



BOOK REVIEW

Mervyn Busted, *The Sash on the Mersey: The Orange Order in Liverpool 1819–1982*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023. xi + 272pp. 22 plates. Bibliography. £110.00 hbk.
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The Orange Order presents as a challenging topic for historians of modern Britain. Its ongoing role as an inward-looking and secretive communal association, organized on the basis of denomination, and its ability to summon large-scale urban spectacles deep into the twentieth century is an awkward anachronism in a tale overwhelmingly defined by profound social and cultural change. Mervyn Busted's history of the Order and its constituent lodges in its English stronghold of Liverpool is therefore a welcome addition and a unique contribution to modern British and urban history, as *Sash on the Mersey* deftly guides the reader through the Order's peculiar and exceptional influence on Liverpool.

The Sash on the Mersey's greatest strength is its holistic and comprehensive scope. Busted skilfully moves the analysis away from a singular and well-trodden focus on high-profile public processions and sectarian clashes towards a much broader and more mundane understanding of the Order. In utilizing the minute books and accompanying documentation from various local lodges, Busted illuminates the central role of the Order in the everyday life of Liverpool's communities and the civic life of the city. The positioning of the Order as a vibrant, working-class, highly local and voluntary communal association builds our understanding of lodges as an integral part of the social capital of urban communities; a point of welfare, co-operation and mutual support in times of hardship and an important vehicle through which certain urban communities understood and defined themselves, their neighbours and the built environment.

The way in which the Order claimed, used and conceptualized urban space is likewise well addressed. The Order is clearly best known for parading and Busted shrewdly outlines the changes parading made to the urban landscape – the procession, the decorated houses and accompanying regalia akin to a fairy scene from a pantomime, as colourfully described by one newspaper. Busted provides a fascinating dissection of parading, picking apart the various paraphernalia (banners, may-poles and costumes) and their evolving importance and meaning. Parading is rightly set out as an urban performance – an intricate dance involving individual members, lodges, the police, local politicians, counsellors and committees, set on a stage of intense and highly localized sectarian boundaries. Crucially, Busted's analysis moves beyond processions. Coverage is given to the inter-communal meaning and policing of effigies, whereas the book's final chapter investigates the intense and fascinating

negotiations between local lodges and the recently completed Anglican Cathedral for the hosting of an Orange service.

However, given the holistic scope of the book, surprisingly little attention is given to the topic of race. Busteed points out that the Order mixed patriotism and imperial pride with latent racial superiority but *Sash on the Mersey* fails to interrogate how a sense of organizational identity grounded in racial superiority interacted with Liverpool's long-standing black community, the city's troubled history of racial discrimination and segregation or individual members' identities.

The latter point raises a broader issue. Busteed draws attention to the fact that previous analyses of the Order have been inhibited by a lack of access to private lodge records which can in any case be limited in detail. *Sash on the Mersey's* use of internal sources undoubtedly allows for fresh interpretations on the everyday function of lodges, but these are not without their deficiencies. All too often, reference is made to lively discussion amongst members on a variety of topics but the actual content and nature of that discussion – and thereby a window into the opinions, identities, motivations and worldviews of individual members – remains elusive. This issue is general but is particularly problematic for women's and juvenile's lodges where the majority of record-keeping positions were filled by men.

Buttressed by local newspapers and various other contemporary publications, that Busteed is able to fashion a coherent narrative from such occasionally fallow source material is admirable, but the effect is that the rich internal life of lodges is only glanced at. *Sash on the Mersey* is unable to completely draw back the curtain. For example, Busteed briefly hints that interactions between male and female lodges were an opportunity to meet potential marriage partners and suggests that there was general concern regarding the rumoured extent of gambling within lodges, but these aspects (and others) remain tantalizingly out of reach. Within this context, the strikingly candid correspondence between the parties trying to negotiate an Orange service in the Anglican Cathedral stands out all the more, and suggest that a lack of personal and oral testimony presents as a missed opportunity, certainly in studying the Order in post-war Liverpool. However, these issues do not fundamentally detract from a useful and interesting study.

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