

French exiles over 500 years

A History of the French in London: Liberty, Equality, Opportunity. Edited by Debra Kelly and Martyn Cornick. Published by University of London, £40.

Reviewed by Nick Bailey.

Peter Ackroyd 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 641 French residents in Westminster and 558 in or near the City. Those living in Westminster at this time tended to be printers, artists, engravers, musicians and silversmiths.

By 1871 there were over 10,000 French people based in London. Migration to London reflected French politics of the time, from the persecution of the Huguenots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to royalists and catholic clergy escaping the guillotine in the French Revolution and anarchists after the defeat of the Paris Commune in the 1870s.

Although each group brought



LOUISE MICHEL opened a French anarchist school in Fitzroy Street in 1890. Illustrated by Clifford Harper

very different religious, cultural and political assumptions, each established their own institutions, including shops, restaurants, schools, churches and a hospital. Many of these have survived such as the French Hospital, the French protestant church in Soho Square, Maison Bertaux and restaurants such as the **White Tower** (formerly in Percy Street) and **L'Escargot** in Greek Street.

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

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 Sussex. On his return, he commissioned Robert Hooke to design Montagu House in the French pavilion style in Bloomsbury – now the site of the British Museum. A number of French painters, such as Baptiste, were brought over to decorate the

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interior. Some of the furniture and artefacts can still be seen in the Montagu's country retreat at Boughton House in Northamptonshire.

By the nineteenth century Fitzrovia and Soho were becoming the destinations of choice for political exiles from France. There were two main waves of migration separated by a generation. The first were supporters of the French revolution of February 1848 when the Second Republic was founded by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. The second group of about 3,000 came in the 1870s after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and included large numbers of anarchists. Many of these 'Compagnons' remained in London until an

amnesty in 1895 allowed some to return to France. Fitzrovia was an obvious destination because of the availability of accommodation and employment in restaurants and workshops, as well as the presence of fellow countrymen already established here.

Thus many émigrés arrived by train at Victoria or Cannon Street and headed straight for the 'French Quarter' in Soho and Fitzrovia. The book identifies **Charlotte Street** and **Goodge Street** as the main axis of anarchism in the 1870s and '80s. Malato, a noted French anarchist, described it as a "small anarchist republic".

COMPATRIOTS

Two particular compatriots are mentioned: **Victor Richard**, a greengrocer, at 67 **Charlotte Street**, and **Amand Lapie** who ran a bookshop at 30 **Goodge Street**. These two provided advice, support and a meeting place for new arrivals. **Ernest Delebecque** rented out rooms at 28-30 **Charlotte Street**.

There was also a much wider support network, such as a **Librairie Parisienne** in **Charlotte Street** and a **Librairie Française** 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 the more destitute, there was a communard soup kitchen in **Newman Passage** and a **M. Lassassie** ran a barbers shop in **Charlotte Street**. Educational needs were also taken care of. **Louise Michel** opened the **Ecole Anarchiste Internationale** in **Fitzroy Street** in 1890 and in 1905 a **Université Populaire** 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 anarchist club in **Stephen Mews**. In the following year the **Autonomie Club** moved to 32 **Charlotte Street** and was subjected to 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 Special Branch soon after the Greenwich Park explosion caused by **Martial Bourdin** and featured in **Joseph Conrad's** novel, *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 a high profile generation who had been radicalised by political events in France, such as the Paris Commune. After a series of amnesties, 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 benefitted 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 1905 "no foreigner was expelled" from Britain for political reasons.

This review has focussed 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, Greek Cypriots, and Bangladeshis to name a few – some of these histories are still to be written.

Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Association

is moving to new premises during September 2013 to 5A Goodge Place, W1T 4SD
020 7580 4576
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fitzrovia.org.uk

Our drop-in housing and welfare advice service open
Tuesdays 10am to 1.30pm

Women-only housing and welfare advice: Wednesdays 11am to 1pm

Bloomsbury ward councillors' surgeries

6:00 - 7:00pm first Friday of the month at
Fitzrovia Community Centre, Foley Street, W1W 6DN
6:00 - 7:00pm second and fourth Fridays of the month at
Marchmont Community Centre, 62 Marchmont Street, WC1N 1AB
Third Friday of the month is a 'roving surgery'. Get in touch if you would like us to conduct the surgery at your street or building.
Adam Harrison, Milena Nuti, and Abdul Quadir
Contact 020 7974 3111 or adam.harrison@camden.gov.uk
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