**“Everlasting Memorials”: Urban Improvement and the Shadow of Ruin in Mid-Eighteenth-Century London**

In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, a number of proposals for improving London were produced. Some focused on the appearance of the city’s built structures while others were more broadly concerned with the lack of a coherent street plan for the city as a whole. Together, the wide range of writings on urban improvement expressed an anxiety that while Britain had successfully asserted its military and commercial prowess, the appearance of London did little to suggest that Britons were also a polite and refined people. Proposals for improving the capital frequently argued that architectural magnificence and a more organized layout would have immediate economic benefits by luring foreigners to London, thereby making the city a stop on the Grand Tour. While debates about the appearance of London can be traced back to its redevelopment in the wake of the Great Fire, this question received heightened attention in the 1760s as the territorial gains of the Seven Years’ War made Britons increasingly aware of their global empire and the example of Rome seemed ever more applicable to their own predicament. In this decade, discussions about the appearance of London were part of broader debates about the state of the arts in Britain, reflecting a growing concern with what the appearance of London might say about national culture, both at that moment and at a future time when all that remained would be fragments of the present. The debates about how the metropolis looked, and what its future ruins might say about London’s – and the nation’s – contemporary status, also informed imaginative works that invoked a ruined city as a vantage point from which to apprehend its current corruption.

Awareness of the history of the rise, decline, and fall of previous empires meant that those meditating on Britain’s status on the global stage understood, in David Skilton’s words, “some of the cultural significances not only of the past transfer of empire (*translation imperii*) by which Britain achieved imperial greatness, but of the next *translatio* which would take that greatness away”.[[1]](#endnote-1) Recent accounts of the “London in ruins” trope have focused in particular on its role in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, at a moment when Britons were coming to terms with their status on the global stage in the period after the loss of the American colonies and through the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.[[2]](#endnote-2) This trope is perhaps most famously associated with Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), which imagines a future moment when London’s “faded glories” are surveyed by American visitors, and Thomas Babington Macaulay’s invocation of the figure of a New Zealander who “shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul’s”.[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet the prospect of a future London in ruins can be traced at least as far back as John Dyer’s *The Ruins of Rome* (1740), a work which ends with a warning to “my Countrymen” to “beware” the fate of the Roman empire.[[4]](#endnote-4) For Dyer and others, Rome provided an important touchstone for understanding Britain’s imperial status. Poems such as Dyer’s, Suvir Kaul notes, “are haunted by the ruins of Rome, not to the point where they can see nothing but decline, but certainly in a way that qualifies their vision of future grandeur”.[[5]](#endnote-5) As I will show in what follows, one way of accommodating the transience of imperial power was to appeal to a consolatory story about how public improvement works undertaken in the present would offer clear evidence to future generations of the scale of Britain’s achievement. As I will also show, however, the trope of future ruin sometimes served the purpose of immediate political intervention, identifying the current moment not as one that had to be celebrated more appropriately, but as the point at which Britain’s status as a global empire was already beginning to unravel.

As already noted, one recurring concern voiced by critics of the appearance of London in the middle decades of the eighteenth century was that Britain’s progress in the arts was neither commensurate with its commercial and military prowess, nor able to rival the cultural achievements of its continental neighbours. As early as 1734, the historian and political writer James Ralph opened his *Critical Review of the Publick Buildings, Statues, and Ornaments* with the observation that “As nothing contributes more to the grandeur and magnificence of a city, than noble and elegant buildings, so nothing produces an heavier censure on a nation’s taste, than those which are otherwise” [1], before going on to declare that “’[t]is high time therefore for us to look about us too, and endeavour to vie with our neighbours in politeness, as well as power and empire”.[[6]](#endnote-6) In Ralph’s account, progress in the arts made over the course of the early seventeenth century, when “taste made a bold step from *Italy* to *England*”, was halted by the Civil War and further stunted when, after the Great Fire, plans to rebuild London in a more orderly and magnificent manner were rejected in favour of following the contours of the existing streets (2). For both Ralph and the economist Joseph Massie, whose *Essay on the Many Advantages Accruing to the Community, from the Superior Neatness, Conveniencies, Decorations, and Embellishments of Great and Capital Cities* was published in 1754, making London grander could have financial benefits. For Massie, “The Decorations, and fine Embellishments of Cities…will ever be found productive of perpetual Accessions of *Wealth* and *Commerce*, of *People*, *Power* and *Influence*” as “a general Resort to, and Residence at such finely adorned Cities, by Persons of high Rank and Opulence, will necessarily occasion much Money to be brought thither”.[[7]](#endnote-7) Ralph pointed both to the example of the Palace of Versailles, which “has made that crown ample amends for the expence of erecting it” from “the company that single fabrick only has drawn into *France*”, and of Italy, a country “generally visited by all foreigners of genius and distinction…owing to the magnificence of their structures, and their number and variety: they are a continual bait to invite their neighbours to lay out their money amongst them” (2). The absence of magnificent architecture was, in these accounts, a missed opportunity to attract foreign visitors, who would become the audience for works announcing London’s cultural prestige, and who would in turn communicate their sense of that prestige to others.

As evident in works such as Ralph’s and Massie’s, as well as in the debates about the construction of Westminster Bridge, which opened in 1750, discussions of the appearance of London recognized at once how London’s cityscape could potentially exemplify the nation’s cultural prestige, and how, in the present, the metropolis offered little evidence of its achievements in the arts. These concerns became even more pressing in the wake of Britain’s victory in the Seven Years’ War when, as John Bonehill observes, a wide range of competing views of what London could and should look like “were shaped by professional aspirations and competition, by appeals for public and even royal patronage, as well as more broadly by the politics of the age, by the mix of cultural hubris and anxiety that accompanied Britain’s ascendancy to global power”.[[8]](#endnote-8) Debates about urban improvement, and the role of grand and monumental architecture in proclaiming British power and prestige, overlapped with debates about the place of the arts in mid-century Britain, and about whether royal patronage or the public should provide the necessary financial support for them. At this moment, Douglas Fordham notes, men like John Gwynn argued that “cultural transformation should flow naturally from imperial grandeur”.[[9]](#endnote-9) Gwynn, a carpenter with ambitions to become an architect, dedicated his *London and Westminster Improved* (1766) to George III, appealing to the King to offer his patronage to public improvement projects, and was one of the founding members of the Royal Academy – an establishment that actively sought royal endorsement – when it opened in 1768.[[10]](#endnote-10) *London and Westminster Improved* offered a critical commentary on the present state of the capital. As Bonehill suggests, Gwynn’s treatise – much like the monumental “Bridge of Magnificence” that featured on the subscription tickets for Paul and Thomas Sandby’s *Six London Views* (1766-68) – offered “paper landscapes” and “paper monuments” that, their proposers knew, were unlikely to come into being (366, 392). Though they might be read as “extravagant and visionary”, as Gwynn himself acknowledges, these critical commentaries and ambitious plans nevertheless outlined possibilities for what London could be.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The role that buildings could play in telling a story about the past was outlined in the anonymous *English Architecture: or, the Publick Buildings of London and Westminster* ([1756?]), a work that aimed to offer “A succinct Review of their History, and a candid Examination of their Perfections and Defects”.[[12]](#endnote-12) It argued that

The Publick Buildings of a kingdom afford, when their dates are truly known, the best and most authentick history of its rise, splendour, and decline; and so far characterise its people…publick buildings remain everlasting memorials of the munificence of their founders, and of the taste of the age wherein they were built. (n.p.)

Eighteenth-century commentators looked to Rome in particular as the key example of how, even as future ruins, buildings could serve as, in the above quotation’s phrase, “everlasting memorials” of the achievements of the present. As Kaul argues, in making the “memorial fragments of imperial conquest – architecture, arches, statues, coins” the means of accessing and understanding the progress and eventual decline of the Roman empire, a work like Dyer’s *The Ruins of Rome* also “underlines the commemorative power of cultural fragments” that go on to serve as “coded records of national glory” (101). Rome served as a reminder, as Jonathan Sachs puts it, that “greatness comes not necessarily through economic, political, or imperial achievement, though this is requisite, but rather through the cultural markers of that achievement – through the built environment that celebrates it, and, by implication, will endure if only in ruined form after the civilization that it commemorates has long passed” (3).

For Gwynn, “The English are what the Romans were of old, distinguished like them by power and opulence, and excelling all other nations in commerce and navigation” (xv). As if to underscore that the London cityscape did not demonstrate this, however, he ends his “Introduction” with an injunction: “Let us, therefore, no longer neglect to enjoy our superiority; let us employ our riches in the encouragement of ingenious labour, by promoting the advancement of grandeur and elegance” (xv). In Gwynn’s terms, “publick magnificence” should be “considered as a national concern”; its encouragement “must necessarily stimulate the powers of invention and ingenuity” and lead to works that “will do honour” both to their creators and to “their country” (1). Like Ralph before him, Gwynn saw the redevelopment of post-Fire London along the contours of the existing street layout as an opportunity lost. In 1749 he published a copy of the plan for rebuilding the City produced by Christopher Wren in the wake of the disaster, dedicating it to the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Common Councilmen of London, while in *London and Westminster Improved* he blamed the “mean, interested and selfish views of private property” for the rejection of Wren’s plan (30). Though he conceded that the rebuilt city was “more regular, open, convenient, and healthful than the former”, he also argued that it “by no means answered to the character of magnificence or elegance” (3). In the absence of “a general well regulated limitted [sic] plan,…enforced by commissioners appointed by authority” and who were “men of sound judgment, taste and activity”, London had developed in a piecemeal way, which Gwynn characterizes as a process of “heaping absurdity upon absurdity” to produce “reproach and contempt” (5). The result was a city that was “inconvenient, inelegant, and without the least pretension to magnificence or grandeur” (5).

In a context in which urban development was driven by speculative builders, Gwynn anticipated that his proposals would be met with “the old cry of private property and the infringement on liberty” (vi). Like many other proposers of improvements across the mid-eighteenth century, Gwynn sensed the difficulty of reconciling public improvement with notions of British liberty, so as to differentiate it from the absolutist power that drove improvements in Paris under Louis XIV.[[13]](#endnote-13) One of the ways in which Gwynn sought to address the concerns surrounding public improvements was to emphasize their income-generating potential. Like Ralph and Massie before him, Gwynn pointed to the economic benefits of making London a stop on the Grand Tour. In *London and Westminster Improved*, he argued that “publick magnificence” has political advantages arising from “the intercourse with foreigners expending vast sums on our curiosities and productions”, noting that “had we more ample means of gratifying that thirst after novelty and amusement, numbers [of foreigners] would continually flock to our nation, as we continually do to theirs” (xiv). At the same time as claiming that a grander city would attract foreigners in the present, he also anticipated a moment of future ruin, noting that “the chief sources of wealth to many fallen states, are the remains of their magnificence, and the constant confluence of foreigners to those places supply the deficiencies of manufactures or commerce” (xiv). The rewards of such a “laudable tax on [the] curiosity” of foreigners would be felt not only now, but also long after the current moment of glory has passed (xiv).

While Gwynn urged readers to begin to think about what the architecture of the city might reveal about the current moment, Robert Mylne, the architect of Blackfriars Bridge, presented the public with a view of his bridge under construction that hinted at how it might appear as a future ruin. *A View of Part of the Intended Bridge at Blackfriars London* (Figure 1), a scene captured in August 1764 and published in 1766, presents the bridge mid-construction. Drawn by Mylne and engraved by the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the image highlights the architect’s Grand Tour credentials, in particular his knowledge of classical form as developed through studying Rome’s ruins on site (Bonehill 388). In this image, the spectacle of incompleteness introduces a double meaning. The wooden support frames used in constructing the arches, one of which is tiled and one of which is yet to be so, clearly gesture to the act of construction as process, as do the workmen operating pulleys at the top. The caption points the viewer to additional features that indicate that this is a work in progress, including “*The Keystone, on which the City Arms are to be cut*” and, to the left of the bridge “*The Pile Engine*” used in the construction. While these features, along with the caption’s dating of the scene as “August MDCCLXIIII” make clear that the bridge is going up rather than falling into disrepair, the partial columns of varying height rising from platforms near the bridge’s base further invoke the kind of classical ruins that feature in Piranesi’s views of Rome, which are called up in the caption’s announcement that the image was engraved by the Italian artist “at Rome”. In this way, the image gestures towards the Italian *veduta* tradition, one which, in Mark Hallett’s words, “dramatized the continuing relevance and potential of classic forms”.[[14]](#endnote-14) Mylne’s view brings past and present into

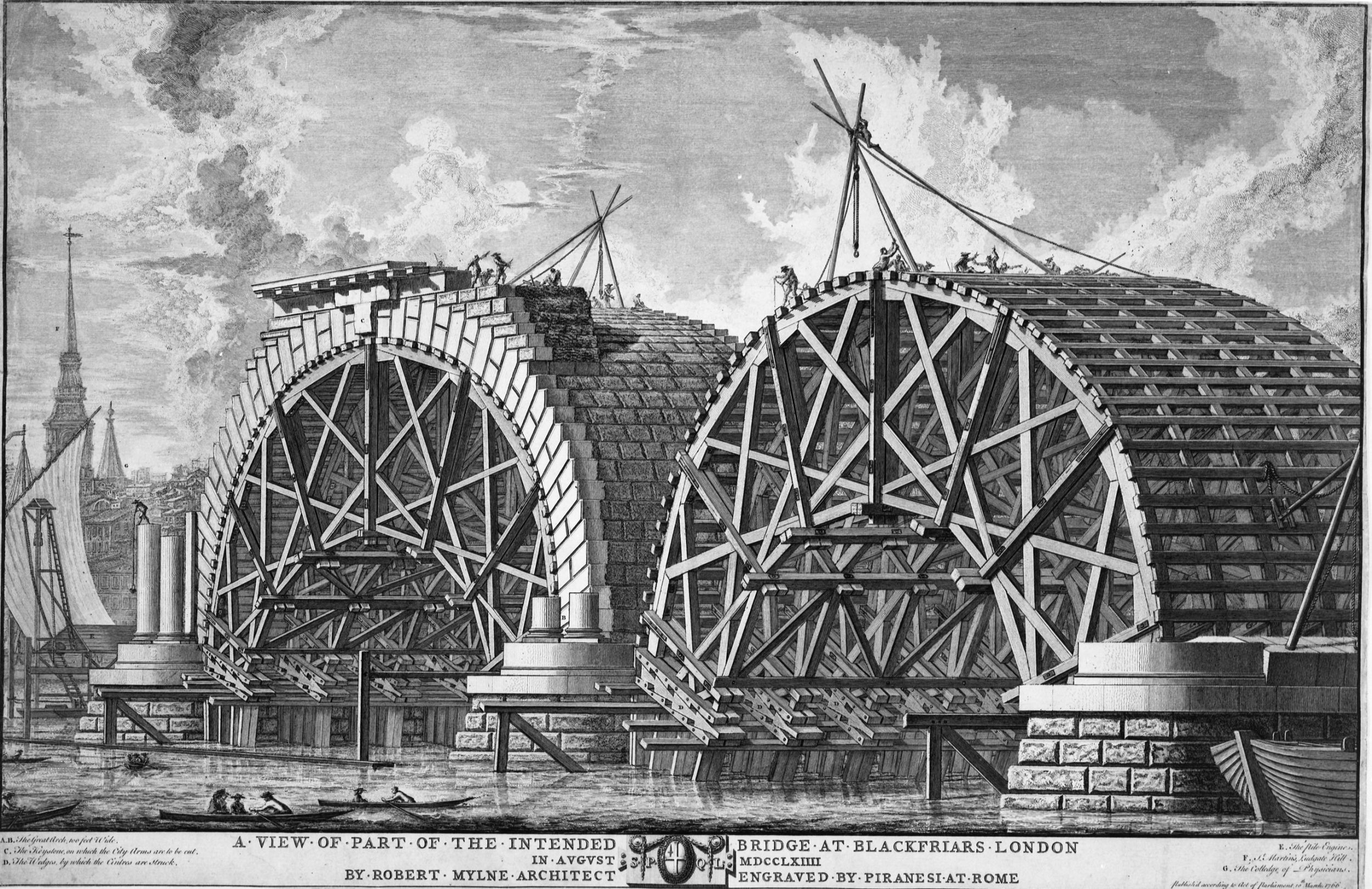


Figure 1: Giovanni Battista Piranesi after Robert Mylne, *A View of Part of the Intended Bridge at Blackfriars London in August MDCCLXIIII* (1766).

dialogue in a manner that implies what future ruin might look like; in echoing the architectural forms of ancient Rome, it announces mid-eighteenth-century Britain as the inheritor of the classical past. In Mylne’s image, we can see a similar process at work as in Canaletto’s view of London through an arch of Westminster Bridge, which, as Hallett notes, offered “an internal, mutually reinforcing symbolic juxtaposition that correlated precisely with the dual readings of the bridge as both a bearer of tradition and an icon of modernity” (49).

Both Gwynn’s treatise and Mylne’s bridge (a commission for which Gwynn also competed) therefore recognize the moment of the mid-1760s as one to mark with monumental architecture whose fragments at some distant future point would exemplify Britain’s current prestige. Others, however, used the trope of future ruins as a means to identify the seeds of decline already evident in the present. The anonymous *Private Letters from an American in England to His Friends in America* (1769) “are supposed to be written towards the close of the eighteenth century” (though the work’s temporal references are unstable, at moments referring to events relating to Wilkes and Bute as having occurred a century ago).[[15]](#endnote-15) Like Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, which it predates by over forty years, *Private Letters* imagines what a future American visitor might make of the remnants of London’s former glory. Told from the perspective of an American who travels to Britain in order “to see a country my worthy ancestors sprang from, and of which, according to the custom of America, we still value ourselves on being natives”, the letters record the visitor’s attempt to make sense of what he encounters (1). Though he seems to expect to find a nation in prosperity, while crossing the Atlantic his ship encounters a fleet “all freighted with the effects, valuables, and persons of several capital merchants, who had quitted Old England to settle themselves elsewhere”, and the passengers on board attempt to persuade him to abandon what would be “an almost useless voyage” (5-6). What he finds on arrival highlights the way in which the vestiges of the past might not yield a stable set of meanings; while, as we have seen, some expressed a confidence that magnificent architecture would serve as “everlasting memorials”, as *English Architecture* claimed, *Private Letters* suggests that sometimes ruin is simply ruin, offering no testimony to any past achievement. Like those visitors to eighteenth-century Rome who, as Rosemary Sweet notes, were disappointed not to find “pristine perfection” and “exaggerated scale and monumentality” but instead “the prosaic reality of antiquities surrounded by the paraphernalia of everyday life – sheds, shops, market stalls, washing lines, rubbish and animals”, the American finds that rubbish frequently impedes access to, and is sometimes even indistinguishable from, London’s monuments.[[16]](#endnote-16) Throughout, he struggles to come to terms with his sense of disappointed expectation.

Having read “several volumes of naval history during my *long, long* passage”, the American feels an especially heightened sense of melancholy on arrival in Plymouth – whose “choaked up” harbour makes navigation difficult – as he recalls “every anecdote of English glory” while being presented with “a strange prospect, that the same would never happen again” (10-11). As he ruminates over the cycle of empires, he notes to his correspondent that

The declensions of empires are to be considered as natural causes…they have their infancy, their youth, their maturity, and, though care and temperance may postpone it awhile, yet must the common catastrophe happen, when dotage and death shall long struggle which shall be predominant, but in the end, the conquest is determined in favour of the latter. (11)

Through this lens, he sees around him “proof” that “this country was completing that very destruction it had so fatally began” (11). What makes *Private Letters* especially provocative is that while proof of the nation’s decline confronts him everywhere he looks, he is unable to find much evidence of a prior moment of magnificence – of Britain’s empire at its “maturity”. Like Gwynn’s critical commentary on the appearance of London, the fictional letterspoint to concerns about mid-eighteenth-century London’s uncoordinated development. The American visitor finds that speculative developers have been the driving force behind a “frenzy of new building” that is unplanned, piecemeal, and poorly constructed (18). The pace of this development has outstripped demand, and even new houses stand empty. In the place where his pocket map outlines “a large space of ground coloured green, intersected by a river, and called Hyde Park” he finds only more buildings, and what was once Kensington Gardens has been transformed into streets of formerly fashionable houses, now parceled up and inhabited by labourers (16). What is initially framed as the natural, and therefore inevitable, process of “the declensions of Empires” is thus mapped on to what Gwynn referred to as the “mean, interested and selfish views of private property” (*Private Letters* 11, Gwynn 3). In doing this, *Private Letters* presents unplanned and uncoordinated development as symptomatic of much larger causes of decline.

The “self vanity” that makes people “[s]o fond…of hearing the jingle of their own names” in the streets they develop in London is characteristic of the luxury and self-regard of the British that confronts him throughout his tour (19). At a linen-draper’s shop, for example, he is surprised to find no one prepared to serve him: the owner and his apprentices are all too personally occupied to attend to him. While the American’s letters emphasize that London is no longer the centre of global trade, he also notes a kind of self-delusion amongst the city’s tradesmen about their actual status. As a cheesemonger explains, “We are all merchants, now, and every shop is a warehouse…my neighbour over the way, she has scarce three yards of ribbon, or more than three caps in her window; and yet it is called the *Cap-Warehouse*” (87). The distinction between a tradesman and a merchant, according to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755-56), is that between a shopkeeper and an agent of global commerce, “one who trafficks to remote countries”.[[17]](#endnote-17) By defining themselves as “merchants” and referring to their premises as warehouses rather than shops despite the limited items on offer, these tradesmen exemplify a form of vanity that both underscores what has been lost and demonstrates an ignorance amongst those who have remained in Britain as to the scale of this decline.

That global commerce has fled is signaled by the American’s inability to locate the Royal Exchange. When he asks a coachman to take him there, “the fellow laughed, and said, he supposed I had heard that there was, now, no such place; but that he could shew me the ground it once stood upon, the same being, at present, a kind of college for repentant prostitutes” whose inhabitants feign distress in order to “escape creditors, get cured of a certain disorder *gratis*, or be rid of a bastard child” (25). Visiting other famed monuments, the American learns how commercial values have corrupted all institutions. St. Paul’s has been transformed into a theatre playing host to pantomimes and musical performances, a development that can be traced back to “the luxury of bishop, dean, and residentiaries” who, after making some money by letting out the burial vaults to a wine seller, determine to give it over to its current uses, “finding religion of no value” (28). At Westminster Abbey, the story is much the same: “the pomp, pride, and dissipation of the dean and canons, had entirely overthrown the place” and it now stands roofless, a home to various shop stalls (125). Pieces of its architectural fabric, as well as its tombs, have been sold off to adorn the houses constructed during the speculative building frenzy. Fragments of Isaac Newton’s monument, for example, have been used as “the ornaments to the pilasters on a city alderman’s green-house – [while] the fine medallion of him crowns the top of a *beauset* in a common-councilman’s dining room – and the fellow, I hear, has the meanness to let it be seen, for buying six pennyworth of anything in his shop” (127). At the British Museum, the American learns that most of its curiosities have been sold off as the “idle, eating citizens” who were charged with looking after the institution have bartered these treasures to satiate their appetite for venison and burgundy (42). Rather than standing as monuments to the past, London’s most significant buildings have been repurposed for financial gain, rendering futile the traveller’s efforts to “search for antiquities, or vestiges of what has been” (26).

As he moves through London, then, the scene the American encounters is notably devoid of any evidence of former grandeur. At Leicester Square, the author “f[inds] nothing but unroofed buildings, common sewers open to the air, and, of course, very offensive, [and] grass growing between the interstices of the stones, on the foot-way, and, in short, everything symptomatic of desolation” (25). He undertakes his “pilgrimage to St. Paul’s” on foot “as the rubbish of old uninhabited houses made it difficult for a carriage to pass” (26). As is the case with Plymouth’s “choaked up” harbour, it is almost impossible to navigate London’s streets, once the arteries of commerce (8). Blackfriars Bridge, London’s most recently completely urban improvement at the time *Private Letters* was published, stands in a state of disrepair. When the American asks the man at the bridge’s tollgate if could give him change for a shilling, he hears that “sometimes, in the whole day, he did not even get a single penny, as other bridges were built above old London, which carried all the travelers that way”, leaving Blackfriars with “so many apertures, for want of regular reparation here, that you would find it difficult to pass, especially if you are troubled with…vertigo” (28-9). Later, as he travels along the Thames, his guide points out “broken piles standing in the river” where there “was once a bridge” (121). He attributes its dilapidation both to the construction of “a score” of bridges, and to the city’s depopulation, as the rage of building has stretched “almost to Uxbridge” at the same time as numerous men and women have emigrated to America. London’s remaining inhabitants “have little commerce this way” so that “’tis hardly likely we shall repair any one of the bridges across the river” (122).

Shortly after his arrival in London, the American learns that the state of desolation that characterizes England is not evident in Scotland. In a thinly veiled reference to the Bute administration, the letter writer explains that a “strange partiality” to the Scots drove them southward in “torrents” (23). Posing as “a true North Briton” at a coffeehouse “resorted to by the Scotch”, he listens as a Scotsman “gloried in the name of the whole nation, in saying, that had it not been for an earl of our court, the south of Great Britain would have been as eminent as ever” before pulling out a map to show the American how, in the “streets which stretch away to Brentford and Uxbridge…not one house…is inhabited by a South Briton – we have got a proper footing – and may we never lose it!” (97, 99, 100). In imagining the Scots as invading England in an arrangement facilitated by Bute, *Private Letters* taps into the broader debates about the Bute administration’s preference for favouring Scotsmen that can also be seen in a work like *A Seasonable Alarm to the City of London* ([1764?]). Published under the pseudonym Zachary Zeal, *A Seasonable Alarm* figures proposed improvements to the City of London’s streets – in particular the removal of shop signs and the repaving of the streets with Aberdeen granite – as part of a Scottish invasion, voicing concerns about the potentially despotic, and un-English, connotations of improvement that Gwynn sought to address in his treatise. Where Gwynn and others championed urban improvements that would serve as memorials of this age, Zeal argues that in advancing such renovations, the Bute administration seeks to eradicate the “healthful Roughness of our streets” and leave the English without “a Foot of *English* Ground to walk upon” – an argument that figures improvement as distinctly un-English.[[18]](#endnote-18) In allowing such “improvements” to proceed, Zeal argues, the English risk becoming like the Romans, who were “conquered by the very People they subdued” after luxury and, with it, effeminacy made them “an easy Prey to the resistless Arms of a manly, rough, uncivilized Race” (16). In imagining Scotch paving as a form of foreign invasion, Zeal – whose English chauvinism may be as much the object of satire as the Bute administration’s plans for paving the City – figures urban improvement not as an investment in the public good but as helping to hasten decline.

Like Zeal’s treatise, *Private Letters* sees the seeds of decline – including the conduct of the Bute administration, the hypocrisy of law and religion, the workings of a credit economy, and widespread luxury and social vanity – as having already been planted. The impulse to identify the present as a pivotal moment can also be seen in an essay in the *Literary Register, or Weekly Miscellany* entitled “Remarks, which are supposed will be made in this kingdom, by two North American travellers in the year one thousand nine hundred and forty-four” that was published in 1769. On arrival, the visitors express their astonishment to “find this once imperial city…this ancient, and once most august city, now fallen to a similar decay and ruin with Balbec, Persepolis, Palmira, Athens, and Rome”, situating London within a longer history of the decline and fall of empires.[[19]](#endnote-19) The dialogue that ensues as they tour London’s ruins with “a poor Briton” who offers to serve as their guide raises questions about London’s past status as, in the guide’s words, “the seat of arts, learning, trade and power” (98). While the visitors note that the ruins of St. Paul’s offer “convincing proof, not only of their knowledge in architecture, but of the great riches of this once free and powerful people”, elsewhere the evidence of past grandeur is harder to find (98). When the North Americans ask their conductor to show them the Admiralty and the Treasury, both of which they have read about in their guidebook, they find that such institutions are only a name to him. While the guide marks moments that point to the onset of decline (such as the rise of bribery and corruption amongst London’s citizens, and the conduct of the East India Company), he presents London’s “distinguished ruins” as offering convincing proof “of the magnificence of this once famous city” (99). His lament for the loss of a moment when “merchants were princes” meets with a retort from the travelers that the present state of decline is down to “the depravity of your rulers”, particularly in treating American colonists “more like aliens than fellow subjects”, as well as a more general “dissipation, intemperance, injustice, violence, ignorance, and despotism” (99). The ruins thus simultaneously record London’s past glory and serve as a monument to the various transformations – political and social – that have contributed to its decline.

Across a range of works produced in the 1760s, then, different versions of a discourse of ruin circulated. Broadly speaking, there is an acceptance of the inevitability of ruin in these publications. They differ, though, in their sense of the present’s relationship to that future moment. For Gwynn and Mylne the contemporary moment is one to seize, one in which encouragement of the arts would lead to more magnificent architecture that would in turn offer undisputed proof of Britain’s status, even when fragments of such buildings are all that remain. For the authors of *Private Letters* and “Remarks…by two American travelers”, by contrast, imagined future encounters with the ruins of London provided a new perspective on the corruption of the present. Where Gwynn and Mylne suggest a confidence that magnificent public works would reliably testify to Britain’s military, commercial, and artistic achievements, the authors of *Private Letters* and “Remarks” point to the possibility that in viewing the vestiges of what was, some viewers might see ruin only as ruin, and not as evidence of former glory. The manifold meanings of ruins would continue to play out in later invocations of the ruin trope that meditated on Britain’s status as an empire during and after both the American Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (*Private Letters* was republished in 1781 under the title *Anticipation, or the Voyage of an American to England in the Year 1899*). Much like the future ruins they invoke, these works themselves can be unstable in their meanings. As E. J. Clery argues, for example, Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* should be read in relation to the author’s broader “skeptical stance towards the fascination of ruins”, its invocation of the trope reflecting not a single coherent argument but instead “the polyphonic theatre of words that constitutes public debate”.[[20]](#endnote-20) By the mid-nineteenth-century, the trope of London in ruins had become so hackneyed that *Punch* issued a proclamation banning the use of the New Zealander contemplating the ruins of London: “The retirement of this veteran is indispensable. He can no longer be suffered to impede the traffic over London Bridge. Much wanted at the present time in his own country. May return when London is in ruins”.[[21]](#endnote-21) The final statement, allowing his return at a future moment when the city is actually in ruins, simultaneously acknowledges the inevitability of ruin, in its “when” rather than “if” formulation, and argues that such a moment is in no way impending.

Like the accounts of Rome in ruins examined by Kaul, and the prospects of future ruin in Romantic period works explored by Sachs, imaginative explorations of future ruin in the mid-eighteenth century at once acknowledge an inevitable trajectory towards decline and consider how Britain’s current position on the world stage might be appropriately memorialized. They remind us of how questions about what it meant to be a commercial and imperial power informed debates about the appearance of London, and how questions about the nature of eighteenth-century urban development, and in particular the role of speculative building in shaping the city, could impact what London in ruins might look like. Much like Joseph Michael Gandy’s paintings of John Soane’s Bank of England in ruins that were undertaken while the building was being constructed, they consider how the architecture of the present moment might appear to future viewers, and in so doing, they imagine the kind of stories that buildings might be able to tell about London’s – and by extension the nation’s – commercial, martial, and cultural achievement in the eighteenth century. In invoking the figure of an outside observer – and frequently an American, as one imagined to be from an empire on the rise as Britain’s waned – they also meditate on the nature and scale of Britain’s cultural and artistic achievements by thinking about what place it might have on the Grand Tour, both now and in the future.

1. David Skilton, “Tourists at the Ruins of London: The Metropolis and the Struggle for Empire”, *Cercles* 17 (2007): 93-119; 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Skilton and Jonathan Sachs, *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Ormskirk: Broadview Press, 2002): 161- 174, line 158;Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Review of Leopolde von Ranke’s *History of the Popes*” (1840) in *Critical Historical and Miscellaneous Essays and Poems*, 3 vols. (New York: W. L. Allison, 1884), II: 466. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Dyer, *The Ruins of Rome. A Poem.* (London: Printed for Lawton Gilliver, 1740), 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia 2000), 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. James Ralph, *A Critical Review of the Publick Buildings, Statues and Ornaments in, and about, London and Westminster* (London: Printed by C. Ackers, 1734), 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Joseph Massie, *An Essay on the Many Advantages Accruing to the Community, from the Superior Neatness, Conveniencies, Decorations and Embellishments of Great and Capital Cities* (London: Printed for Henry Whitridge, 1754), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. John Bonehill, “‘The centre of pleasure and magnificence’: Paul and Thomas Sandby’s London”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2012): 365-392; 366. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years’ War: Allegiance and Autonomy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Holger Hoock, *The King’s Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 25; Miles Ogborn, “Designs on the City: John Gwynn’s Plans for Georgian London”, *Journal of British Studies* 43 (January 2004): 15-39, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved, Illustrated by Plans* (London: Printed for the Author, 1766), viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *English Architecture: or, The Public Buildings of London and Westminster* (London: Printed for T. Osborne, [1756?]), title page. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, John Spranger, *A Proposal or Plan for an Act of Parliament for the Better Paving, Lighting, and Cleansing the Streets, Lanes, Courts, Alleys, and Other Open Passages…* (London: Printed for S. Baker, 1754) and Jonas Hanway, *A Letter to Mr. John Spranger, on His Excellent Proposal for Paving, Cleansing, and Lighting the Streets of Westminster, and the Parishes in Middlesex* (London: Printed for J. Waugh and W. Fenner, 1754). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Mark Hallett, “Framing the Modern City: Canaletto’s Images of London”, in *Canaletto and England*, ed. Michael Liversidge and Jane Farrington (London: Merrell Holberton, 1994): 46-54, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Private Letters from an American in England to his Friends in America* (London: Printed for J. Almon, 1769), n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Rosemary Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour: The British in Italy, c. 1690-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2012), 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “merchant” in Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Printed by W. Strahan, 1755-56), 2 vols. II: n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Zachary Zeal, *A Seasonable Alarm to the City of London, on the Present Important Crisis* (London: Printed for W. Nicoll, [1764?]), 13; 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. “Remarks, which are supposed will be made in this kingdom, by two North American travelers in the year one thousand nine hundred and forty-four”, *The Literary Register: or, Weekly Miscellany. Being A Repository of the Most Interesting Essays; with Extracts, and a Collated Review of Publications, in the Year MDCCLXIX* (Newcastle: Printed for the Benefit of the Subscribers to the Journal, By the Compilers of that News-Paper [1769]): 98-99, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. E. J. Clery, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven: Poetry, Protest, and Economic Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 114, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Punch* (1865) qtd in. David Skilton, “Contemplating the Ruins of London” *Literary London Journal* 2:1 (2004), n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)