

London

The biography

P.Ackroyd

March 4 - 25, 2006

When a Man is tired of London, he is tired of Life. Those oft-quoted words by Samuel Johnson is nowhere to be seen in this immensely fat compilation of Londonia intended to celebrate the city. On the other hand there are plenty of similar sentiments being presented. A certain Arthur Machen claims

it is utterly true that he who cannot find wonder, mystery, awe, the sense of a new world and an undiscovered realm in the places by the Grays Inn Road will never find those secrets elsewhere, not in the heart of Africa.

Boswell suggests likewise that

the intellectual man is struck with London as comprehending the whole of human life in all its variety, the contemplation of which is inexhaustible.

And fittingly Ackroyd ends his panegyric with *It is inimitable. It is Infinite London.*

So what is special about London that is not true about other populous cities? How much of the eulogy of fascination that is accorded London is not equally appropriate to any other great metropolis? After all as big cities go London is nowadays not particularly swollen with inhabitants, dwarfed by the Metropolitan New York, not to mention the vast mega cities of far eastern Asia. Or is it the combination of large population and old history that gives it a pride of place? Which affords its distinction as being the first modern representative of the phenomenon known as the megalopolis?

The history of London goes surprisingly far back, at least two-thousand years. This is a respectable age for an important city, but not truly exceptional. The grandeur of London derives very much from the imperial grandeur of the country of which it happens to be its capital, but the point of Ackroyd, shared by most eulogists and chroniclers of London, is that the imperial connection is but coincidental, and as such ephemeral, to the character of London, which repeatedly is likened to an organism, following its own hidden laws, impervious to the planned control of outsiders.

The story of London commences in historical mist and myth, the most tangible sources of which are the accidentally discovered archeological remains. Thus its long history is not really a fact, unlike that say of Rome for which a continuous written record is available. Its ancient character is more that of its location¹ than its actual character. Location is the mother of any city. As the city matures it may make its own acquisitions, but it as little chooses its place of birth, as do we choose our parents. And the typical location the world over is the effluence of a river. This is the same story all over again. Humans tend to congregate for trade, some locations being more convenient than others. Precedents tend

¹ And possibly its name that supposedly has a Briton provenience and not a Saxon. But etymology is a speculative business, especially when concerned with extinct languages of fragmentary documentation

to instill habits, and a self-perpetuating process starts, which occasionally is terminated, and once dead, like with all living organisms, impervious to attempts at resurrection. But London prevailed, through the times of the Celts, the Anglo-Saxon invaders, the onslaughts by the Norsemen, the absorption by the Normans, and throughout the medieval centuries, right through its heyday of the 17th throughout the 19th century, and still thriving during its decay of the 20th and 21st. Most of that time London was a provincial city after all, England being but a peripheral part of Europe, still like all cities it acted as a magnet, not only to the surrounding hinterland, but also to transients all over the world. The Ascendancy of Britain, and hence that of London, notwithstanding claims to its independence, can be traced to the 16th century, in retrospect glorified as the Elizabethan Age. Thus three centuries more than others have set their mark upon the city and above all its myth, namely the 17th, 18th and 19th.

The 17th century is the century of the Great Plague in 1665² and the subsequent purification through the Great Fire the year after. It is the century of the Royal Society, the diaries of Pepys, the architectural plans of Wren, and the rivalry with Amsterdam. It is a century of solidity, heavy oak furniture and religious solemnity. Brick buildings and oil-paintings, and elaborate wigs. The 18th century brings forth lighter associations. Voltaire, Sterne, Johnson and Boswell. It is a London depicted by the moral tales of Hogarth, or the sketches of Rowlandson. It is the century of liberalism and political enlightenment. The 19th century is the London of Dickens and also in its later part Sherlock Holmes. The typical image is that of the etching, so adapted to mass-reproduction through the wide circulation of the press. It is a century of optimistic confidence and steady progress. Spiritual, scientific and material. The early 20th the one of worldwide commerce and heavy fogs. And in recent decades inevitable decline and marginalization, although Ackroyd refuses to acknowledge this.

Ackroyd presents no chronological neither any systematic factual presentation, apart from the initial chapter on the pre-history of London; instead he allows himself to wander back and forth across the centuries, necessarily at great speed, reflecting the bustle of the city itself. The book is divided into various themes, each of them illuminated by a few chapters. The total effect is confusion, not unlike the one we are daily confronted with through our senses. Ackroyd does not set out to explain and clarify, his interest is not that of the historian as much as that of the antiquarian. He delights in the inconsequential detail. The general effect is charming, but also dumbing, and you find yourself treading through long stretches of transportation, (not unlike those the city itself invariably forces upon the visitor) being distracted, yet knowing that there never is any danger of losing the thread, the whole narrative being so totally disconnected, that nothing that goes before is necessary to understand what will come after. It is a book more meant to be dipped into from time to time, choosing chapters more or less at random, rather than systematically to plod through. The lack of argument and structure drags you down, because it is the presence of an unfolding narrative that propels you along as a reader. Thus the reading of the book has taken much longer than its size would have warranted.

It is an eulogy, but as an eulogy it is remarkably focused on the unsavoury facets

² although one should not forget that plagues and other epidemics of disease were endemic to the city for most of its pre-modern existence

of the city. Poverty and over-crowding, pollution, destruction, crimes and punishments, general deprivation, disease and the occasional rule of the mob. Why do people congregate in cities? Why do they not enjoy the quietude of the country, its fresh air and wholesome living, when given the choice? We usually have two strong illusions of the past, and like all strong illusions, they carry within them a good deal of truth. One illusion is that the life of the past was backward and miserable, and due to the blessings of progress we have escaped its clutches. The other is that the life of the past was idyllic, and the curses of civilization have persistantly alienated us from our natural rights. The fact is that life of the past was in fact miserable, although for many it was quite pleasant and they would have been quite reluctant to exchange it for future blessings. There is a saying that the past is a foreign country, and it is. The life of a metropolis like London was in many ways even up to the end of the 19th century like the life in a contemporary metropolis of the Third World. This means squalor and a mass of poor people, uncared for, suffering, starving, dying in the very streets. Dickens moving around in the middle of the 19th century would have encountered dirt and stench and abject poverty familiar to the Third World traveller of today. In view of such misery and begging, a man cannot but close his senses and concentrate on being well and alive himself. One grows accostumed, especially if one unlike the modern tourist, has been born to it³ Something momentous has in fact happened, at least in the Western World, something that has made abject poverty an exception not a rule. It is this transformation that shields us from the past, and makes the 19th century, so close to us in time, yet as distant mentally as the medieval times. It is this apartness that provides both the sense of nostalgia and the feeling of good riddance. And so why do people congregate into cities? The reason is the same as the one that holds today in the Third World. Opportunity. Coupled maybe with an innate gregariousness.

The biography of London takes mostly place in the past. And without its past it would be almost nothing. The City as well as the biography. Just a conglomeration of people and traffic. And a few pages of travellers information. The general theme of Ackroyds London is how the past has survived. That in spite of all that destruction, whether by accident or design, that has effaced it and allowed it to regenerate, the past still holds it in its grip, its immanent traces still to be detected. Nothing tangible remain from its old Saxon past, apart from some intermittent archeological fragments accidentally unearthed. Yet as Ackroyd is fascinated to point out, the irregular lay-out of certain buildings to be found can be directly traced to the contours of old fields. After the Great Fire of 1666 Christopher Wren had some grandiose plans for a thorough rebuilding of the city, replete with grand avenues and a regular street-grid. Of that there came to almost nothing. The old city re-imposed itself. The irregular and the irrational triumphing over the rational and sensible. This does not mean that its buildings have been sancrosant. On the contrary much have been torn down unsentimentally, curiously with a certain regularity. Starting with the unplanned conflagration of 1666. Major rebuildings were made in the 1760's, 1860's and also in the 1960's. Yet, all those urban restitutions have escaped methodic plannings. The Blitz hit London hard, yet it is surely an exaggeration as claimed by the

³ And the modern tourist learns quickly enough to take misery for granted and thus to accept it with few qualms. The instinct for survival being our strongest. And in fact the charms of travellig in the Third World have almost always been the opportunity of time-travel they provide.

author that a third of the city was reduced to rubble and ashes. 30'000 people died in toto, huge in comparison with present terrorist tolls, insignificant compared to fatalities you must expect in times of War. After the Blitz the lateral expansion of London was to be constrained by a Green Belt. In fact it worked. The center was thrown back upon itself, and after the raze and craze of the 60's, there developed the phenomenon of gentrification, in which the old and dilapidated, enjoying great location, was being pietously refurbished by the affluent. Thus in modern times the history of London resembles closely that of every modern city of the Western World. In New York, lofts became fashionable in the 70's. London followed suit in the next decade, as the industrial base of the city became obsolete. In London this also included the docks and the harbours, which became the scene for new opportunities of development. Not as in the past of unsullied countryside, but of abandoned urban wastes. Typical of this is the recent reuse of the huge power station as a modern art museum. Of medieval London there is almost no tangible traces. London does not boast a medieval center like many continental cities. Most of it was admittedly destroyed in the Great Fire, and what remained, like the medieval wall was torn down in the 18th century, to free the city from obstructional passages⁴. The imperial London we know. The London of Trafalgar Square is the result of early Victorian refurbishings. Regent street, with its graceful arc is another Victorian construction. Still London as a city is not renewed for its beauty, not even a die-hard patriot like the author himself can claim this. To the modern traveller it gives a rather sordid impression, once you are away from the imperial streets. Oxford street, supposedly one of its main commercial thoroughfares, strikes the visitor as narrow and provincial.

London has been the city of the affluent, but on those Ackroyd pays little heed. Even more it is the city of the middle-class, and despite their significance, they play but a peripheral role. This makes for some puzzling omissions, because after all what makes a city tick, how does it support itself, and how does it generate wealth. The city as a consumer is an obvious entity, and the author takes great pleasure to cite statistics of the past as to how many pigs, chickens, cows the city devoured daily. The city also devoured people, until recently mortality always surpassed natality making it continually crave a new fresh influx of immigrants. And what did it produce but waste? The sewage problem of any modern third world city is a major one. And London was no exception. The medieval street was a hazard filled with human and animal waste. One can only imagine the stench. The tributaries of the Thames soon degenerated to sewers⁵. Yet pollution in the past was always local, with the improvement of the Victorian Age, it became more global. As all refuse was succesfully channelled into the Thames, the river collapsed ecologically overnight.

But there was also human waste. Criminals holed up in various prisons, Newgate being the most notorious and during 1780 razed by the mob. Execution by hanging was a common means of dealing with criminals, even for rather mild offenses, up to the end

⁴ In the Third World, this happened later. The walls surrounding Peking were torn down by Mao in the 1960's.

⁵ Ackroyd in particular discusses the Fleet river. A real health hazard. It was eventually bricked over, but this only shielded it visually, its presence as a transmitter of fluid was far harder to suppress, and consequently it made itself known from times to time during times of flooding

of the 19th century. Public displays of hanging attracted large crowds even as late as the time of Dickens and Thackeray, both out of curiosity once deciding to inspect fortuitously the same spectacle. Hanging was a ritual, including a ride in a cart through the streets. The public thirst for blood strikes us now as primitive and morbid, but would the practice be resumed today, it certainly would still attract big crowds.

And there was prostitution. The Victorian age is supposed to be notorious for its hypocrisy. Supposedly a large percentage of the female population, in London as well as in continental cities like Paris and Vienna, were engaged in the activity up to the First World War that proved to be the end of the *Belle Epoque*. And prostitution also involved unsavoury practices like pedophilia. And indeed the concern for little Nell⁶ was what would happen to her lost in the streets. The prospects were just too obvious to the contemporary reader. And children, even if not sexually abused starved and were crippled. Child labour being rampant, often involving dangerous task, like burrowing in narrow chimneys, being exposed to soot and developing cancers. It is all very familiar to us through the socially conscious novels of a Dickens. We used to blame it on brutal industrialization, but its sources no doubt went far further back. The 18th century was no heaven. Alcoholism reaching a prevalence never ever reached again. One thinks of Gin Lane by Hogarth.

The charm of an antiquarian approach to history is the quotidian detail. Ackroyd naturally offers a few, although not as systematically as one would have expected. But how were the streets covered? How wide were they? (Not generally less wide than today) What kind of vehicles travelled along them? The omnibus is an old feature of traffic, although it was initially powered by horses. And how were the streets lighted? This having been a perennial problem, necessitating the nightwatchmen looking out for fires, the threat of which were constant. Improvement came gradually. Kerosene and gas. And finally electricity. The wonder of the early 20th century. Yet the street-lighter was part of the scene for quite some time. And what about the underground? On this Ackroyd is not so forthcoming. We all suspect that the London underground was the first in the world (another source for the fascination of London), but when was its first line erected? And how did it grow and develop? For many tourists to the city, not to mention its residents, the underground is an inescapable feature of daily life. We learn that the trains were initially pulled by steam, but were eventually electrified. But when did this happen? Ackroyd is never precise as to details. His ambition is not to so much to document as to evoke.

There are many things that are not covered in the book, thick as it is. A tourist is likely to spend a large fraction of his purpose-filled time in museums. The National Gallery, The Tate, the British Museum, and of course the museums in Kensington. But neither the Museum of Natural History nor the Victoria and Albert get any coverage. And the same goes more surprisingly for the National Gallery and the British Museum. The reading room of the latter is legendary. Not a mention. More affluent visitors may turn their noses down on standard tourist fare and maybe join some of the clubs or shop along the most

⁶ Ackroyd refers to Dickens short story 'Master Humphrey's Clock' and not 'the Old Curiosity Shop'. Could it be an egregious mistake by a one time biographer of Dickens? Probably not. The short story is probably in the nature of a predecessor. In fact the first chapter of the Novel stands out narratively from the rest.

expensive shops. None of that glittery life enters the book. For many non-Londoners their conception of the city is through novels. What about Edwardian London, the London of Oscar Wilde, and later the Bloomsbury group. I got to know London through the early novels of Huxley among others. An unrepresentative slice maybe, yet a fascinating one, contributing to the myth that is London to the outsider.

What about myself? As I was a child the great metropolis was not London but New York with its sky-scrapers. And in fact of the great Metropoli of the world, New York would be the only one where I would end up living for a few years, and thus get a personal and residential relation to. But now we are speaking about London. London had as many inhabitants as Sweden we learned in elementary school. This awed us⁷. English being the first foreign language one was taught, there was naturally emphasis on English geography and history. In the spring of 1966 I learned about the plague and the great fire, about St Pauls Cathedral in our text-book at school. That summer my family scheduled a visit to England, and I read up on London systematically in guide books, novels and memoirs. I studied the London map very carefully⁸. It was like getting engaged in an imaginary country, but one which would eventually turn real. Four days we spent in the capital, staying at a typical Belgrave Hotel, with its narrow stairs and white pillared facades. In a way it was my real first touch with the big world, as London proved to be to many of my contemporaries. In 1971 I stayed a night in London on my way to Boston⁹. Then for the first time I was entirely on my own. It was exciting and bewildering, and of London I had but shady reminiscences at the time¹⁰. I recall taking a lot of cabs, because I had been told by the travel agent that cabs were cheap in London. I even ended up taking a cab to Heathrow from my hotel. Something I had arranged the evening before with one of the drivers that had taken me around. It made me have second thoughts and I started to worry that the cab-driver would rob and kill me¹¹. After that I have made many visits to London, more than it would be reasonable to list, although not more than it would be possible to do. Most of those visits have been overnightstands so to speak. In and out. Often while in transition. 1979 stands out. I arrived by ferry then. It was after my return to Europe after my American sojourn. I felt that I was finally home and that life could begin again. A life in which Europe would be my natural scene. How satisfying was it not to arrive in December. The tourist, as I had been in the past, arrives in the summer. How does he or she know whether the city exists in winter? In the early eighties I went every year. Then there was a long hiatus of almost ten. Then a few quick detours in the 90's,

⁷ London turned early into a city of a million. Already by the 18th century. I do not know about the 17th. Maybe it was outdone by Amsterdam. Many of the classical Dutch cities were more populous in the 17th and 18th century than they are now. In 1939 London reached a population of 8.9 million. Ackroyd believes that this has not been surpassed by the city since.

⁸ Ackroyd mentions the parson in Haworth, the father of the siblings Brontë, who used to study the map of London very carefully, no doubt dreaming about an existence with wider horizons

⁹ curiously anticipating a similar necessity when I flew from Gothenburg to Detroit almost thirty years later in the summer of 1998

¹⁰ As always some few odd moments stick in your mind. I remember ordering a 'steek' in a restaurant and getting a quizzical look then being corrected to 'stake'

¹¹ I recall writing a postcard to a friend as an explanation would I disappear without a trace

and two longer visits in the third millenium. Longer in the sense of being almost a week each.

So what is my London? I think of Trafalgar Square. From then the old used bookstores of Charing Cross beckon. I do my tour as if doing rounds on pubs, occasionally dipping into a regular bookstore, like Blackwell or Foyles. I always end up with a package. Then the classical museums. Hyde Park. Victoria Station. Whitehall and the Parliament. Leicster Square. A visit to a theatre. A long walk along the Thames. In later years I discovered the Paddington area, so convenient when you are flying via Heathrow¹². Regent street, Picadilly, and Oxford Street. This is about it. No special pubs (except possibly of course the one by the British Museum) or favourite restaurants (anything Indian will do), definitely no clubs (who would accept me?). No departmentstore shopping. And almost always with a camera.

And a final note. There are maps provided with the book, but not enough, which is surely a defect considering how much of the geography is assumed by the author.

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¹² Pre-checking of luggage possible even after September 11