Where Marx and Miliband meet

An engaging account of an unruly city, but why so little on Empire, wonders Danny Dorling

Walking London’s streets, if you close your eyes for a moment, ignore your ears and imagine the smells and the tastes, you can try to summon up what it might have been like a century ago. It is usually only when glancing up at the blue plaque, recognising the name and then reading the date that this feeling dawns. A frisson of connection with people, long dead, that you have only ever heard of and can never know. 

David Rosenberg’s subtle, wide-ranging Rebel Footprints connects place to place and era to era. Nine annotated maps and detailed itineraries take you by the sites of long-past struggles, rebels’ homes and workers’ battles. This is largely a victorious history. It begins in 1830 and mostly ends in 1939, when change is ushered in and the way paved for the era to come of the welfare state, comprehensive schools, free healthcare and mass council house building.

Most readers will not walk these walks other than in their imaginations, but they will pick up all manner of relevant and irresistible trivia. They’ll learn that Keir Hardie took no pride in fancy clothes, while some of his socialist contemporaries liked to wear flashier suits...before defecting to the Liberals. Never trust a well-dressed man.

Arthur Conan Doyle donated 10 shillings and sixpence to the newly established British Brothers’ League of fascists in 1901, where well-moustached University of Oxford graduates teamed up with clergymen, businessmen and other grandees to oppose immigrants in a manner reminiscent of today.

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography, University of Oxford, and author, most recently, of Inequality and the 1% (2014).