

Writing Sample

John Wyatt Greenlee

Introduction

This writing sample is excerpted from the final chapter of my dissertation. To help situate readers, I am including the project's table of contents and a quick summary of helpful background.

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Context

Starting in the mid-fourteenth century the English in London and other major cities began to import an increasingly large number of eels from Dutch merchants. Initially the Dutch imported mostly smoked or salted eels, but in the mid fifteenth century they began to bring over live eels, carried in the holds of waterships called *schuyts*. These ships became central to the eel trade in London, and the Dutch eel merchants, or *palingmen* sold eels from the decks of their ships while at anchor in the mid-Thames. As London's population began to balloon in the sixteenth century the city began to outstrip its local and regional resources. The number of native eels dropped and the demand for foreign eels grew. At the dawn of the seventeenth century London had become to reliant on fish from Holland to meet demand. The ships became a civic landmark, appearing on maps of the city and in London plays from the early 1600s. As tensions between England and Holland erupted into warfare later in the century, however, the ships and their cargo became a point of contestation. The ships were evicted in 1666, and remained absent until 1681. When the Dutch returned, they quickly regained their market position. But the ships never regained their landmark status. The following writing sample looks back at the first instance when the Dutch eel ships appeared on maps of London, in 1600.

Landmarks on the Water: The Eel Ships in London's Urban Geography

Sometime at the very end of the sixteenth century the Dutch and their schuyts went from simply being usually present on the Thames to being an established feature of the London cityscape, with maps and literary descriptions of the city singling them out. The earliest detailed maps of London,

which come from this period, do not show them.¹ In 1544 Antonis van den Wyngaerde penned a panoramic view of the city that showed no ships anchored in the current of the Thames, either off of Queenhithe or Billingsgate.² A nineteenth-century reproduction by Nathaniel Whittock show two ships near Queenhithe that look strikingly similar to images of the Dutch ships from seventeenth-century maps, but Whittock added these (and other details) himself. The so-called Copperplate Map from the 1550s does not appear to have shown the ships, and neither does the map which was based on it, the (also so-called) Agas Map from the 1560.³ The bird's-eye view map of London in Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg's 1572 atlas, the *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, likewise did not see fit to show the Dutch eel ships. Prior to 1600 no map of London – regardless of perspective – included the Dutch eel schuys in their representations of the capital.

John Stow, the great historian and antiquarian whose 1598 *Survey of London* offered the first detailed, ward-by-ward chorography of the city, hardly even bothered to mention eels. In the *Survey*'s section on Queenhithe Stow repeated verbatim much of the 1463 regulation that split trade between Queenhithe and Billingsgate, which listed eels among possible foodstuffs to be covered.⁴ But otherwise, the *Survey of London* is quiet about eels, and the schuys go unmentioned.⁵ But for all that Stow's book gives a highly detailed and telling account of the city's spaces and histories, it does not fairly portray the London of its day. Historians Ian Archer and Patrick Collinson, among others, have made the point that John Stow rendered a highly nostalgic version of London that looked back to an

¹ The oldest topographically accurate image of London is from a book of poetry by Duke Charles d'Orlean in 1480, currently held at the British Library (BL Royal MS F II). This image does not offer an especially accurate image of the city, beyond showing the Duke imprisoned in the Tower of London. There are no identifiable eel ships on Duke Charles's map.

² Howard Colvin and Susan Foister, eds., *The Panorama of London circa 1544, by Antonis van Den Wyngaerde*, London Topographical Society, Publication No. 151 (London: London Topographical Society, 1996), 25, 33.

³ Neither map has a surviving sixteenth-century version. Three of the plates for the Copperplate map have been recovered (they include the Queenhithe sections), and the earliest known version of the Agas map is a printed copy from 1633.

⁴ John Stow, *A Survey of London, Written in the Year 1598*, ed. Henry Morley (Stroud, England: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1999), 325–26.

⁵ Stow, 329–37.

idealized England of his youth. Stow, who lived from 1525-1605, experienced broad changes to London over his lifetime, many of which he resented. He chaffed at the city's size, its growing playgoing culture, and at what he understood to be a steady breakdown of its traditional bonds of social interdependence, and in writing his book he excised many of those elements from the city he presented.⁶ Stow's great survey cast an antiquarian eye over the capital, and his text is often as marked by what it does *not* show as by what it does.⁷ Though the Dutch had essentially cornered the London eel market in his youth, they had not yet become an established part of the landscape. Moreover, their prominence in his day offered evidence of the new England that Stow did not care for: one that had to rely on outsiders like the Dutch to supply so intrinsically English a commodity as eels. That Stow chose to exclude them, both in the first printing of the *Survey* in 1598 and in the second printing in 1603, is perhaps not surprising.

But though Stow might have wished them gone, by 1603 – and, for that matter, likely by 1598 – the eel ships at Queenhithe had worked their way into the imagined geography of the city's people.⁸ In 1600 the English cartographer and surveyor John Norden printed a panoramic city-view of London that included the ships (Fig. 26). Measuring roughly one foot by four feet (39x125 cm), the Norden's map showed the city from Whitehall to Blackwall, looking northward from a central point in Southwark. To help his viewers, Norden labeled parts of the city, surrounding villages, and major urban landmarks. He drew the Thames as a crowded river, teeming with ships. Below London Bridge, the river hosts an armada of ships, all heading out to sea in a clear expression of English expansionism. Above the bridge, the map shows a large number of small crafts scooting around the river – mostly

⁶ Patrick Collinson, "John Stow and Nostalgic Antiquarianism," in *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720*, ed. Julia F. Merritt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19.

⁷ Ian W. Archer, "The Arts and Acts of Memorialization in Early Modern London," in *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598-1720*, ed. Julia F. Merritt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89–115; Collinson, "John Stow and Nostalgic Antiquarianism."

⁸ If the Dutch were also still selling live eels off of Billingsgate at this time, they never made it onto maps or into descriptions of the city.

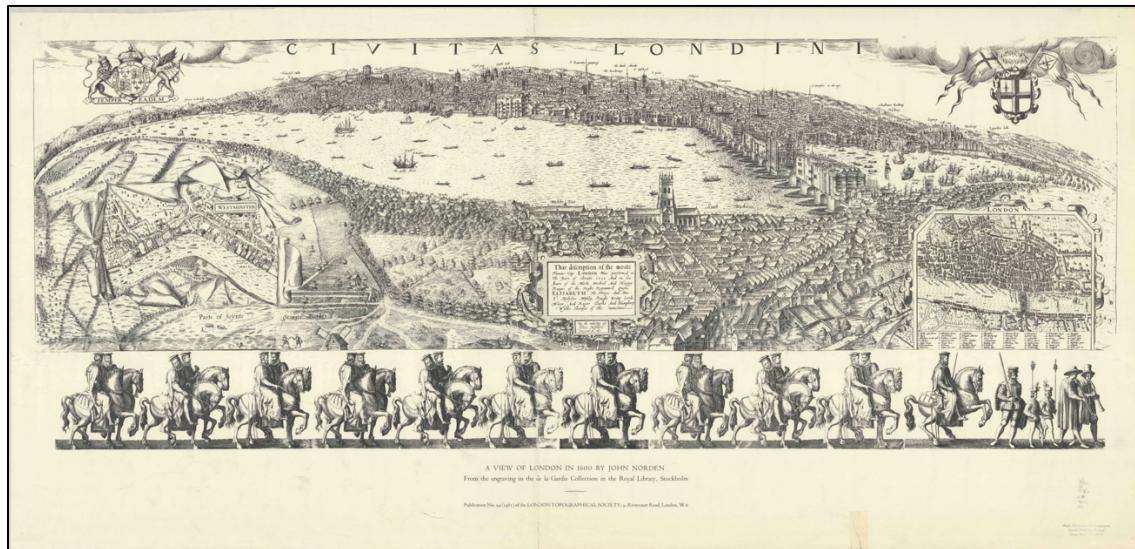


Fig. 26: John Norden's city-view map of London, Civitas Londini (1600). Reproduction by the London Topographical Society, Publication No. 94, 1961.

water-ferries carrying Londoners between south and north banks of the Thames. Among the rowboats and pleasure punts, however, Norden drew three larger vessels, which he labeled. The first, anchored hard by the south shore, is a big, three-masted ship that he marked as "The Galley Fuste." Not far away from the galley, the second and third ships stand together, anchored mid-stream. Deep-welled and broad beamed – and clearly labeled – the twin Dutch eel ships wait just off of Queen's Hythe with their writhing cargo (Fig. 27).

Norden's decision to include the eel ships on his map is, in many respects, striking. With the exception of the Galley Fuste, every other named element on the document represents a fixed place. Norden labeled those monuments and neighborhoods that bounded and filled in in the city's urban geography. The map gives title to such immovable landmarks of the cityscape as The Tower, St. Paul's Cathedral, Coels Harbor (Coldhabor), Winchester Howse, and Hyghgate. Even the Galley Fuste, although mobile, was a monument that operated within a prescribed space and role

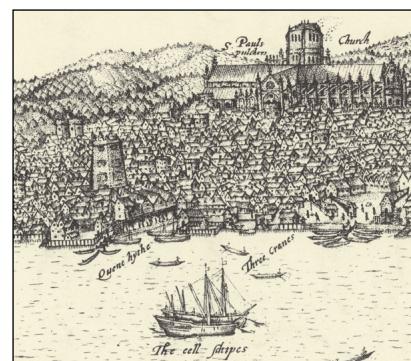


Fig. 27: Closeup image of the Dutch eel ships anchored in the Thames off Queenhithe, from Norden's city-view map Civitas Londini (1600). Reproduction by the London Topographical Society, Publication No. 94, 1961.

in the life of the city. The galley, which appears in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* and other plays of the era as the Galley Foiste, served as a centerpiece of an annual municipal ritual. Every year London's Lord Mayor's rode the vessel upriver in a celebratory procession to Westminster, where he swore his oath of office to the crown before taking the galley back home.⁹ The ship held an important place in the capital's rites and ceremonies, was only used once per year, and then only travelled the small stretch of water between London Bridge and Whitehall – an itinerary conducted within the bounds of London's physical (and, to a degree, political) ambit, and wholly encompassed by the scope of Norden's map.¹⁰ In addition to the demands of custom keeping it in place, the ship was also far too large to pass through London Bridge; it had been carried overland and then installed in the Thames.¹¹ The Galley Foiste, like the map's other named elements, represents an essentially static, permanent marker of London's geographical and cultural identity.

The eel ships, however, bring a markedly different aspect to the constructed space of the city map. Neither London nor the crown controlled the ships, and the vessels owned a particular impermanence unlike any other marked place on Norden's map. Alone among the multitude of named landmarks, the eel ships had the ability to weigh anchor and depart. Not only did they possess the potential to leave, but individual ships did so on a regular basis. The entire trade, in fact, required it. Consequently, the ships that Norden penned represent not the actual physical vessels – which could come and go at will – but rather an idealized space in which the ships, as a type, remained fixed. The map weaves the perception of the palingmen and their schuyts into the fabric of the city, fixing into permanence what was, in reality, a literal movable feast.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the galley-foiste and its place in London's history and space, see: David Carnegie, "Galley-Foists, the Lord Mayr's Show, and Early Modern English Drama," *Early Theatre* 7.2 (July 2004): *passim*.

¹⁰ The map both shows (and names) buildings at Westminster, as well as including a more detailed map as an insert: the document provides a view of Westminster artfully tearing through the map in the fields outside of Southwark. Norden (and other, later mapmakers) quite clearly considered Westminster to be an integral part of the London cityscape.

¹¹ Carnegie, "Galley-Foists, the Lord Mayr's Show, and Early Modern English Drama," 55.