City-Lit
London

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city-lit

Perfect gems of city writing

London



edited by
Heather Reyes

introduced by
Peter Watts
Time Out London

city-lit

LONDON

Oxygen Books

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Praise for *city-lit LONDON*

'Brings London to life past and present in a way no conventional guide book could ever achieve.'

Tarquin Hall, author of ***Salaam Brick Lane***

'For those visitors to London who seek to do more than bag Big Ben and Buckingham Palace this is the ideal guide, a collection of writings that expose not only the city's secret places but its very soul. The topography, culture and unquenchable spirit of this extraordinary city are brought sparklingly to life by some of the finest writers imaginable, past and present, among whom I am proud to be included. I can't imagine a more perfect travelling companion than this wonderful anthology.'

Clare Clark, author of ***The Great Stink***

'This treasure trove of a book consists of a diverse collection of literary excerpts that provide a unique way to explore the ever-changing landscape of the city, through the voices of those that know it intimately.'

Rachel Lichtenstein, author of ***On Brick Lane***

'The second volume in this enticing new series includes extracts from the work of 60 wonderfully diverse writers, including Will Self, Monica Ali, Alan Bennett, Dostoyevsky, and yes, Barbara Cartland (writing about a West End ball)'

Editor's Pick, ***The Bookseller***

Editor's Note

Putting together an anthology on your own city is like trying to paint a picture of a lover: the more you try to capture it, the more it seems to escape definition. But it makes you appreciate as never before London's 'infinite variety', its slipperiness and diversity, its varying moods and modulations.

The portrait I've ended up with is in part a personal one: some editors would have chosen less by Jan Morris, and I make no excuse for the several appearances of Virginia Woolf, one of the most significant London writers. But I've also tried to present the capital through others' eyes – whether tourists, immigrants, temporary workers, or visitors from other parts of the United Kingdom, the very old and the very young. Also a scattering of 'standards' – like the London fog of Dickens. And along the way I've acquired some new favourites: Alan Bennett's good-natured portrait of the Queen as she suddenly discovers 'reading'; a piece of journalism by a very young Maeve Binchy; and Will Self's wonderful creation of a London cabbie in *The Book of Dave*.

Hope you enjoy the tour.

Heather Reyes

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Introducing London … by PETER WATTS

I don't really know London. This despite having lived and worked within the collar of the M25 for my entire life, something that is simultaneously a source of great pride and creeping shame. I've explored it, sure. I've gazed down at dawn on drowsy Londoners from atop a thirteenth-century church tower in darkest Hackney. I've listened to the hum of traffic passing overhead from deep within the buried Fleet River beneath Holborn Circus. I've walked the Thames from St Paul's to Hampton Court, been to the end of more than half the tube lines, sniffed Billingsgate Market's early-morning buzz and fed the black-tongued giraffes at London Zoo. I've even travelled every bus from 1 to 50 in numerical order, a task that's taken me to every point of the compass from Debden in the north-east to Fullwell in the south-west (no, I'd never heard of them before I started, either). But I still don't know London. Not really. There are vast tracts of its urban geography that are a total mystery to me, a no-man's land, vacant lots, blank space in my internal A-Z.

This is not an unusual condition. Indeed, it might even be a necessity for living a sane, balanced London life because most of the city's residents seem to suffer from it, some quite contentedly, perfectly happy to stay within the few square miles where they live and the West End where they work. This could be because there is simply too much London to handle – too many streets, too many people, too much history, too many inconsistencies. The London cabby, scientists say, has developed a larger-than-average hippocampus – the part of the brain that processes navigation – simply to cope with all the information. One of them, Fred Housego, even won 'Mastermind' in 1980.

Most of us don't even try to deal with all this geographical sludge. In *Soft City*, Jonathan Raban's charismatic study of the modern city from 1974, he noted: 'The Greater London Council is responsible for a sprawl shaped like a rugby ball about twenty-five miles long and twenty miles wide; my London is a concise kidney-shaped patch within that space, in which no point is more than seven miles from any other … I hardly ever trespass beyond those limits, and when I do, I feel I'm in foreign territory, a landscape of hazard and rumour. Like any tribesman hedging himself in behind a stockade of taboos, I mark my boundaries with graveyards,

terminal transportation points and wildernesses. Beyond them, nothing is to be trusted and anything might happen.'

This is a common way of behaving, retreating within self-imposed borders and putting up the fences to the darkness on the other side. It's captured in this volume by Tarquin Hall's passage from 'Salaam Brick Lane' and the stark single-line confession: 'Most of London, the city of my birth, was as foreign to me as Prague'. The bard of Cricklewood, Alan Coren, explores a related theme in a typically whimsical extract in which he imagines his intended tour of all the London landmarks he has never actually visited – the Tower of London the Monument and the Serpentine – having decided to leave that sort of thing to the tourists.

No wonder and no shame. If you're born in Harrow, what should you understand of Harlow? If you live near Crystal Palace Park, why would you need to know Hampstead Heath? How many Londoners have ever toured the Houses of Parliament or been into the Whispering Gallery of St Paul's? The greatest area of neglect is the City – if you don't work within that glorious square mile that contains all history from the Romans to the Credit Crunch why would you ever have a reason to go there? Londoners leave it to tourists and bankers.

And then there are the contradictions. This is the city that features some of the wealthiest real estate within some of the most deprived boroughs in the United Kingdom; the city whose ships helped spread English around the world but is now home to more than 250 different languages and has schools where the native tongue is barely spoken; the city that when recently called upon to appoint a new mayor, replaced a left-wing, working-class, car-hating socialist with a right-wing, public-school educated, neo-Thatcherite motoring correspondent, two iconoclasts who seemed to have nothing in common bar a quick wit and mutual contempt for orthodoxy. Who can get their head round that?

So, how can you learn to master this metropolis, the first great city of the modern age and still the world leader in art and commerce? Well, you could follow in the footsteps of Phyllis Pearsall, the creator of the single greatest London book – and one that is understandably omitted from this anthology – 'The A-Z'. In the 1930s, Pearsall is said to have walked every one of London's 23,000 streets – that's around

3,000 miles of serious perambulation – in her determination to produce the most comprehensive map of London that is humanly possible. Alternatively, you could save on leatherwear and consult some of the other classics of London literature, those writers who have made it their business to understand the city, or at least their particular patch of it. After all, will anybody ever show off Soho like Colin McInnes, or capture Camden like David Thomson? Virginia Woolf's West End is so beautifully developed, so perfectly drawn, so hyper-real, it almost dwarfs the genuine article. And Monica Ali's Brick Lane places it as firmly on the tourist map as Big Ben and the Wheel, so you can tell yourself that there really isn't any need to check it out for yourself.

London books allow you to travel in time as well as space. McInnes's Soho is the good one, the one we've all heard about from the 1950s, when it was still raw, neon-lit, jazz-fuelled and edgy rather than a shallow cluster of over-priced restaurants and drunken daytrippers wondering where all the loucheness has gone (it's still there, just, in secret drinking clubs and members' bars hidden behind nameless Georgian façades). And Thomson's Camden is one on the verge of massive change, a working-class district of pubs and markets that is about to experience the first invasion by the middle-classes that will recondition the area beyond all recognition, setting off a chain reaction of gentrification around London's inner suburbs from Notting Hill to Islington. For those of us who only know these places in their current incarnation, this stuff has an extraordinary archaeological value that their authors could never have intended, like the background of family photographs that show furniture and fittings everybody forgot about long ago because they never bothered to record them.

But that's not to say things were so much better in the old says. Indeed, one of the most important things about this volume is that it emphasises the current prodigious strength of London writing. Yes, there's Dickens and Woolf and Conrad and Wilde and Conan Doyle – as there should be – but there's also Ackroyd and Sinclair and Self, the titanic trinity of contemporary London writing. These three create a London in which all of the past is present in today, one in which the lines between what counts as history and what counts as modern are blurred, and one in which London's

reality is as evocative as their powerful imaginations. Since the 1980s they have done more to resurrect the concept of London writing as a standalone genre than anybody since the Victorian era, when London, the New Jerusalem, was seen to embody the contradictory values of Empire and became a rich source of fiction and journalism. They have encouraged the rediscovery of some of the lost classics of London literature and fostered the climate in which anthologies like this one can flourish. In their wake, modern classics have followed, from Justin Cartwright's snappy satirical novel *Look At It This Way* to Sukhdev Sandhu's invaluable nocturnal jaunts into the belly of sleeping London in *Night Haunts*. This regained respect for London writing also allows the voice of the new Londoner to be heard – the 27.1 per cent of the population that the 2001 census considered to be non-native-born – through authors such as Xiaolu Guo, with her faux-naïve extracts from *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. In Rebecca Taylor's 'London Lives' we even meet one of these recent arrivals in the form of a young brother and sister who travel to London from Poland to begin their new lives, part of the huge wave of Eastern European immigration that has transformed the city in recent years.

It is authors from this final category who could provide some of the finest and boldest London writing of the twenty-first century, because they will come to the city with a fresh mind and open eye, prepared to live and work in those parts of London that are closed by personal choice to most natives. None of them, of course, will ever really get on top of London, even if they choose to stay here for the rest of their lives – but every little bit helps. And if you put all the fragments together, you may one day get something close to the full picture, the London that we all love, even if it's not the one we know.

PETER WATTS is *Time Out London*'s features writer and edits the 'Big Smoke' section.



"Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner … "

A famous old music-hall song begins with the words "Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I love London so", and if the best writers on the city are anything to go by, this seems to be true: most Londoners do *love their sprawling, vibrant, contradictory, sometimes ugly but often beautiful, ever-changing, history-laden capital. The great Dr Johnson once remarked, 'The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it', so let's fly in with travel writer Jan Morris.*

One of the flight-paths to London Airport, Heathrow, goes straight over the middle of the capital, east to west. The city does not look much at first: just a drab sprawling mass of housing estates, terraces and industrial plants, nibbled at its edges by a fairly grubby green – just mile after mile of the ordinary, splodged here and there with the sordid.

Presently, though, the route picks up the River Thames, sinuously sliding between the eastern suburbs, and one by

one landmarks appear that are part of the whole world's consciousness, images familiar to every one of us, reflecting the experience of half mankind. The Tower of London squats brownish at the water's edge. Buckingham Palace reclines in its great green garden. The Houses of Parliament, of all famous buildings the most toylike and intricate, stand like an instructional model beside Westminster Bridge. There are the swathes of London parks, too, and the huge Victorian roofs of the railway terminals, the cluttered hub of Piccadilly, the big new block of Scotland Yard, and always the river itself, twisting and turning through it all, out of the city centre into the western purlieus, until the first of the country green appears again on the other side, with gravel pits and motorways. Windsor Castle appears tremendous on its hillock, and the aircraft, slightly changing its tone of voice, tilts a wing over Slough and begins the last descent to the airport.

It is the city of cities that we have flown over. Like it or loathe it, it is the daddy of them all. If New York is ethnically more interesting, Moscow or Peking ideologically more compelling, Paris or Rome more obviously beautiful, still as a historical phenomenon London beats them all. It has been itself, for better or for worse, for a thousand years, unconquered by a foreign army since William the Norman was crowned King of England in Westminster Abbey in 1066. It has spawned and abandoned the greatest empire known to history. It was the first great industrial capital, the first parliamentary capital, the arena of social and political experiments beyond number. It is a city of terrific murders and innumerable spies, of novelists, auctioneers, surgeons and rock stars. It is the city of Shakespeare, Sherlock Holmes, Dr Johnson, Churchill, Dick Whittington, Henry VIII, Florence Nightingale, the Duke of Wellington, Queen Victoria, Gladstone and the two Olivers, Cromwell and Twist. Mozart wrote his first symphony in London, and Karl Marx began *Das Kapital*. London has five great symphony orchestras, eleven

daily newspapers, three cathedrals, the biggest subway on earth and the most celebrated broadcasting system. It is the original world capital of soccer, cricket, rugby, lawn tennis and squash. It is where Jack the Ripper worked. It is the home of the last great monarchy of all, the House of Windsor, likely to be outlived only, in the expert judgement of the late King Farouk of Egypt, by the Houses of Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs and Spades. London is nearly everything. If you are tired of London, Dr Johnson once remarked, you are tired of life.

Jan Morris, *A Writer's World*

* * *

In The Groundwater Diaries, *Tim Bradford also recalls Dr Johnson's most famous words about London, then adds his own quirky list of the city's attractions.*

London is beautiful. Samuel Johnson, in the only quote of his anyone can really remember, said, 'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.' He may have been a fat mad-as-a-hatter manic depressive in a wig, but there is something in his thesis. London's got its fair share of nice parks and museums, but I love its underbelly, in fact its belly in general – the girls in their first strappy dresses of the summer, the smell of chips, the liquid orange skies of early evening, high-rise glass office palaces, the lost-looking old men still eating at their regular caffs even after they've been turned into Le Café Trendy or Cyber Bacon, the old shop fronts, the rotting pubs, the cacophony of peeling and damp Victorian residential streets, neoclassical shopping centres, buses that never arrive on time, incessant white noise fizz of gossip, little shops, big shops, late-night kebab shops with slowly turning cylinders of khaki fat and gristle in the window, the bitter caramel of car exhaust fumes, drivers spitting abuse at each other through the safety of tinted electric windows, hot and tightly packed tubes in summer, the roar of the crowd from Highbury or White Hart Lane, dog shit on the

pavements, psychopathic drunken hard men who sit outside at North London pub tables. London has got inside me. I've tried to leave. But I always come back. It's love, y'see.

Tim Bradford, *The Groundwater Diaries*

* * *

And as a complete contrast, Virginia Woolf's middle-aged Mrs Dalloway gets high on the beauty of a glorious summer morning in the city.

For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty, – one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*

* * *

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, London wasn't always good for the health – open sewers, contaminated drinking water, a refuse problem, high infant mortality, tuberculosis and smallpox rife – but

> *it was nevertheless a beautiful and energetic city to which many young people flocked, attracted by its high wages. (Sound familiar? …)*

London in 1700 was the most magnificent city in Europe. It took its beauty from Wren's skyline of churches, especially as viewed from the river. Dominating the city, the new St Paul's rested on its hilltop nearing completion. Only the dome was outstanding, prompting the wag Ned Ward's analogy, 'As slow as a Paul's workman with a bucket of mortar'. The River Thames was the artery of the metropolis, the wide thoroughfare dotted with thousands of pleasure craft and red and green passenger boats plying their trade. London Bridge with its density of houses and souvenir shops was the only bridge linking the north and south banks. And below it at the Port of London the ships lined up like a floating forest to unload their cargoes from the furthest corners of the world. Only a few miles away the hills of Hampstead and Highgate provided a reassuring rural backdrop to the thriving metropolis at their feet.

The capital dominated the kingdom to an extent that it has never done before or since. It was home to at least 530,000 people – one in nine of the entire population – while the second city, Norwich, had a population of 30,000. Not only did so many of William III's subjects live in London, but the city impinged on the lives of many more. It was a magnet to all classes. Aristocracy and gentry flocked to London to be seen at court, to attend parliament, to settle their legal affairs, to enjoy the season and arrange marriages for their children, and to shop. London was a shopper's paradise, a great emporium of goods for its hungry consumers. The booming newspaper industry in Grub Street found a ready market in London's coffee-houses where everything was up for discussion. London was the centre of a lively publishing trade, the theatre and music. Visitors absorbed its ideas and culture and disseminated them to all parts of the kingdom.

Maureen Waller, *1700: Scenes from London Life*

* * *

Although the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's famous novel, The Secret Agent, *runs a seedy shop in Soho where political extremists meet, even he seems transformed as he steps out into a lovely London morning …*

Such was the house, the household, and the business Mr Verloc left behind him on his way westward at the hour of half past ten in the morning. It was unusually early for him; his whole person exhaled the charm of almost dewy freshness; he wore his blue cloth overcoat unbuttoned; his boots were shiny; his cheeks, freshly shaven, had a sort of gloss; and even his heavy-lidded eyes, refreshed by a night of peaceful slumber, sent out glances of comparative alertness. Through the park railing these glances beheld men and women riding in the Row, couples cantering past harmoniously, others advancing sedately at a walk, loitering groups of three or four, solitary horsemen looking unsociable, and solitary women followed at a long distance by a groom with a cockade to his hat and a leather belt over his tight-fitting coat. Carriages went bowling by, mostly two-horse broughams, with here and there a victoria with the skin of some wild beast inside and a woman's face and hat emerging above the folded hood. And a peculiarly London sun – against which nothing could be said except that it looked bloodshot – glorified all this by its stare. It hung at a moderate elevation above Hyde Park Corner with an air of punctual and benign vigilance. The very pavement under Mr Verloc's feet had an old-gold tinge in that diffused light, in which neither wall, nor tree, nor beast, nor man cast a shadow. Mr Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold.

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*

* * *

The opening of Ian McEwan's novel, Saturday, *describes neurosurgeon Henry Perowne rising before dawn and, from his bedroom window in Fitzrovia,*

looking out over a typical London square and contemplating the beauty and success of London.

He opens the second shutter, letting it concertina into the casement, and quietly raises the sash window. It is many feet taller than him, but it slides easily upwards, hoisted by its concealed lead counterweight. His skin tightens as the February air pours in around him, but he isn't troubled by the cold. From the second floor he faces the night, the city in its icy white light, the skeletal trees in the square, and thirty feet below, the black arrowhead railings like a row of spears. There's a degree or two of frost and the air is clear. The streetlamp glare hasn't quite obliterated all the stars; above the Regency façade on the other side of the square hang remnants of constellations in the southern sky. That particular façade is a reconstruction, a pastiche – wartime Fitzrovia took some hits from the Luftwaffe – and right behind is the Post Office Tower, municipal and seedy by day, but at night, half-concealed and decently illuminated, a valiant memorial to more optimistic days.

And now, what days are these? Baffled and fearful, he mostly thinks when he takes time from his weekly round to consider. But he doesn't feel that now. He leans forwards, pressing his weight onto his palms against the sill, exulting in the emptiness and clarity of the scene. His vision – always good – seems to have sharpened. He sees the paving stone mica glistening in the pedestrianised square, pigeon excrement hardened by distance and cold into something almost beautiful, like a scattering of snow. He likes the symmetry of black cast-iron posts and their even darker shadows, and the lattice of cobbled gutters. The overfull litter baskets suggest abundance rather than squalor; the vacant benches set around the circular gardens look benignly expectant of their daily traffic – cheerful lunchtime office crowds, the solemn, studious boys from the Indian hostel, lovers in quiet raptures or crisis, the crepuscular drug dealers, the ruined old lady with her wild, haunting calls. Go away! she'll shout for hours at a time, and squawk harshly, sounding like some marsh bird or zoo creature.

Standing here, as immune to the cold as a marble statue, gazing towards Charlotte Street, towards a foreshortened jumble of façades, scaffolding and pitched roofs, Henry thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work.

Ian McEwan, *Saturday*

* * *

Aldous Huxley's novel, Antic Hay, *also finds a gentleman enjoying a London square from his balcony, though in a less salubrious part of the city.*

Gumbril Senior occupied a tall, narrow-shouldered and rachitic house in a little obscure square not far from Paddington. There were five floors, and a basement with beetles, and nearly a hundred stairs, which shook when any one ran too rudely down them. It was a prematurely old and decaying house in a decaying quarter. The square in which it stood was steadily coming down in the world. The houses, which a few years ago had all been occupied by respectable families, were now split up into squalid little maisonettes, and from the neighbouring slums, which along with most other unpleasant things the old bourgeois families had been able to ignore, invading bands of children came to sport on the once-sacred pavements.

Mr Gumbril was almost the last survivor of the old inhabitants. He liked his house, and he liked his square. Social decadence had not affected the fourteen plane-trees which adorned its little garden, and the gambols of the dirty children did not disturb the starlings who came, evening by evening in summertime, to roost in their branches.

On fine evenings he used to sit out on his balcony waiting for the coming of the birds. And just at sunset, when the sky was most golden, there would be a twittering overhead, and the black,

innumerable flocks of starlings would come sweeping across on the way from their daily haunts to their roosting-places, chosen so capriciously among the tree-planted squares and gardens of the city and so tenaciously retained, year after year, to the exclusion of every other place. Why his fourteen plane-trees should have been chosen, Mr Gumbril could never imagine. There were plenty of larger and more umbrageous gardens all round; but they remained birdless, while every evening, from the larger flocks, a faithful legion detached itself to settle clamorously among his trees. They sat and chattered till the sun went down and twilight was past, with intervals every now and then of silence that fell suddenly and inexplicably on all the birds at once, lasted through a few seconds of thrilling suspense, to end as suddenly and senselessly in an outburst of the same loud and simultaneous conversation. […]

… darkness came down, and the gas-lamps round the square lit up the outer leaves of the plane-trees, touched the privet bushes inside the railings with an emerald light; behind them was impenetrable night; instead of shorn grass and bedded geraniums there was mystery, there were endless depths. And the birds at last were silent.

Aldous Huxley, *Antic Hay*

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One of the most beautiful and popular strolling places for Londoners is Hampstead Heath. In Helen Simpson's novel, Constitutional, *a school teacher makes the most of her lunch-hour by taking her regular walk around the Heath, enjoying the views and the snippets of conversation overheard from other walkers.*

'I just think she's a bit passive-aggressive,' said the woman to her friend. 'In a very sweet way. D'you know what I mean?'

This is so much the sort of thing you hear on the Heath that I couldn't help smiling, straight from Stella's funeral though I was,

standing aside to let them past me on to the pavement. Even five minutes later, almost at the ponds, I'm smiling, but that could be simple relief at being outside in some November sun.

The thing about a circular walk is that you end up where you started – except, of course, that you don't. My usual round trip removes me neatly from the fetid staffroom lunch-hour, conveniently located as the school is on the very edge of the Heath. […]

Because I know exactly how long I have – quick glance at my watch, fifty-three minutes left – and exactly how long it takes, I can afford to let my mind off the lead. Look at the sparkle of that dog's urine against the dark green of the laurel, and its wolfish cocked leg. In the space of an hour I know I can walk my way back to some sort of balance after my morning-off's farewell distress before launching into sexual reproduction with Year Ten at five past two.

When the sun flares out like this, heatless and long-shadowed, the tree trunks go floodlit and even the puddles in the mud hold flashing blue snapshots of the sky. You walk past people who are so full of their lives and thoughts and talk about others, so absorbed in exchanging human information, that often their gaze stays abstractedly on the path and their legs are moving mechanically. But their dogs frisk around, curvetting and cantering, arabesques of pink tongues airing in their broadly smiling jaws. They bound off after squirrels or seagulls, they bark, rowrowrow, into the sunshine, and there is no idea anywhere of what comes next.

This walk is always the same but different, thanks to the light, the time of year, the temperature and so on. Its sameness allows me to sink back into my thoughts as I swing along, while on the other hand I know and observe at some level that nothing is ever exactly the same as it was before.[…]

Forty-nine minutes. From that hill up there to my left it's possible to see for miles, all over London, and on a clear day I'm pretty sure I can pinpoint my road in Dalston. A skipper on the Thames looked up here at the northern heights three centuries ago and exclaimed at how even though it was midsummer the

hills were capped with snow. All the Heath's low trees and bushes were festooned with clean shirts and smocks hung out to dry, white on green, this being where London's laundry was done.[…]

As I overtake an elderly couple dawdling towards the ponds, these words drift into my ears – ' … terrible pain. Appalling. They've tried this and that but nothing seems to help. Disgusting … ' The words float after me even though I speed up and leave the two of them like tortoises on the path behind me. […]

Thirteen minutes. It always surprises me how late in the year the leaves stay worth looking at. November gives the silver birches real glamour, a shower of gold pieces at their feet and still they keep enough to clothe them, thousands of tiny lozenge-shaped leaves quaking on their separate stems. That constant tremor made them unpopular in the village where I grew up – palsied, they called them.

Trees live for a long time, much longer than we do. Look at this oak, so enormous and ancient standing in the centre of the leaf-carpeted clearing […] They have been known to live for a thousand years, oak trees, and there are more really old ones growing on the Heath than in the whole of France. Look at it standing stoutly here, all elbows and knees. When the weather is stormy, they put up signs round here – 'Beware of falling limbs'. […] Four minutes to go, and I'm nearly there. Walking round the Heath on days like this when there is some colour and sun, I can feel it rise in me like mercury in a thermometer, enormous deep delight in seeing these trees with their last two dozen leaves worn like earrings, amber and yellow and crimson, and in being led off by generously lit paths powdered silver with frost. It must be some form of benign forgetfulness, this rising bubble of pleasure in my chest, at being here, now, part of the landscape and not required to do anything but exist. I feel as though I've won some mysterious game.

Helen Simpson, *Constitutional*

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A love of the city – particularly the area along the Thames – is captured in this short but energetic extract from Colin McInnes' Absolute Beginners.

Whoever thought up the Thames embankment was a genius. It lies curled firm and gentle round the river like a boy does with a girl, after it's over, and it stretches in a great curve from the parliament thing, down there in Westminster, all the way north and east into the City. Going in that way, downstream, eastwards, it's not so splendid, but when you come back up along it – oh! If the tide's in, the river's like the ocean, and you look across the great wide bend and see the fairy advertising palaces on the south side beaming in the water, and that great white bridge that floats across it gracefully, like a string of leaves. If you're fortunate, the cab gets all the greens, and keeps up the same steady speed, and looking out from the upholstery it's like your own private Cinerama, except that in this one the show's never, never twice the same. And weather makes no difference, or season, it's always wonderful – the magic always works. And just above the diesel whining of the taxi, you hear those *river* noises that no one can describe, but you can always recognize. Each time I come here for the ride, in any mood, I get a lift, a rise, a hoist up into joy. And as I gazed out on the water like a mouth, a bed, a sister, I thought how, my God, I love this city, horrible though it may be, and never ever want to leave it, come what it may send me. Because though it seems so untidy, and so casual, and so keep-your-distance-from-me, if you can get to know this city well enough to twist it round your finger, and if you're its son, it's always on your side, supporting you – or that's what I imagined.

Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners*

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Back to Jan Morris. Having lived most of her adult life abroad, she admits to being something of a stranger in her own capital. Here she describes spending a very happy morning wandering around the city with which she was 'innocently infatuated'.

The day was very early when I began my morning's affair with London, and I started, as determined lovers should, with a nourishing English breakfast, the most potent of aphrodisiacs. The first watery sunshine was glimmering as I walked into the streets of Covent Garden, and the noble façade of the Opera House stood there above the vegetable-wagons pale and romantic. The alleys were stodgy with lorries, and the pavements were bustling with porters, and a fine old lady in black strode by with a tray of cabbages on her head. In the shade of a classical portico some union propagandist had pinned a notice suggesting disagreeable methods of dealing with strike-breakers. Hanging, it observed, was too good for such vermin.

There was a public house around the corner. Licensed for the porters of the market, it was the one pub in London where you could get beer at that time of the morning, so I sat down to a brown ale, three smoking golden sausages, and a slice of toast – a princely breakfast. Two extremely stout men shared my table and swapped an incessant flow of badinage. Their Cockney was proud and undiluted, and every now and then one of them winked blearily at me, to put me at my ease. I put lots of mustard on my sausages and tried hard to enjoy the ale. London is a rich and saucy city, for all its espresso-bar veneer, and its heart still thrives on beer and bangers and such old stalwarts of the palate.

Presently the sun, like a timid tippler, appeared through the glass of the saloon bar door: so I said goodbye to those two portly jokers and made my way east to Billingsgate. London Bridge was almost empty when I arrived there, and as I climbed down the gloomy staircase to the fish market my footsteps echoed desolately away beneath the bridge: but when I emerged

from the tunnel into Lower Thames Street there before me was all the blast and colour and virility of Billingsgate, against one of the most glorious city settings on earth.

Away to the east stood the bastions of the Tower, like misty cardboard replicas; and behind me there arose the mountainous hump of Cannon Street Station, grandly cavernous; and beside me, hunched against an office block, there stood the fine old church of Magnus Martyr, with its 'inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold'; and to my left a mesh-work of city lanes, Fish Street and Pudding Lane, Botolph Lane and St. Mary at Hill, clambered up the slope around the Monument; and everywhere there were the fish-men, in their white coats and queer leather hats, barging and pushing their way from the refrigerator trucks to the market, splashed with mud and gusto and fishy liquids. There was grandeur, and humour, and vivacity, and brutality to this compelling scene: and in the middle of it all stood the City policemen, like holy men, writing things down in little black notebooks.

Across the river on Bankside no such noble turmoil animated the wharves. A hush lay over the alleyways and warehouses, and only a few early dockers were coughing and talking throatily on the barges moored alongside. As I wandered, though, I could feel the rising animation of the place as the city woke to the day; and soon there approached me down an empty lane a figure whose eager stride and sharp decisive footfalls were the very epitome of morning purpose. It was dressed all in black, and as it advanced down the shadowy canyon of the warehouses I saw that its legs were sheathed in gaiters. I stopped in my tracks, overcome by this pungent confrontation of the commercial, the medieval, and the ecclesiastical. 'Magnificent!' said I. 'Well, er, yes,' said the clergyman, 'it always is lovely at this time of the morning, and if you go a little farther you'll see the new house they've just built for me next to Christopher Wren's, thus enabling me to be the first Provost of Southwark to live on the spot since my cathedral was founded some, let me see, yes,

some *one thousand, three hundred* years ago: Good morning!' – and the Provost strode off to his cathedral.

But even London's chain of associations is sometimes broken, and when one of the old landmarks is destroyed, replaced or made redundant, then you may feel the melancholy of the place, and realize how heavily it leans upon the grandeurs of the past. You may sense this nostalgia beside the forgotten India Office, or outside an Admiralty that is no longer the world's final arbiter, or beside Buckingham Palace, where Queen Victoria gazes bleakly across an empire that has vanished: or you may do as I did that morning, cross by Blackfriars Bridge, meander down an awakening Fleet Street, turn into Kingsway, and pause for a moment to watch them pulling down the old Stoll Theatre. […] By now the day had burst, so I took a bus to Harley Street: for there on any weekday morning, parked in lordly comity, you may inspect the best selection of Rolls-Royces in the world.

Jan Morris, *A Writer's World*

* * *

And the last word on that very special affection for the capital comes from well-known humourist Alan Coren.

I'm off to the Dome, me. Any minute now. Just a few things to be sorted out first, and then I'm away to Greenwich. That is the joy of living in London, it is not like living in Runcorn or Bute, you do not have to engage in major long-term plans and serious expenditure if you want to take in the sights, you do not have to pore over timetables or work out complex routes, you do not have to book expensive hotels or give advance notice to employers or arrange with neighbours to feed the cat and water the pot plants, you do not have to turn off the gas and notify the police of keyholders, or pack for unpredictable meteorological contingencies, you just walk out of your gate and, a short bus ride away, there it all is – ships, towers, domes,

theatres and temples lie, open unto the fields and to the sky, all bright and glittering in the smokeless air. Any time you choose, you can go. Everything is always there.

Like the Tower of London. It has been there since 1038. As early as 1947, I nearly went, my sandwiches were packed, the Tizer was in my satchel, the school bus was ticking over at the corner of Cecil Road, but then I sneezed a couple of times, and she was always a worrier, my mother. But no matter, the Tower would always be there, the Crown Jewels, the ravens, the Beefeaters, the Traitor's Gate, a terrific day out, and I shall certainly get around to it any day now. I have of course seen it many times and not just driving past, either: I stopped once, got out, and had a look in the moat. It is a really knockout moat. It made me more determined than ever to do a proper visit, sometime.

I could do it on the day I visit the Monument, it is a stone's throw away, you could kill two birds with that stone, it is merely a matter of deciding whether to go up the Monument first or afterwards. There is an amazing view from the top, tourists come from all over the globe, but you have to climb 365 steps to get to it, and that could take time. I might be too knackered for the Tower, after that. I intended to go with David Collingwood in 1951, the year we didn't go to the Festival of Britain; I actually had a golf ball in my pocket, we were going to drop it off the Monument to see how high it would bounce, but we went to the pictures instead. I'm not even sure I could do 365 steps now, it would be a bit embarrassing to drop dead at step 189, it is a spiral staircase, the emergency services would have a hell of a job getting a stretcher all that way up and down, they might have to lug me to the top and lower me on a rope. An undignified way to go. Not nice for the family.

St Paul's would be a safer bet. There is only one flight of steps up to the famed Whispering Gallery. God knows what's held me back all these years, but I shall of course go, as soon as

I've thought of something a bit special to whisper. A man in my position can't whisper any old rubbish. The smart thing to do would be to practise in Guildhall, it doesn't have an echo; at least, I don't think it does, but it'd be a doddle to find out, it is only a half-hour bus ride from Cricklewood and you would also get to see the world's most magnificent municipal building. Still, it's been there since 1430, it is unlikely to fall down over the next few days, there's no rush, I could go after I've visited Westminster Abbey, which has poets underneath it. You can stand on Chaucer. Better still, I could make a day of it by walking from the abbey across Horse Guards Parade on the day Her Majesty was Trooping the Colour, it looks terrific on television, and then visit Buckingham Palace, open to the public now, and an absolute must. I just hope the Millennium Wheel is working by June, it is a mere stroll from the Palace, it'd be crazy to miss the opportunity, the bit of the wheel you can see from my roof looks stunning. You can also see the Post Office Tower and Canary Wharf, both essential to go to the top of for unparalleled views of the world's greatest city, which I eagerly look forward to, even if you can't see Peter Pan's statue, one of my top priorities. I shall visit it very soon, also the Serpentine, which I've often nearly seen, only to be irritatingly thwarted by having to fasten my seat-belt and make sure my tray-table was safely stowed.

And, after all that, the Dome awaits. Why my heart leaps within me at the very prospect, who can say? Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner.

Alan Coren, *The Cricklewood Tapestry*

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