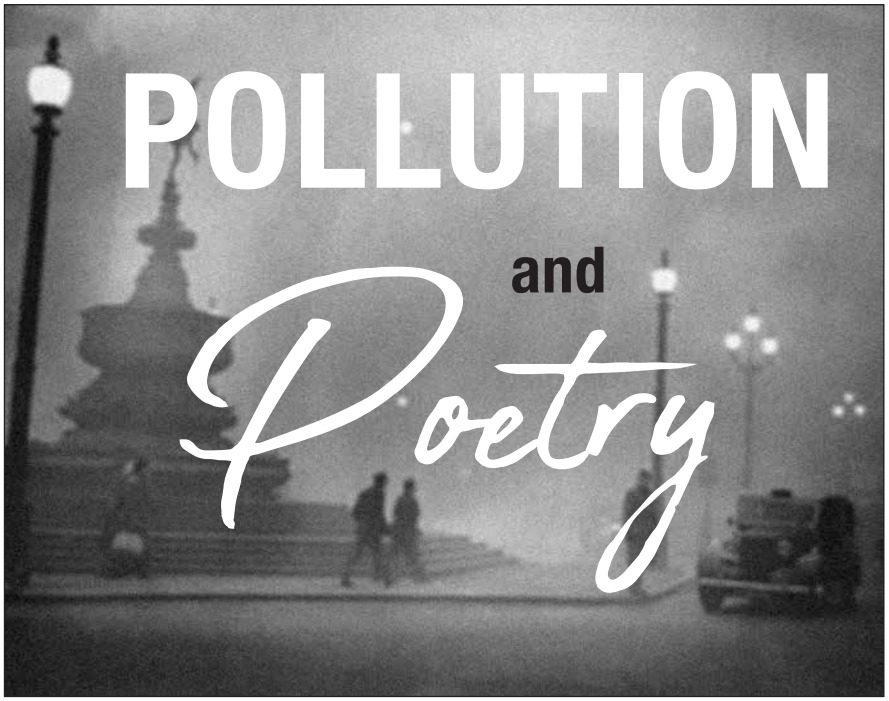
DISCUSSED: London fog, infant mortality, John Evelyn, Hetty Wesley Wright



Piccadilly Circus, London, 1952.

BY LORA E. GERIGUIS

Environmental anxiety is not a twenty-first-century innovation, nor is it a product solely of twentieth-century corporate globalism, or even an invention of nineteenth-century industrialization. Instead, we can trace evidence of human awareness of our interconnections with and dependence upon nature back much earlier, for example, to the Dark Ages in England. The discovery of coal and its fuel properties in the 1300s was quickly stigmatized by the English as being accompanied by an unpleasant sulfur smell suggestive of hell fire and clouds of smoke that laced every surface with corrosive dust. King Edward (1442–1483) banned the burning of coal and established penalties to prevent the ill effects of usage, but his measures did not deter a population driven to satisfy its needs for cooking and warmth, particularly during the unusually cold spells that periodically marked the pre-modern era, known as the "Little Ice Age."[1] Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) feared England's tree supply was being dangerously exhausted by the over-foresting demanded of the economically critical and militarily sensitive building and shipping trades, as well as wood's continued use by the population as a fuel source, and so sought to study the problem throughout her reign.[2] Long-held assumptions about the inexhaustibility of nature were being challenged by the

The discovery of coal and its fuel properties in the 1300s was quickly stigmatized by the English as being accompanied by an unpleasant sulfur smell suggestive of hell fire and clouds of smoke that laced every surface with corrosive dust.

evidence of such environmental stress-points well before the words of William Shakespeare's poetry were first spoken on the stage of the Globe theatre.

By the seventeenth century, London was already choking on its air pollution. The pervasiveness of the smoke from coal usage inspired the earliest known print publication to specifically identify pollution as a problem and to argue for a solution to it. In *Fumifugium: Or the Inconvenience of the Air and Smoak of London Dissipated*,[3] John Evelyn addressed King Charles II (1630–1685) by dramatizing in biblical terms what the capital city of London had become, a "hell on earth," caused by the ever-present "Hellish and dismal Cloud of SEA-COAL" generated by the unrestricted burning of coal within the city limits, by industry in particular and households to a lesser extent.[4] Evelyn warned, "this pestilent smoke… corrodes the very iron, and spoils all the movables [household goods] leaving a soot on all things that it lights: and so fatally seizing on the lungs of the inhabitants, that the cough and the consumption spares no man."[5] A later editor of Evelyn's work makes a point of comparing the high death-toll among London's children resulting from pollution to the practices of deliberate infanticide typified by ancient Greek and Roman cultures: "We shudder and are shocked at the barbarity of it, but at the same time are accustomed to read with great composure of the deaths of thousands of Infants, suffocated every Year, by Smoke and Stenches which good policy might in a great measure remove."[6]

Evelyn's proposed solution to London's pollution problem was to outlaw the industrial use of coal inside the city and to plant a hedge of trees and flowers around the city to act as a filter for the air and a beatifying boundary line—a suggestion quite prescient in its science and precociously suggestive of modern city planning practices. As evidence of the merit of limiting coal burning in the city, Evelyn recalls a year when "Newcastle was besieged and blocked up" due to war thereby preventing the mining of coal and limiting its use in London as a season when the gardens produced "such plentiful and infinite quantities of Fruits, as they never produced the like either before or since."[7] Unfortunately, Evelyn's plans for ameliorating pollution in London were ignored by King Charles, who was described later as so "negligent and dissipated a Patron" for his rejection of Evelyn's advice.[8] *Fumifugium* was reprinted by concerned citizens five times over the next three hundred years, indicating that his articulation of the problems of pollution held sway well into the twentieth century.[9]

By the eighteenth century, at a time of already high infant mortality, Londoners understood that their children died at a significantly greater rate than did their country cousins.[10] Hetty Wright (1697–1750), sister of John and Charles Wesley who went on to found Methodism, lived in London with her husband, who operated a lead-works shop adjacent to their house. Tragically, all of the Wright children died in infancy, a fact that biographers say Hetty blamed on their family living so close to the lead-works shop, precisely the kind of industry fueled by coal.[11] Wright commemorated the loss of one daughter on "the second day of its birth" in a 1733 poem, by metaphorically evoking coal smoke as the specter of death:

> That whene'er that fatal cloud
> Must thy radiant temples shroud;
> When deadly damps, impending now,
> Shall hover round thy destined brow,
> Diffusive may their influence be,
> And with the blossom blast the tree![12]

The references to "fatal cloud," "shroud," and "deadly damps" are unmistakably coal-related images. The "shroud[ing]" of her daughter's temples by the "fatal cloud" is reminiscent of Evelyn's disgust that London "should wrap her stately head in Clouds of Smoke and Sulfur."[13] The "damps" are a direct evocation of the various gases (e.g. methane) known to regularly leak out of fissures of coal mines, often leading to explosions that killed many miners.[14] The "diffusive" quality of these gases meant they could accumulate and spread to other areas of the mine, a property the poet-mother calls upon in her grief to express her desire to die with her child ("with the blossom blast the tree"). Wright's imagery is also strongly suggestive of the terminology employed by Timothy Nourse in 1700 to describe the dangers of coal pollution to the very young: "new-born Bodies, like tender Plants, or Blossoms, are soon blasted by the Sulphureous [sic] Exhalation."[15] Regrettably, wide-spread recognition that coal was killing the kids did nothing to reverse trends towards greater economic dependence on a fuel source that England had in such large supply: "by 1700, Britain was probably mining five times more coal than the rest of the world combined."[16]

Poetry of this period documents a consciousness of pollution, either through negative description of pollution's harm (as seen in Wright's poem), or idealized depictions of the clean-aired country-side as a pollution-free zone.

Sometimes both themes are addressed by the same poet, as can be exemplified by Mary Barber's "To a Lady in the Country" (1728), with its reference to herself being stuck in smoky Dublin (where she "very seldom see[s] the sun" due to that city's high level of coal usage), while her aristocratic lady-friend (and patron) enjoys the pure air of the country.

> Whilst lovely Landscapes you survey,
> And peaceful pass your Hours away,
> Refresh'd with various blooming Sweets;
> I'm sick of Smells and dirty Streets,
> Stifled with Smoke, and stunn'd with Noise
> . . . .
> "O! would kind Heav'n reverse my Fate,
> Give me to quit a Life I hate,
> To flow'ry Fields I soon would fly;
> Let others stay—to cheat and lye.
> There is some blissful Solitude,
> Where eating Care should ne'er intrude,
> The Muse should do the Country Right,
> And paint the glorious Scenes you slight."

When she wasn't being entertained by generous patrons in their country houses, Barber's lower-class status kept her living in the city ("a life I hate"), which certainly aggravated her asthma, often to a debilitating level.[17] Beyond her physical and medical challenges, note the direct association made by Barber between the material filth of Dublin (the "Smells and dirty Streets") and the moral corruption of city life ("Let others stay—to cheat and lye"), which became a mainstay of the way city and country life were contrasted during the period.

Although poets and other people have long recognized humanity's responsibility to live in the world without harming it, to be both good stewards and appreciative curators of nature, we've repeatedly failed to live up to that divine calling. Sarah Dixon (1671–1765) in her poem, "Spring" (1740), recalled "happy Eden" before the fall as filled with "delightful Greens," where "Perfumes, did through the Air diffuse."[18] Dixon likens Adam and Eve's fall into sin as a blow struck by humanity against nature: the "Elements were all at Peace with Man,/Till he, himself, the dangerous War began."[19] There is a striking similarity between Dixon's thesis in "Spring" and the argument made more than two hundred years later by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962), where she predicted a future, fabled, even Edenic "town in the heart of America" that would experience a "spring without voices" due to the polluting of our environment by unrestricted commercial use of pesticides: "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves."[20]

Carson's predictions might well have been informed by London's Great Fog of 1952, when unusually cold weather conditions prompted a high rate of coal usage, the smoke of which was held close to the ground due to an anticyclone hanging over the region. At least 4,000 people (perhaps as many as 12,000) died during the four days of the event from the same breathing aliments that Evelyn described in 1661.[21]

Nelson's Column, December 1952 (Photo: N T Stobbs)

The Clean Air Act of 1956 and other measure taken to improve air quality were a direct response to the mid-century tragedy;[22] perhaps London's politicians were finally moved to action because the large-scale calamity was well photographed and widely publicized. In January 2018, London papers reported another cold weather fog/smog event was expected; they notified the public that, while reminiscent of 1952, the "modern version will only be moderately polluted." [23] What would Evelyn say of this limited and severally delayed implementation of his clean air vision?

In the 1970s, Francis Schaeffer reminded Christians that our divinely ordained relationship with nature "should not only be for aesthetic reasons—though that would be enough reason in itself, because beautiful things are important—but we should treat [creation] with integrity because this is the way God has made it."[24] Aesthetics can be a means of planting the seeds of an environmental enthusiasm

that will bear the fruit of more sustainable practices. As a professor who teaches British literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I'm challenged to make poetry of a distant time and a seemingly ancient language accessible to contemporary, technology-native, visually-literate college students. Ironically, the environmental anxiety of that earlier period has proven to be bridge of commonalty that students can cross to meet the poets of the past. The ability for students to read both environmental anxiety and enthusiasm for nature in the works of the past brings the otherwise 'alien' period into clearer focus, so that it can be appreciated—even embraced—as a means of better understanding their own present-day relationship with the still imperiled world.

Further Reading

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 50th anniversary edition. Introduction by Linda Lear. Boston: Mariner Books, 2002.

Freese, Barbara. *Coal: A Human History*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Schaeffer, Francis A. *Pollution and the Death of Man: A Christian View of Ecology*. 11th printing. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980.

End Notes

1. "Europe had by this time entered into its so-called Little Ice Age, a period that would last through the 1700s. On average, this was the coldest period since the last ice sheets had left the Northern Hemisphere; the region's climate was characterized by longer, harsher winters and the occasion freezing over of the River Thames." Barbara Freese, *Coal: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 31. Freese is the source for the coal history related in the previous sentence as well (1).

2. "During Elizabeth's reign, dozens of commissions were sent out by the central government to investigate the wood shortage round the nation, and each one confirmed the serious decline of the forests." Freese, *Coal*, 30.

3. "Fumifugium" is a word Evelyn invented, combining two Latin words, one for smoke or vapors and the other for exile or banishment.

4. John Evelyn, *Fugifumium*: *Or the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated* (1661), Reprinted by B. White (London: At Horace's Head, in Fleet Street, 1772), 18-19, Books.google.com. All references to Evelyn's work are quoted from this edition. Spellings have been silently modernized.

5. Evelyn, *Fugifumium*, 19-20.

6. B. White, "Preface by the Editor," *Fumifugium*, vii-viii.

7. Evelyn, *Fugifugium*. 21.

8. White, "Preface," *Fumifugium*, viii.

9. Evelyn's 1661 work was reprinted in 1772, 1825, 1930, 1933, and 1961 at the behest, not of literary or historical presses, but by environmental activist organizations, suggesting something powerful about Evelyn's ability to articulate the problems of pollution and the failure of government to resolve them.

10. B. White, writing in 1772, quotes the "yearly Bill of Morality" which reports that "near half the children that are born and bred in London die under two years of age." He contrasts this statistic with the knowledge that a "child born in a Country Village has an even change of living year forty year…the chance for Life in infants, who are confined in the present foul Air of London, is so small, that it is highly prudent and commendable to remove them for it as early as possible." B. White, "Preface by the Editor." *Fumifugium*, vii.

11. Headnote to "Mehetabel Wright (1697-1750)," David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, 3e (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 332.

12. Mehetabel ('Hetty') Wright ('nee Wesley), "To an Infant Expiring the Second Day of its Birth" (1733), *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: The Annotated Bibliography*, 3e. Edited by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard (Alden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 333.

13. Evelyn, "To the Reader," *Fugifugium*, 8.

14. Freese, *Coal*, 49.

15. Timothy Nourse, *Campania Foelix* (1700). Quoted by Freese, *Coal*, 38.

16. Freese, *Coal*, 56.

17. Barber "suffered from chronic ill health [described as a "cough, and asthma"] and frequent spells of disability." Fairer and Gerrard, eds., Headnote to "Mary Barber (c.1685–1755)," *An Annotated Anthology*, 479.

18. Sarah Dixon, "Spring," *Poems on Several Occasions (Canterbury:* J. Abree, 1740), 84. Books.google.com.

19. Ibid.

20. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 50th anniversary edition, (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), 2–3.

21. "The Great Smog of 1952," www.metoffice.gov.uk.

22. Ivana Kottasova. "Here's What London is doing about its pollution problem," *CNN Money* (24 January 2017). Money.cnn.com.

23. Ian Kano. "London Smog Hits Back," Insidecatholic.com (11 January 2018).

24. Francis A. Schaeffer. *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology*, 11th printing (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 54.

LORA E. GERIGUIS is a professor of English and associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at La Sierra University. Her previous contributions to *Spectrum* have explored "The Bible in Art and Literature" (Spring 2011) and "Female Metaphors in the Bible" (Spring 2012). She and her husband, David, have three children: Peter (21), Paul (19), and Julia (17).