

*London Stories: Personal Lives, Public Histories.* By Hilda Kean. (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2005; pp. x + 229. £12.95).

This is an exceptional and readable book which bridges the gap between professional historians and the ever-growing army of family historians in this country. The ‘London stories’ of the title are those of the author’s own family, stretching back through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Hilda Kean explains that one trigger for starting to write this book was the chore of sifting through the furniture and bric-a-brac accumulated by her mother, in readiness for the elderly lady’s move to sheltered accommodation. The *mélange* of photographs, lecture notes, commemorative biscuit tins and the rest, represented, Kean realised, ‘the physical substance ... of lives lived in working class London ... existences lived ... apart from contemporary time ... a coming together of lives of different generations and times’ (p. 5).

From that fortuitous beginning, the author embarked on an eclectic and energetic scavenging trip involving, first, the paper records used by family historians: registries of births, marriages and deaths; census returns; Post Office and street directories. On its own, such archive material is, Kean reminds us, ‘just stuff’ which ‘sits there,’ dry as dust, needing life breathed into it.<sup>1</sup> The lifeless photo copies of official records need to have colour added from the possessions the subjects owned (in some cases made), their houses, the streets they walked, the gravestones that mark their resting places.

Resuscitation is not a solitary task: family history, Kean argues, is not a profession but an *activity*, and a shared one. Unlike academic historians, filling their notebooks from solitary toil in British Library or Bodleian, the family historian is gregarious, constantly seeking, says Kean, ‘to involve others in an explanation or construction of a [shared] past’. Those who happen to share a common surname, those whose memories may yield valuable clues or provide missing links, enthusiasts with expert knowledge of a vanished London trade and others are sought out, consulted, socialised with.

Starting with the still visible and tangible ‘evidence’ of the East London house where the author’s great-great-grandfather lived and died, successive chapters lead us through 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century generations of Spitalfields silk weavers, Kentish hop pickers and charcoal burners, Midlands farm labourers, London carriers, woodworkers, instrument makers and many other trades. Although the book follows a rough chronological pattern, each chapter is complete in itself, illuminating not just a stretch of time in the family

story but the contemporaneous social, political and technological forces at work. The narrative interweaves the personal and the public, noting the impact on private lives of events ranging from the Combination Acts to the London Blitz, from cholera to the ‘shame’ of mental illness and the treatment of ‘cripples’ in Victorian Britain.

The narrative and argument of this book are, therefore, both closely woven and rich in colour. Such faults as appear are irritating rather than serious: a family tree at the beginning of the book might helpfully supplement the genealogical information at present relegated to an Appendix; the photographs – as is so often the case these days – are rather meanly reproduced, with poor contrast. Occasionally the reader stubs a toe on Kean’s style: a gravestone in Hadlow churchyard lists ‘*some* seven children’ (my emphasis) although we already know it *was* seven; an East London vicar, landlord to the Kean family, has to be fitted up with the superfluous tag ‘a man of God.’

Throughout the book the author’s stated aim is to ‘bring the past into the present’, to enable today’s reader to engage with past generations face to face. *London Stories*, while not in the least resembling a text-book, offers family historians a model of how such ‘public histories’ may be constructed – perhaps ‘collected’ would be the better word.

The book ends, after the mother’s death, with a final look at what might be dismissed by many as the most inconsequential of inherited possessions – tinsel horseshoes from a wedding bouquet, World War II Home Guard shoulder flashes, a child’s toy clown from the 1950s. ‘Has this’ the author asks, ‘now become an integral part of my historical archive?’ Is this new ‘stuff’ merely personal to the author or material capable of broader resonances? (p. 190) As a counter-blast, surely, to popular TV’s fixation with de-cluttering, Kean argues that because these traces of previous lives do continue to exist, the historian must continue to ask questions, including the really big one for all historians: who ‘owns’ these ephemera, these stories? But indeed, the book provides a satisfying answer: the stories now belong to us, the readers, and we may think ourselves lucky to be, at least, temporary leaseholders of these nuggets from the Kean family history.

*Ruskin College, Oxford*

CHRISTOPHER SLADEN

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (2001, Manchester) p. 68, quoted pp. 23–24.