"Tales of Two Cities": How London and Paris helped to make each other great

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By Glenn Altschuler

In "Parallele de Paris et de Londres" (1780), Louis-Sebastien Mercier compared the food, bridges, prisons, and pets of the two great cities in Europe. According to Jonathan Conlin, Mercier imagined the relationship between London and Paris as a grand conversation about how to design an ideal city.

Poised between fantasy and reality, Mr. Conlin claims, Mercier's London and Paris were chaotic, civilized and riotous. Each city was "an emporium of elegance" -- and "a metropolis of mud."

In "Tales of Two Cities: Paris, London and the Birth of the Modern City," Mr. Conlin, who teaches at the University of Southampton (and is the author of "The Nation's Mantelpiece" and "Civilization"), keeps the conversation going.

Dismissing a narrative of influence on one side and resistance or reception on the other as simplistic, he focuses instead on "the process of crossing and exchange" and on each city "as a series of intersections." Between 1700 and 1900, he argues, this dialogue was part of a process by which the "city as problem was tamed" and "metropolitan living moved from being the questionable exception to the fashionable rule."

Mr. Conlin uses six features of cities -- apartments, streets, cemeteries, eateries, music halls, and the underworld -- as, in essence, case studies that defined urban life. His book is enlightening, enchanting and exquisitely written.

Mr. Conlin has a gift for re-creating everyday life in his two cities. In the absence of street numbers, he reveals, shopkeepers in the 17th century hung massive signs, in the shape of animals, objects or celestial bodies, outside their establishments, not only as advertising, but to help outsiders and residents discern where they were.

Giving new meaning to "born under the sign of X," Mr. Conlin writes, "they turned even a short walk into something magical, full of bizarre connections and contrasts."
Streets were so dirty, Mr. Conlin also indicates, that enterprising young Parisians stationed themselves on bridges, offering to remove the detritus from the shoes of passers-by. And "night walking," the preserve of students, drunkards, criminals and prostitutes, was a crime.

A 9 p.m. curfew (10 p.m. in the summer) had been in place for 400 years, and householders were required to hang a candle near the door (in London) or above the first floor window (in Paris) on moonless winter nights. In the 18th century, the curfew remained in force in Paris, but was often ignored in London.

Before long, according to Mr. Conlin, pavements, gutters and street lamps enabled individuals to wander the streets, night and day, without getting doused with mud, assaulted, or run over by a carriage. And the urban promenade was becoming "a source of delight and mystery in its own right, rather than an unpleasant passage through the city's monstrously distended body."

Mr. Conlin's chapter on the "can-can" is equally fascinating. Born in Paris in the first half of the 19th century as an early form of break-dancing, performed by men and women, "with nary a lace petticoat in sight," he demonstrates, it was transformed into "skirt dancing" by a Brit named Kate Vaughan, and then picked up under the label "the Parisian quadrille" by French entertainers who grabbed hold of their skirts, waved them around, and kicked their legs, encased in black tights, high in the air.

Can-can dancers from "Gay Paree" returned to mixed reviews in London music halls in 1896. Not for the first or last time, Conlin observes, Londoners and Parisians denied they had learned anything from the other. Some observers on both sides of the Channel insisted that the English could never have invented something so seductive or risque.

And the use of the phrase "French cancan," Mr. Conlin suggests, underlined the "convoluted pedigree" of the dance: It was French, but not francais, a national dance turned into tourist schlock.

On this, and other matters, Mr. Conlin concludes, the men and women of London and Paris "were both right." They "had constructed an invisible city, one that was seductive, glamorous and romantic as it was mechanized, commercial and high-tech."