



LONDON: THE BIOGRAPHY

by Peter Ackroyd

Reviewed by Freda J. Fuller-Coursey

SUNY, Binghamton

The 773 pages of Peter Ackroyd's "biography" of London—the city, not the writer—are the fruit of an incredible mission. Though Ackroyd openly admits, "no scholar ... however eager or ambitious can hope to assimilate all material" on London, he tries. Quoting Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities," Ackroyd says London "does not begin and does not end."

This circuitous book reaches from London's prehistory (often educated guesswork) to today. Ackroyd explains his use of "biography" by comparing London to "a human body": its "byways" to "thin veins," and its "parks" to "lungs." He claims London has "a human shape with its own laws of life and growth," and is "a labyrinth, half of stone and half of flesh." Ackroyd warns readers his book is a similar labyrinth.

He begins by calling London "a vast ocean in which survival is not certain." Its yellow-brown or red bricks are dug from "primeval landscapes" (William Blake, too, suggests bricks tie London to "its primeval past"). Shark skeletons, wolf skulls, crocodiles, hippopotami and other animal remains (even a mammoth unearthed in 1690 at today's King's Cross) provide links to the ancient city.

Ackroyd attributes London's name to ancient Celtic, medieval Welsh, or Gaelic *lunnd*, or "marsh" (I thought "London" came from the Roman *Londinium*, whose walls exist today, but he disagrees). Writing of London burning (first in 60 AD, when "Boudicca and her tribal army laid waste the city"), Ackroyd says red "is London's colour, a sign of fire and devastation." Its second sign, he says, was plague.

Describing London as noisy, energetic, combative and filthy, Ackroyd says its "presiding deity" is money. He calls London a natural force, the image of time, and says London's growth "cannot be controlled." Traffic, he says, has been a complaint of guests and citizens since the 16th century (I've seen worse only in Baku and Cairo). Ackroyd calls London maps "impressionistic surveys," and Henry James agrees. In 1869, James wrote the "magnitude" and "inconceivable immensity" of London are "such as to paralyse (the) mind for any appreciation of details."

"Londoners hear the voices of all those who came before them in the smallest houses and meanest streets," Ackroyd comments. He quotes V.S. Pritchett, who said in the 1960s that "London has the effect of making one

feel personally historic ... although London wipes out its past the Londoner does not quite forget."

Ackroyd's book, packed with information on London, is very well indexed. One of the book's most useful sections is a brief concluding chapter called "An Essay on Sources." Detailing (and sometimes recommending) Ackroyd's sources, these 12 pages include material ranging from surveys of London to "stories of hauntings, body-snatchings and deaths by lightning."

I recommend Ackroyd's *London: The Biography*, but it is not light reading. Full of fascinating facts, figures and tales, his material is shoe-horned in so tightly the reader may need to take it in brief sittings. Researchers, historians and Londonophiles will find Ackroyd's work indispensable in a library on London. Excusing his abilities as guide, Ackroyd says "I am not Virgil," but he works diligently to lead the inquisitive through the London he himself has "pursued over a lifetime." If you want to know London, this comprehensive, roughly chronological study shows you its roots, violence, theatre, criminals, and mysteries. You see strange phenomena, the Underground, Victorian London, and the city's inevitable outcasts. If you're *still* hungry for more, Ackroyd points the way.