French exiles over 500 years


Reviewed by Nick Bailey.

Pierre Ackermann in his biography of London argues that "London has always been a city of immigrants" and notes that this could be applied to any period over the past 250 years. This book takes a historical perspective over 500 years of just one of these immigrant communities: the French in London. Fitzrovia and Soho feature as the main reception area for successive waves of exiles and immigrants from France.

The book is divided into 15 chapters describing key periods of migration from the Huguenots in the sixteenth century to the formation of the Free French after General de Gaulle's arrival in London in 1940. The French moved to London because it was noted for its tolerance and freedom of expression. By 1638 a Privy Council census recorded 614 French residents in Westminster and 586 in or near the City. Those living in Westminster at this time tended to be printers, artists, engravers, musicians and silversmiths. By 1781 there were over 10,000 French people based in London. Migration to London reflected French political and religious differences.

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The Duchess

The Duke of Montagu, for instance, had been Charles II's ambassador in Paris but in 1678 was forced to retreat to London after having affairs with the Duchess of Cleveland, one of the King's mistresses (featured in a recent Fitzrovia News article) and her daughter, Lady Sassa. On his return, he commissioned Robert Hooke to design Montagu House in the French pavilion style in Bloomsbury, the site of the British Museum. A number of French painters, such as Baptiste, were brought over to decorate the interior. Some of the furniture and artefacts can still be seen in the Montagu's country retreat at Boughton House in Northamptonshire.

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The book also discusses some of the British aristocracy who developed close links with the French.

DUCHESS

The book identifies Charlotte Street and Goodge Street as the main axis of anarchy in the 1870s and '70s. Malat, a noted French anarchist, described it as a "small anarchist republic".

COMPATRIOTS

Two particular compatirors are mentioned: Victor Richard, a grocer at 67 Charlotte Street, and Amand Lapie who ran a bookshop at 36 Goodge Street. Their two small bookshops, advice, support and a meeting place for new arrivals. Ernest Delbecque rented out rooms at 26-28 Charlotte Street.

There was also a much wider support network, such as a Librairie Parisanienne in Charlotte Street and a Librairie Francaise in Goodge Street, both selling French and foreign newspapers.

La Librairie Cosmopolite in Charlotte Street had a reading room with at least 5,000 French books.

For more destitute, there was a commissary soup kitchen in Newman Passage and M. Lassesse ran a bakers shop in Charlotte Street. Educational needs were also taken care of. Louise Michel opened the Ecole Anarchiste Internationales in Fitzroy Street in 1900 and in 1905 a Université Popular was set up by comrades from various nationalities in Euston Street, although this did not last long because of funding difficulties and internal disputes.

VERY ACTIVE

The French residents of Fitzrovia were very active politically and in 1885 formed an anarchistic club in Stephen Street. In the following year the Autonomie Club moved to 32 Charlotte Street and was associated with the repeated police raids and speculation about the "international anarchist conspiracy" in the popular press. Many of these assertions were played down in confidential police reports of the time. The Club later moved to 6 Windmill Street where it was raided in 1894 by Chief Inspector Melville of the Royal Flying Corps, who claimed to be the Secret Agent. Police spies, known as Les Mouchards, were regularly patrolling the streets of Fitzrovia and visible day and night outside Lapie's bookshop in Goodge Street.

RADICALISED

The French anarchists in Fitzrovia were highly radicalised and a generation who had been radicalised by political events in France, such as the Paris Commune, who had a series of annihilations, some returned to Paris while others became more integrated into British and European politics. It is claimed in the book that above all the French immigrants benefited from the generally relaxed attitude of the British authorities to minorities and the liberal attitude towards immigration. They could also establish links with other international radical movements. It is claimed that between 1823 and 1890 "no foreigner was expelled" from Britain for political reasons.

This review has focused particularly on the role played by Fitzrovia as the "French Quarter" in the nineteenth century. Of course, other nationalities have similar histories and have lived in Fitzrovia at different times - the Italians, Spanish, Indian and Bangladeshi to name a few - some of these histories are still to be written.