will be on a rapid road to a broken constitution, particularly the elderly. When public parks open in early dawn, the homeless are stretched out on grass, dry or wet, like corpses.

The spike

Respite from the streets is sought in the ‘spike’, also known as the ‘casual ward’, ‘a building where the homeless, bedless, penniless man if he be lucky may casually rest his weary bones and then work like a navvy next day to pay for it’ (62). The thought of dependence on the spike keeps the workers toiling all hours of the day as the combination of ill-nourishment and exposure hastens a broken health and worse. On entering the spike, inmates receive six ounces of bread (like a brick) and a pint of skilly (oatmeal mixed with hot water). They bathe in the same water and sleep in the vermin-ridden conditions akin to those in the tenements. But ‘charity’ comes at a price and the next day the men are set to breaking stones, disposing of dangerous hospital waste or picking oakum – occupations associated with prison life suggesting how poverty was criminalised at the time. When an opportunity arises to flee, London recognises that the men around him have been cowed by authority and fearful of losing future access to this most jaundiced form of relief.

In moments of reflection in the spike, the men ‘ascribe their homelessness to foreign immigration, especially of Polish and Russian Jews who take their places at lower wages and establish the sweating system’ (87). The inmates round on a man who suggests that the wife and children of the

immigrant living on lower wages will be assailed by conditions worse than their own. For his part, London sees the social decay of the East End as the result of gross inequality of wealth; 500 hereditary peers own one-fifth of England and spend a 'wasteful luxury' of 32 percent of national wealth (115). He also takes aim at appalling working conditions which result in men becoming 'caricatures of what physical men ought to be' and children are 'twisted out of all shapeliness and beauty' (169). He champions working women often left to carry the entire family on a pittance after the 'thing happens' – an industrial accident or illness strikes down the husband – and leaves the mother to feed an entire family on what can she can earn from home. A letter is cited from a working woman to a police court missionary dated 18 April 1901:

“Sir: Pardon the liberty I am taking, but having read what you said about poor women working fourteen hours a day for ten shillings per week, I beg to state my case. I am a tie-maker, who, after working all week, cannot earn more than five shillings, and I have a poor husband who hasn't earned a penny for more than ten years” (157).

Occupational illness

Then there are occupational illnesses to which women, as well as men, are regularly exposed such as 'wet feet and wet clothes' in the linen industry causing bronchitis, pneumonia and rheumatism. There is potter's dust that settles over years on the lungs and reduces breathing till death, or steel dust, stone dust, clay dust, alkali dust, fluff dust and fibre dust that kills 'like machine guns' (195). The book humanises those lost like Harriet A. Walker:

“a young girl of seventeen, killed while leading a forlorn hope on the industrial battlefield. She was employed as an enameled ware brusher, wherein lead poisoning is encountered. Her father and brother were both out of employment. She concealed her illness, walked six miles a day to and from work, earned seven or eight shillings per week, and died at seventeen” (196).

We are unsurprised when London ventures that ‘The cases of out of works killing their wives and babies is not an uncommon happening’ (123) because this ‘chronic condition of misery’ is never wiped out, even in periods of greatest prosperity.

Today’s people of the abyss

The question for today’s reader of Jack London’s text is what value can we draw from it in the context of contemporary society? Is the book a time capsule from a bygone era from which we can learn ‘how it was’ rather than ‘how it is today’? Iain Sinclair’s introduction sides very much with the latter perspective suggesting that the book demonstrates:

“the fault lines of what we are presently experiencing: empty Babylonian towers of spectacular hubris overshadowing rough sleepers, who must remain invisible under foot, or find themselves banished to hobo camps under motorway spurs, treated to one-way tickets to dying seaside resorts” (n.p.).

Yes, undoubtedly, the century that has lapsed since the publication of *The People of the Abyss* has brought levels of unanticipated material and technological advancement and, yet, so-called ‘developed’ societies remain scarred by serious levels of inequality. In my home city of Belfast, five homeless people have died in a three month period (January to March 2016), most recently Catherine Kenny, a 32 year old woman with addiction problems (*Belfast Telegraph*, 23 March 2016). Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), a Belfast-based human rights organisation, found that from October 2014 – October 2015 a total of 21,386 benefit claimants were sanctioned; meaning that their benefits were withdrawn under a new more stringent and often arbitrary welfare system (PPR, 2016). The withdrawal of one benefit can mean the loss of all welfare assistance, including housing benefit, which in turn means claimants are sometimes forced on to the streets.

In the south of Ireland, 3,885 adults were living in emergency accommodation at the end of January 2016 such is the lack of affordable housing to rent. This total included 884 families, of which 577 were single

parent families (DECLG, 2016). This problem is compounded by the ‘recent hospitality extended to vulture funds in Ireland’ which are buying up housing loans from banks and serving tenants with notices to quit (Storey, 2016). And in England, the homeless charity Crisis has found that 275,000 people approached their local authority in 2015 for ‘homelessness assistance’ and, in London alone, ‘7,581 slept rough at some point in 2014-15, a 16 percent rise on the previous year’ (Crisis, 2016).

While the levels of deprivation today in terms of life expectancy, the condition of housing and the working environment have greatly improved from the days of the ‘abyss’, many of the issues tackled by Jack London’s book persist. We still have gross inequality, high levels of poverty among the working poor, limited social mobility and job insecurity through measures such as zero hour contracts. Oxfam (2016) has reported that 62 individuals own as much as the poorest half of the world’s population so while we have travelled far in terms of development indices over the past century we appear to have learned little about wealth redistribution.

Tangerine Press has done us all a great service in re-publishing *The People of the Abyss* with a series of original photographs taken by the author that complement his impassioned prose. It is a vital social polemic imbued with humanity and written with a compassionate eye that reminds us of the responsibility we all have to ensure that national wealth is invested in social need and protecting the most vulnerable around us. As Rosita Sweetman (2016) said of the book:

“*People of the Abyss* shows how far we have come, but also the dangers of a new abyss yawning as global capitalism dumps unions and enforces zero-hour contracts, and the global arms industry’s bombs drive millions from their homes”.

References

Belfast Telegraph (2016) ‘Hundreds gather to pay respects at funeral of homeless woman Catherine Kenny who died on Belfast’s streets’, 23 March 2016, available:<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/hundreds-gather->

[to-pay-respects-at-funeral-of-homeless-woman-catherine-kenny-who-died-on-belfasts-streets-34565983.html](http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/article34565983.html) (accessed 7 April 2016).

Crisis (2016) 'Homelessness Briefing', available: <http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Homelessness%20briefing%202016%20EXTERNAL.pdf> (accessed 7 April 2016).

DECLG (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government) (2016), 'Homeless Report 25-31 January', available: http://www.environ.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_january_2016_0.pdf (accessed 7 April 2016).

London, J (1999) *The Call of the Wild and White Fang*, London: Wordsworth.

Orwell, G (1940) *Down and Out in Paris and London*, London: Penguin.

Oxfam (2016) 'Billionaires who own same as half the world – Oxfam', 18 January, available: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2016/01/62-people-own-same-as-half-world-says-oxfam-inequality-report-davos-world-economic-forum> (accessed 7 April 2016).

PPR (Participation and the Practice of Rights) (2016), 'The People's Proposal: Realising the Right to Social Security', Belfast: PPR.

Storey, A (2016) 'Vulture Funds gorge on Ireland because the government lets them', 16 March, available: <https://www.dublininquirer.com/2016/03/16/andy-woes-vulture-funds-government-policies/> (accessed 7 April 2016).

Sweetman, R (2016) 'The People of the Abyss by Jack London', *Irish Times*, 23 January, available: <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-people-of-the-abyss-by-jack-london-1.2507030> (accessed 16 February 2016).

Stephen McCloskey is the Director of the Centre for Global Education and Editor of *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*.