London: A Social and Cultural History, 1550-1750” by Robert O. Bucholz and Joseph P. Ward
By Jonathan Yardley
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No doubt the publication of this account of two centuries in London’s long and eventful history was timed to coincide with the opening less than two weeks hence of the 2012 London Olympics. Indeed, it could help the weary traveler pass a few hours while waiting in the clogged immigration and customs lines at Heathrow Airport. Make no mistake about it, though, this encyclopedic survey by two American professors of history is no guidebook for the tourist, but a serious and remarkably successful attempt to describe how the city reached the cusp of “modernity,” how it emerged from relative obscurity in the middle of the 16th century to become, about 200 years later, “the greatest city in Europe,” with a population whose distinctive traits are recognizable to this day.

Robert O. Bucholz (Loyola University, Chicago) and Joseph P. Ward (University of Mississippi) cover a great deal of ground, but their study boils down to “two principal themes: (1) how the sleepy port and court town of a second-rate power on the fringes of Europe became an imperial capital, a world city, and a harbinger of modernity; and (2) how at least 6,000 to 8,000 immigrants a year came to London, acclimated themselves to it, built it into a great metropolis, and became Londoners.” This process of acclimatization is by now a familiar one, as the world becomes ever more urban and people wrap themselves in the identity of the cities to which they migrate, but in the middle and late years it was virtually unheard of, especially in England at a time when “most English men and women lived in rural villages of as many as 500 or as few as 50 inhabitants.”

The English inhabited “a strict, God-ordained hierarchy” in which a “chain of being” put each person in his or her place. It was a society that “valued order, not opportunity; conformity, not originality, community, not individuality,” in which those at the top of the ladder — the king, the nobility, the highest ministers of the church — were expected to treat the lower orders with paternalistic care and the lower orders, in turn, were expected to grant their superiors deference. London, though, “was arguably the place in England where the Great Chain of Being was most consistently under attack and least likely to work,” because “its population of about 120,000 was ten times larger than its provincial rivals” and because it was already noted “for its social mobility, its inhabitants growing rich or poor, rising or falling in status, very quickly.”

These characteristics had a tenuous grip on London as this book begins, but its central story is how they grew ever deeper roots, to the point that the people who lived there were not merely English men and women but Londoners. Indeed, a strong argument could be made that it was London, not England, that defined them, just as it is New York, rather than the United States, that defines the people of that city. But urban identity is a relatively new phenomenon, so this book helps us understand how it came to be.