Zuelow on Black, 'Hotel London: How Victorian Commercial Hospitality Shaped a Nation and Its Stories'

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The George Inn, Southwark, is famously the only coaching inn left in London, although there remain other pubs (including the Old King’s Head just around the corner) that claim similar heritage even if the original buildings have vanished. Approaching the inn, which is accessed down a narrow alley and surrounded by nineteenth- and twentieth-century structures, it is hard not to imagine a time when stagecoaches were the sole way to travel long distances. Only one side of the original building, once shaped like a horseshoe, still stands, but the Stuart-era, timber-framed edifice is evocative. Galleried balconies present a distinctive front. Inside, the dark wood, worn floors, and plentiful tap handles feel cozy and inviting. It is not difficult to visualize staying in one of the rooms, but luxury is not part of that fantasy.

In the years since World War II, pubs such as the George were recast as exemplars of Englishness, speaking to a romanticized past. They fueled nostalgia, promising to transport the visitor back to a simpler age. Such an obsession with the past and a desire to revisit it is a recent development; there is a reason that so few such inns remain. In stark contrast to the postwar view, by the mid-nineteenth century the coaching inn symbolized backwardness and antiquity. They were masculine, dirty, uncomfortable. In an age of exciting new technologies, most obviously marked by the arrival of steam, and a growing faith in what would ultimately be called “modernity,” new forms of commodified comfort were necessary.

The grand hotel was that new form. This institution embodied a look back to a tradition of opulence and luxury enjoyed by elites, but more than this it formed “an integral part of the century’s cherished narrative of progress, both cultural and financial” (p. 52). In her book, Hotel London: How Victorian Hospitality Shaped a Nation and Its Stories, Barbara Black sets out to explore this new addition to the London cityscape with all its multiplicity of meanings. She sees the development of grand hotels as profoundly important. They were symbols of status and national power, a means of escape from the ordinary into another, more permissive realm. They were transformative, altering the people who stayed in them. Along with museums and clubs, the subject of two earlier books in Black’s trilogy examining “three influential and era-defining institutions in nineteenth-century England,” she sees the hotel as “connected to England’s growing cosmopolitanism and empire building,” a factor central to the “rise of capitalism” (pp. 9-10).[1] It was more than this, though. At one point she cites a quote

attributed to Winston Churchill: “We make our buildings, and then our buildings make us” (p. 49). That seems to be very much the case here.

Black views hotels through a lens inspired by Walter Benjamin, merging “materiality and representation” (p. 17). The grand hotel existed in a realm that was both real and symbolic, “hyperspaces ... that present a disjunction between the built environment and the human body and mind” (p. 39). They were exemplars of a “culture in transit.” Ultimately, the author suggests that nineteenth-century grand hotels can best be thought of using philosopher-historian Michel Foucault’s notion of the “heterotopia.” She sums up the idea: “A place for desires and dreams, for nostalgia and the unconscious, the hotel is a kind of theater. Victorian hotel design connects to the past as it conjures the future, reaching back to a lost and even primal world (satisfying the deep human desire to be pampered), even as it invokes the world as it could be, might be, will be” (pp. 40-41).

Hotels played such an important and complex role because they were so closely connected to transience and mixing. They are “about mobility—and that movement is often literal, physical, and geographic. Yet hotels also speak to the dream of social mobility, pursued by a traveling clientele but also sought by those who built the industry of commercial hospitality” (pp. 52-53). They brought together people who had come from afar, but also people whose distance from those who stayed in the hotels was measured in material rather than geographic terms. There were vast divides between those who occupied the front of the house and the back, the top of the building and the cellars beneath. Likewise, while London’s clubs and pubs represented male space, hotels explicitly welcomed women. The presence of ladies established the respectability of the institution, even as it simultaneously created the possibility of sexual transgression and deviance that allowed hotels to occupy a unique space in the imagination of the Victorians.

After a discussion of the theoretical importance of hotels, Black presents five “biographies” of major London sites: Brown’s, Claridge’s, the Langham, the Midland Grand (St. Pancras), and the Savoy. As the author notes, the selection permits “this chapter to span the length of the century” (p. 53), giving readers an overview of the development of these institutions, the people involved in creating them, and the context into which they were introduced. We encounter service staff and distinguished guests, visionaries and entrepreneurs. The story of these five hotels makes compelling reading and should be of great interest to those not already steeped in hotel history.

The sites and diversity of actors allows for a deeper exploration of changing ideas about materiality, sexuality, colonial relationships, social class, and meaning of space and place. Hotels were the setting and the plot for novels, not to mention home to many of the authors that wrote them, and Black offers a thought-provoking survey of grand hotels in literature. While there are many famous characters in these pages, none is more so than Oscar Wilde: “a member of the beau monde, an oppositional body that tests cultural norms by traveling, repeatedly showing up where he doesn’t easily, or wholly, belong” (p. 157). Sadly, for Wilde what happened in the hotel did not stay there. His “leaky’ erotic life” blurred lines between home and “elsewhere,” offering Black’s readers a window into the contested nature of a place like the Savoy (p. 158) as well as to the permeable line between hotel and city. For Wilde, the hotel represented the promise of a place to escape from an unhappy life at home, but there was no escape. He lived in hotels, and died in one, a notorious figure. Hotels were the site of happy, exciting moments, but they also represented a place for lingering ghosts, suggesting that these institutions may not ultimately offer any real rest. As Black writes, “the tensions and
contradictions inherent in the hotel enterprise reveal it as a force of order as well as disorder, respectability and dissolution, safety and potential violence” (p. 171).

All of the complexity and contradiction that Black carefully describes matters a lot because it prompted Victorians to think about identity. According to Black, that reflection helped to create a sense of the nation. This claim deserves some skepticism. Grand hotels certainly played a vital part in shaping nineteenth-century London, but the capital was a world apart, an “other” for many (most?) of those who lived outside it. Grand hotels likely exacerbated the sense of difference, in part because they were one of the primary connections between home and abroad. The city’s importance could not be limited to Britain, and, likewise, the story of its new hotels extended far beyond the White Cliffs. We find American and French influences at almost every turn. One can certainly see how these institutions helped to make London the remarkable cosmopolitan center of empire—and that story is massively important—but more needs to be said about how it also lined up with a sense of being English or British outside of the metropolis.

Yet, this is really a book about London and on that front it shines. The merger of literary theory, social geography, and history make this a thrilling read and a tremendously useful addition to the growing literature on hotels, motels, and other such accommodations. Readers will think differently about hotels, both in scholarly terms and when they stay in them. These new institutions clearly altered London life in terms of gender, class interaction, and consumerism, helping to define not only the city but a new century. At the same time, hotels personified tensions within British society as regards the relationship between past, present, and future, a tension that the coaching inn nostalgia which started this review demonstrates is still very much a part of life, even if the order is different now than it was then. The book will interest literary scholars and historians of tourism, cities, and gender as well as cultural geographers. It is packed with useful references and intriguing ideas. While probably too theoretical for all but the most advanced undergraduates, it will nevertheless appeal to a wide scholarly readership, and it deserves attention.

Note


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