

Ein Sommer in London

Th. Fontane

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How would it be to visit London in the early 1850's? Fontane is our cicerone, and he sends back short letters to an imagined correspondent. (The book, which is a recent reprint¹ provides no editorial comments, does not even inform the buyer, when the book, or the material was originally published. That is close to criminal.) But the promise above which the book suggests is disappointed. The brief sketches give very little indication of how life was back then, maybe because it was so obvious. A contemporary visitor to the London of Dickens, would be captivated by a lot of things, people at the time would never even have noticed. Most likely the dispatches of today from foreign media correspondents will also be apt to disappoint future readers.

In those days travel was a true adventure and not undertaken lightly, and when you went away, you stayed away, none of these touch-downs for a weekend, which has now become so popular for people wanting to get the most out of life (and in the process missing out on it altogether). The title is 'A summer in London' but actually Fontane seems to have been away for six months. If so the notes he chose to publish make up a rather meagre result. This was not Fontane's first visit, he had been there before in 1844 as a young man in his mid-twenties, and notes that now, eight years later, the country has changed tremendously, or at least as regards the attitude of the English towards foreigners. He attributes this change to the events of 1848 which saw a big influx of Germans moving to London, and in the process, he speculates, abusing the famous hospitality of the English, who in their turn, should be faulted for their inability to make distinctions (meaning not to be able to separate someone like Fontane himself from the run of his compatriots).

But let us begin from the beginning. We are treated to the impression of London through its docks and harbors along the Thames. Fontane is a bit awed after all, it is really a big city, as big as they would come at this time of history. Fontane has a few critical things to say about the English. The architecture of the buildings are substandard, even St Pauls Cathedral, does not meet his full approval. In short, London is not a beautiful city, a verdict I guess most people would agree with today. He is in particular struck by the fact that while in Berlin the houses are big and house a lot of people, while in London, the average buildings are very small, on the average holding no more than seven people². On the other hand the typical residential buildings are remarkably uniform, and by describing one you describe all. And then he proceeds to give a detailed description room by room, and thus giving the German readers a glimpse of the quotidian life of a Londoner.

Fontane takes his readers to some of the sights of London, including the outskirts. He

¹ Tredition Classics, providing reprints of classical authors as well as giving opportunities for self-promotion via publication.

² He claims the statistics of 350'000 residential buildings of the city, which would translate into a population just over two millions, which seems quite reasonable.

descends to the catacombs of the port, where wine and other luxuries are stored in great quantities. He brings them out to Richmond Park, which fascinates him, as well as joining him on a pic-nic out at Hampton Court together with some English people, including a pretty young woman, who seems to take his fancy. At Hampton Court he visits the galleries and can remind the reader of the antics of Henry VIII and his court, including the unfortunate fate of Anne Bolen [sic]. At times you are also treated to a trip by omnibus through Central London, passing by Trafalgar Square, where he notes that the pillar on which Nelson is perched, is so ridiculously tall, that the sculpture on top could have been that of anyone. Still those scenes do not convey any sense of physical presence, somehow they are too abstract and vague. As noted, to us traveling on a London Omnibus drawn by horses, would have been a memorable experience by itself, Fontane, as a contemporary, takes it for granted. More interesting is his experience in a different part of London, where he goes to make a visit. He is struck by its difference from the rest of the London he is familiar with, but nevertheless it is unmistakably London. A big city like London is big, and the casual visitor only sees a very small part of it, having no idea of its vastness that supports its center, and at the same time being indifferent to it and self-contained.

Fontane is at his most interesting, not when he describes the scenes, but when he ruminates on the differences between English and German national character. First he notes that the English has no sense for music. Such appalling music is being performed all over the city, not because of the greater tolerance of the public, but simply because of ignorance and lack of innate musical sense. He refers to visits to English homes, where the singing and the playing is so bad, that Fontane does not feel inhibited to sing himself to gratify his hosts, something he would of course never have done back home. Furthermore he is not impressed by the offerings of the National Gallery, but a few Murillos seem to make up at least partly for the general inadequacy. He visits an annual exhibition at the place, only regretting that less space had not been given to it, as the judges have included far too many works. One picture though, catches his fancy, and he waxes over it for most of the short chapter. It is a picture of Charlotte Corday being led to her execution during the French Revolution, and painted by a certain Ward³. Fontane does not tell us who Charlotte Corday was, maybe it was common knowledge at the time. For the modern reader, she should be identified as the woman who murdered Marat⁴. What irks Fontane more than anything else is the commercial attitude of the British. It is a nation of shopkeepers, and he predicts that their greed, is the disease which will within a span of a century bring the empire down⁵. Perhaps the most interesting of his observations concern the social scene. He is struck by the class society of the English, how they put greater

³ Fontane does not provide any more information than the last name. With the modern habit of googling, the gap is easy to plug. Edward Matthew Ward (1816-1879) was an English Painter at the time of the pre-Raphaelites, in the competition with the same. The painting Fontane refers to won a prize beating Millas and his Ophelia. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate any reproduction of the painting.

⁴ Known to most of us by the painting by David, showing the man dead in his bathtub, quill in hand. Corday, who was only in her early twenties, was promptly arraigned, brought to court and executed, all within the span of a few days.

⁵ Indeed his predictions were right, by 1950 England was no longer an imperial power, but a relatively

emphasis on form than contents. In England, as opposed to Germany, there are not only borders between different people, but veritable clefts (Schranken und Kluften). He goes as far to say that while England is an aristocratic society (where people are judged by their exteriors) Germany is a democratic (where people are judged by their worth). He admits that the democracy of the Germans is not a political one as in England, but what we would now more appropriately term as a more egalitarian social. One may argue how correct this analysis is. Admittedly, in the kind of dispatches Fontane is set to produce, simplification is not only inevitable, but the whole point of the exercise, so one should not fault him, would his analysis not be exhaustive. Yet, in simplification, some pertinent and central truths are highlighted, which otherwise may be obscured by a more nuanced analysis.

Some of the dispatches are devoted to the retelling of stories, and as such belong to the most readable. One example is Lady Hamilton, who is accorded many a page. The story of her spectacular rise in London society and her extended love affair with Nelson is riveting material, and has, as I know, served as inspiration for many a fictional reconstruction⁶. Still the particulars were news to me, and more than one hundred and fifty years later, the educational ambition of the author still serves its purpose. Another one at the end of the book, when Fontane visits the south coast of England in anticipation of his departure via Dover and Oostende, giving him occasion to visit Hastings and the battle field. He recounts the story of the Duke of Harald and William meeting in a church in Normandy and the former being tricked by his host to swear an oath on the splinter of Christs cross to rescind his claims for the throne of England. When Edward dies, he nevertheless assumes the kingdom, and having fought off the Norwegian invader Harald Haarfager (fair of hair) hurries with his troops to meet William. The latter suggests an 'envig'⁷ between two, something Harald deflects, and as a result there is a clash between the armies. Three times William is beaten back, but the fourth time he prevails, Harald is killed and the country is famously conquered.

Fontane returns to his homelands, with a renewed appreciation of its advantages. Which, cynics claim, is the only purpose of travels abroad⁸.

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poor European country who was in urgent need of downsizing. But the reasons for that are not so simple to pin-point. Clear is that the US would assume the commercial lead of the English by then.

⁶ By Susan Sontag of course and the Swedish writer Agneta Pleijel.

⁷ A battle face to face between two combatants

⁸ 'Borta bra, men hemma bst' as the Swedish proverb goes.