

PJC BOOK REVIEW 12

David Coke and Alan Borg, *Vauxhall Gardens: A History*

(Yale University Press, London, 2011), pp. 473

ISBN 978-0-3001-7382-6 (hdbk). Price: £55.00

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Published in

***Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35/4 (2012), pp. 610-11**

*Text subject to minor editorial corrections since publication in 2012,
although the message is unchanged.*

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Luscious, lively, learned – and levelling: this important study of Vauxhall Gardens looks not only at the entrepreneurs who ran the Gardens and the famous patrons who conferred their social lustre, but also, democratically, at the entertainers, the craftsmen, and the servants who toiled collectively to create the glittering effect. The result provides an unexpected slice of London's economic history as well as a compendious guide to the cultural life of the long eighteenth century. For these purposes, that elastic period stretches from the later seventeenth century until 1859, when the Gardens finally closed. There is one caveat to make, which is noted at the end. But this sumptuously illustrated volume is, first and foremost, a connoisseur's delight.

No aspect of the Garden's history is neglected. David Coke and Alan Borg are true *aficionados*. They cram their study with lavish data, quotations, and beautiful illustrations. And further details are available on the authors' indispensable website at www.vauxhallgardens.com (launched 2005).

Within this volume, the exposition is broadly chronological, supplemented by four appendixes. These include a helpful set of ground plans, showing the changing layout and facilities of the Gardens in 1742, 1751, 1818 and 1850 respectively. Full attention is given to familiar features, such as Vauxhall music, Vauxhall fireworks, Vauxhall ballooning, and Vauxhall's notorious rum punch – the heady beverage which so addled the head of Thackeray's Jos Sedley that he failed to propose to Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*.

Plenty of recondite details, however, are supplied as well. For example, to reach the Gardens, clients often hired small ferry-boats across the Thames, even after the opening of Westminster Bridge in 1750. Many watermen profited from the trade. But what did they do on the south bank, whilst awaiting their return fares? The answer, pleasingly, is that they drank in local riverside taverns, cultivating their reputation for genial ribaldry (pp.75, 225). Thus primed, they also joined the spectators who gathered to watch the Vauxhall revellers in the summer months. 'From the Water-side to the Gardens, we walked through a double Line of gaping Watermen, Footmen, old Beggar-women and Children,' recorded Samuel Richardson, somewhat waspishly (p.225).

His comment indicated the genuine stir generated by London's most popular pleasure garden. The patrons, even if disturbed by such attentions, could not but feel that they were participating in something of social note. 'A cheerful freedom spread itself through the place', it was reported in 1739 (p.198). 'There was good fare, music, walks in solitary alleys, thousands of lamps, and a crowd of London beauties, both high and low', confirmed the well-travelled Casanova (p.200). Indeed, Vauxhall was especially famed as a meeting place for young people, with a reputation for erotic possibilities, including those of a commercial variety.

One central chapter deals with the workday commercial realities that sustained Vauxhall as a social amphitheatre. The proprietors had to cover their costs, while keeping their entrance fees competitively low. Eventually, the developmental value of the site outstripped the profits from the entertainment business. But the proprietors bowed to economic realities only reluctantly. By the end, Vauxhall had advertised so many ‘final’ seasons that its closure in 1859 led *The Times* to comment unkindly that: ‘it was like the goodbye addressed to the ghost of some friend who has been dead for years’ (p.355).

A final caveat: this study is avowedly close-focus. Hence there is scope for fuller analysis of the framework commercialization of leisure, the eroticization of communal festivities, and the long-term impact of Vauxhall as the paradigmatic urban pleasure garden. But it is a compliment to the authors of this super-rich fare to call for more.