

LSE Lit Fest 2016 Book Review: Dreamstreets: A Journey Through Britain's Village Utopias by Jacqueline Yallop

In *Dreamstreets: A Journey Through Britain's Village Utopias*, Jacqueline Yallop takes readers on a tour of Britain's historical 'model villages', providing accounts of the philanthropists, architects and manufacturers behind such communities as New Lanark and Port Sunlight. While Yallop offers an immersive, beautifully written voyage that critically reflects upon the less 'utopian' aspects of these experiments, Tom Kelsey would have welcomed more inclusion of voices 'from below' – i.e. from those who inhabited the villages.

Jacqueline Yallop will be speaking at LSE on Tuesday 23 February alongside Michael Caines, novelist Benjamin Markovits and Dr Robin Archer (LSE). 'We Don't Have to Live Like This: Experiments in Utopian Living' discusses utopian experiments in British history and considers whether utopian living is possible today. Free tickets are available [here](#). This event is being staged as part of the [LSE Space for Thought Literary Festival 2016](#). To mark the five hundred year anniversary of Thomas More's formative work, the theme of this year's festival is 'Utopia' with a series of free exciting events being held at LSE exploring questions of the imagination, dreams, nostalgia and the quest for a better world.

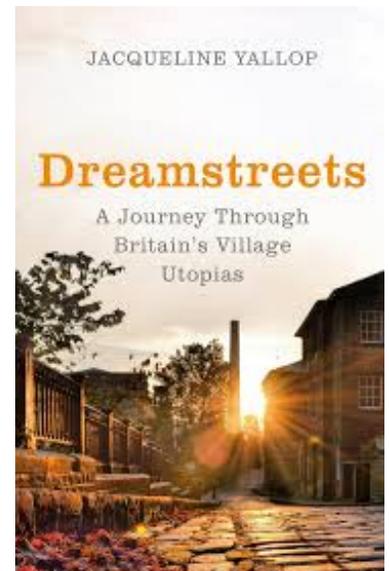
***Dreamstreets: A Journey Through Britain's Village Utopias*. Jacqueline Yallop. Jonathan Cape. 2015.**

What exactly a 'model village' is can be a source of confusion. What first springs to mind is the sort of quaint tourist attraction that scales down an imaginary village as to invite visitors to tower over and look upon it. But we can also use the phrase to describe the self-contained communities associated with the likes of Joseph Rowntree and John Cadbury. Indeed, a model village is also a life-size thing which may now also be a quaint tourist attraction, but was once a space purpose-built for living and working. In *Dreamstreets: A Journey Through Britain's Village Utopias*, Jacqueline Yallop takes us for a tour through the latter type of model village with an eclectic narrative stretching across two hundred years of history, from the middle of the eighteenth century into the middle of the twentieth, beginning at New Lanark and ending with Portmeirion.

Yallop does not deny the misunderstanding which the phrase 'model village' can invoke. In fact, in explaining what she wants to do with her book, Yallop plays on the strange similarities which can be found at both Bekonscot and Bournville. In part, *Dreamstreets* is a biography of the philanthropists, architects and manufacturers who designed Britain's 'village utopias', but Yallop also sees the book as an attempt to position the reader as if they could look upon the full-scale model villages like miniature towns.

Dreamstreets seeks to build a comprehensive view of what these places were about; in particular, Yallop wants to understand the motivations that led to the construction of such spaces. In addition, she aims to get to grips with what it was like to live in these designed communities. With these tasks in mind, *Dreamstreets* does not look to add to historiographical debates. It is unashamedly a popular history book. Suitably, it is a beautiful written and highly readable work on a fascinating topic. It was no surprise to learn that when Yallop came to write *Dreamstreets*, she had already published three novels.

Dreamstreets could have been a particularly twee book. It could look back at the 'village utopia' as embodying a



long-lost paternalism sorely missed in our deeply uncertain age. But despite the book's name, *Dreamstreets* is not this at all. In fact, Yallop might well have been trying to ensure that her work is as dissimilar to this potential narrative as possible. Reasonably enough, the story begins with Robert Owen, the visionary Welshman who built the distinctly industrial New Lanark. We get some personal reflections on what Yallop thinks of the village today – she does not like it at all – and an explanation of the utopian ideals behind it. The discussion on both reinforces the same central theme: essentially, that Owen wanted to control his workers and discourage individualism.



Image Credit: Port Sunlight (Man vyi)

Port Sunlight, a very different type of community, is equally disliked. The rigid visual conformity of New Lanark is not really the problem at Lord Leverhulme's village for soap workers. Instead, this settlement feels a little too much like an advertisement. It is false, superficial and disorientating. But worst of all, it is hypocritical. Each house may be unique and specially designed, yet ultimately Yallop believes that it all comes back to the same impulse which drove New Lanark. Like Owen, Leverhulme wanted to exert his authority and control his workers.

In fact, throughout all the villages that Yallop visits, the commentary always comes back to social control. At times, it feels like every single place seems to be a variation on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. This may well have been the case: to live in a 'village utopia' could have been horribly suffocating. But we just do not know from the evidence that Yallop presents.

Dreamstreets is dominated by Yallop's reflections on the places she visits and the voices of those who built the model villages, yet what those who lived there actually felt and thought is rarely touched upon. Throughout *Dreamstreets*, we look upon these communities from a position towering above them, but the perspective from below is too seldom discussed. Yallop convincingly demonstrates that the philanthropists who built Britain's model villages did so largely out of self-interest, ranging from rather straightforward financial imperatives to the more political desire to mellow any revolutionary sentiment. But self-interest in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. It could well have been the case that the workers being controlled in these villages and their homes also found a sense of freedom in secure wages and a supportive community around them. But we just do not know from *Dreamstreets*.

This criticism may seem unfair or even trivial, but there is perhaps a little more at stake here than just model

villages. The way in which Yallop talks about the imposition of top-down control upon individual liberty is a well-worn theme. Her book clearly reinforces the idea that we must not have a central body dictating our lives. A fine position. But in *Dreamstreets* it comes with little self-awareness about the familiarity of the sort of story which is being told. Moreover, there is even less reflection on what the present-day ramifications of such a stance might be. Even if we were not living through one of the worst housing crises for several generations, it would have been nice to read a book which moved beyond familiar dichotomies.

By the end of the book there is no doubt that one has been taken on an engaging and deeply personal journey through the history of Britain's 'village utopias'. Yet, by the very nature of the way in which the story is told, the work also feels like a rather one-sided view. Both the model village as lost paternalistic dream and the model village as oppressive nightmare are clearly ideological constructions. The space in between these views might well be an interesting place to explore. But it would probably have to be built upon recovering the voices of the people who lived there. In short, *Dreamstreets* is lovely to read, but it might also leave you wanting a different sort of story, one which gets inside of people's houses to tell you about their lives.

Tom Kelsey is a first-year PhD student at King's College London in History. His doctoral research focuses on understanding why mid-1960s to early 1980s Britain saw diverse, sustained and vociferous critiques of the relationship between technology and the state. His academic interests include the history of left in the twentieth century as well as the politics of knowledge and expertise.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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