THOMAS BURKE: SON OF LONDON

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These ‘invisible’ writers and their forgotten publishers produced an imaginative space at once banal and luxuriant, naive and yet oddly complex. Somewhere between the written culture of the nineteenth century and the visual culture of the late twentieth, these writers act as an historical link …. Far more than in the stylistic contrivances of the modernists here exists, warts and all, the core of the modern sensorium.¹

Thomas Burke (1887-1945) was the author of over thirty books. They cover a variety of genres including poetry, historical novels, and detective stories, and almost without exception they are about London.² ‘London was my city’ he declares in his memoir, Son of London (1947): ‘It was in my bones and my blood, and part of my work, I knew, would be an attempt to re-present its life.’³ In 1916, Burke published a collection of stories set in London’s Chinese Quarter in the East End. Limehouse Nights: Tales of Chinatown established him instantly as a literary cause célèbre on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴ Hollywood director D.W. Griffith paid one thousand pounds for the film rights, and the lurid opium dens and illegal gambling parlours of Burke’s stories were sensationally visualised in Broken Blossoms

² The exceptions being travel journals about the English countryside such as The Beauty of England (1933) and Travel in England from Pilgrim and Pack-Horse to Light Car and Plane (1942).
³ Thomas Burke, Son of London (1947), London: Readers Union with Herbert Jenkins, 1948, 243.
The film set a celluloid precedent for the iconic imagery of London’s dockland Chinatown and its reputation as a landmark of early cinema continues to engage critical attention from historians of film. Thomas Burke however is acknowledged only in rare instances as the originator of Griffith’s masterpiece and is then generally dismissed. His reputation has undergone the fate of many minor, genre, or popular writers of his era. In his Foreword to the posthumous Best Stories of Thomas Burke (1950), Burke’s bibliographer, John Gawsworth, wondered appositely: ‘Where will Burke’s final place be in the letters of his day, in the literature he served so diligently?’ Gawsworth lists Burke’s favourite short stories, suggesting their authors as being those with whom he ‘might have liked to be placed’. They include W.W. Jacobs, Marion Crawford, Oliver Onions, O. Henry and Ambrose Bierce, writers whose work exemplified the ‘short story of tradition maintained by the magazines’. These stories Burke admired for having ‘a beginning, a crux and a climax’. On the other hand, he wrote, there is

… the newer kind which derives from Europe and is cultivated by the more exclusive reviews. The latter is not really a short story. It has no true beginning and only a nebulous conclusion. It is not concerned with

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5 Grant Richards, Author Hunting by an Old Literary Sportsman, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1934, 236-37. Griffith also ‘acquired on royalty agreements, the dramatic rights of … Limehouse Nights and Twinkletoes’ (see British Library Mss Collection, B.L. MS56678: Letters from Thomas Burke, 24, Stanhope Road, Highgate, to G.H. Thring, Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers, 27 September 1919, and 20 March 1920). After Broken Blossoms, Griffith merged two other Limehouse Nights stories, ‘Gina of the Chinatown’ and ‘The Sign of the Lamp’ in the film, Dream Street (1921).
