

Foreword

FEW READERS TODAY will be familiar with the name Mary Cathcart Borer, and yet she was one of the twentieth-century's most prolific writers, across many genres. Those who do know of her work are probably most familiar with the volumes on walks and sites in London, published in the 1980s, especially her *Illustrated Guide to London in 1800*. They are, however, but a tiny part of her output.

Mary Cathcart Borer was born in 1906 in London. Her father was a hospital secretary and she graduated with a B.Sc. from University College in 1928. She first worked as a scientific researcher at what was then called the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, and for a few years was married to an archaeologist, Oliver Myers, travelling to Luxor with him. The marriage did not last, however. In 1940 she took up screen-writing and script-editing for film and television, and continued in this field until the 1960s, working on a huge number of productions, many of them relating to children. Between 1937 and 1955 she published in book form 20 or 30 fictional stories and novelisations of some of the film scripts on which she had worked, the most famous of which was 'The Little Ballerina' published in 1949. Throughout the period from the late 1930s to the 1980s she also wrote at least 40 non-fiction books, largely with historical themes. She used at least two pseudonyms, especially for the film scripts – Molly Myers and Egan Storm. She died in 1994, aged 88.

The non-fiction titles show an amazing breadth of interest, research and knowledge. Her histories of geographical places ranged from Africa to Agincourt, from Palestine to the city of

London, and the studies of famous people from Joan of Arc to Hereward the Wake. Her books were extremely popular. The publishers were varied and included some of the most prestigious names in the business, such as Pitmans, Longmans, Michael Joseph and, of course, The Lutterworth Press.

Mary Cathcart Borer's writing shows her deep-seated interest in people, how they functioned, earned their keep and related to each other. This is very clear in *The British Hotel Through The Ages*: the layout and architectural appearance of buildings are surely subjects of explanation and discussion, but the questions that emerge most powerfully relate to why people were and still are in need of what we now describe as 'hospitality', and therefore why the various manifestations of it were designed in particular ways.

Hospitality enables travel, which for centuries was hard, wearisome and full of 'travail', as Borer points out. In this book, she takes us on a long journey, with many stops on the way. We glimpse the soldiers of Rome and the estate stewards of Roman villas travelling the long straight roads of imperial construction; the winding mud-filled tracks of the medieval countryside; the spartan conditions of pilgrims and other travellers seeking shelter and safety in monasteries; and the elaborate coaching inns, which catered not only for private travellers but also the public mail and the complexities of horse hiring, often working as meeting-places for locals – drinking clubs, theatrical plays, dances, gambling, and cockfighting.

The book also demonstrates how the need to travel relates to changes in technology. Borer identifies many of these, with particular attention to the development that made most impact over a short time: the introduction of the railway network, which ended the heyday of the coaching inns in the 1820s-40s (aided by the spread of macadamised road surfaces) that followed. To the surprise of even the railway companies, a vast new public went on the move, not only business men but also wealthy families and the participants in the newly popular railway 'excursions'. The companies built elaborate hotels at their main termini – elaborate both in their architecture and the level of services offered. Independent luxury hotels followed, whilst other more modest

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accommodation was provided for the less wealthy in smaller, quiet, and comfortable hotels as well as the so-called 'residential' and 'temperance' hotels and 'dormitories'.

The story of the roadside inn was not finished, however. Their fortunes were revived by the arrival of the bicycle and later the motor car, with the associated fashion for 'touring', which saw the birth of the 'motor hotel' complete with garage accommodation, forerunner of the modern motel. The idea that even the less wealthy deserved holidays led to the rise of boarding and guest houses in holiday venues, and eventually in the 1930s and 1940s the birth of the Youth Hostels Association and companies such as Butlins. At the other end of the social scale, Borer ends her story with both some of the larger companies that established highly respected chains throughout the country, and the extravagant luxuries of the great city hotels of the 1960s and 1970s.

Mary Cathcart Borer¹ did not write for an academic audience, and she surely did much to open up the genre of well-written and well-researched popular reading. She wrote with a long view in mind, providing the context to more closely focused specialised studies; and she wrote with ease and fluidity. She's earned her readers' respect, as an early woman science graduate working in a new and tough industry. The fact that much of her earlier output was designed for or about children and that in other cases she often used a male-sounding pseudonym may raise questions about the difficulties she had to overcome. There can be no better memorial to a remarkable writer than the reprint of two her books by one of her original publishers (*The British Hotel Through The Ages* and *Willing to School*, on the history of women's education)..

The appearance of this reprint is timely. It is impossible to ignore the fact that for a reader in the early 2020s a history of hotels has, in many cases, a bitter twist. Restrictions on frequent travel and holiday-making have moved us back centuries. Nonetheless, the long view presented by Mary Cathcart Borer is salutary – there have been many changes, good and bad, over

1. If you would like to learn more about Mary Cathcart Borer, see: <https://bearalley.blogspot.com/2011/01/mary-cathcart-borer>, bookaddictionuk.wordpress.com/2019/12/11/mary-cathcart-borer, www2.bfi.org.uk/EganStorm.

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the centuries, and undoubtedly there will be more to come. So while we read about the hotels of our past, let us also wonder what historians of the future will have to say about the hotels of the present.

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