



London Fog: The Biography

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The classic London fogs—thick yellow “pea-soupers”—were born in the industrial age and remained a feature of cold, windless winter days until clean air legislation in the 1960s. Christine L. Corton tells the story of these epic London fogs, their dangers and beauty, and the lasting effects on our culture and imagination of these urban spectacles.

In popular imagination, London is a city of fog. The classic London fogs, the thick yellow “pea-soupers,” were born in the industrial age of the early nineteenth century. The first globally notorious instance of air pollution, they remained a constant feature of cold, windless winter days until clean air legislation in the 1960s brought about their demise. Christine L. Corton tells the story of these epic London fogs, their dangers and beauty, and their lasting effects on our culture and imagination.

As the city grew, smoke from millions of domestic fires, combined with industrial emissions and naturally occurring mists, seeped into homes, shops, and public buildings in dark yellow clouds of water droplets, soot, and sulphur dioxide. The fogs were sometimes so thick that people could not see their own feet. By the time London’s fogs lifted in the second half of the twentieth century, they had changed urban life. Fogs had created worlds of anonymity that shaped social relations, providing a cover for crime, and blurring moral and social boundaries. They had been a gift to writers, appearing famously in the works of Charles Dickens, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad, and T. S. Eliot. Whistler and Monet painted London fogs with a fascination other artists reserved for the clear light of the Mediterranean.

Corton combines historical and literary sensitivity with an eye for visual drama—generously illustrated here—to reveal London fog as one of the great urban spectacles of the industrial age.

London Fog: The Biography Details

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From Reader Review London Fog: The Biography for online ebook

Antonio Gallo says

Osservate bene una delle numerose tele dipinte da Claude Monet, il pittore francese nella fase impressionista. Suo motivo centrale di studio in quel periodo era il tema della nebbia londinese. Questa creava degli strani effetti di luce a seconda della intensità, delle ore del giorno e dei luoghi dove essa calava.

Compito del pittore era dunque quello di catturare le impressioni sfuggenti e fugitive in maniera tale da fissarle sulla tela per sempre. Monet fece una serie di visite a Londra tra il 1889 e il 1892 sempre in autunno. Potete qui vedere alcune immagini fotografiche dal vero della nebbia nell'arco di sessanta anni, prima del cambiamento ed eventualmente confrontarle con le tele al link che vi ho proposto innanzi.

Questo lungo preambolo mi serve per introdurre nel giusto contesto, chi ha la pazienza di leggermi, al tema per me importante del ricordo e della memoria personale che diventa anche sociale. L'occasione me la offre mio figlio che mi ha segnalato la recensione di un libro uscito in Inghilterra qualche settimana fa e recensito ottimamente sulla rivista letteraria inglese "London Review of Books". Un libro uscito sulla famosa nebbia di Londra con un titolo che è tutto un progetto.

L'autrice, da buona inglese, ha dato al volume questo titolo: "Nebbia di Londra: la biografia". A chi non conosce almeno un pò di storia sociale e letteraria delle Isole Britanniche, un libro sulla nebbia potrebbe sembrare strano, se non addirittura irrilevante. Non ci si può rendere conto di quanto sia stata importante, invece, la nebbia per la storia di questa città e il suo Paese. Per altri versi, in maniera differente e meramente atmosferici, ancora lo è. Ma il perchè di questa segnalazione ha anche un connotato più specifico, tanto da farne quasi un caso personale per questo blogger. Nella presentazione del suo articolo, la rivista dice che nell'anno 1962, quando tutto accadde, Neal Ascherson era un giornalista del giornale "Observer". In questa veste ebbe modo a Londra di occuparsi di quanto successe a causa della nebbia. In quell'anno, guarda caso, anche io mi trovavo in Inghilterra. Scopro così essere in buona e autorevole compagnia per testimoniare quell'evento.

Avevo poco più di venti anni ed ero andato da quelle parti per studiare la lingua. Lavoravo in un ospedale psichiatrico e ci rimasi per quasi tre anni. Il cronista ha qualche anno in più di me. Lui, oggi, recensisce il libro di Christine Corton partendo proprio da una esperienza diretta a Londra di quella che venne chiamata "the Great Fog" nel dicembre del 1962. Una "grande nebbia" che fece innumerevoli vittime e creò una serie infinita di problemi che perduravano, però, da sempre. In effetti dall'inizio della Rivoluzione Industriale.

I ricordi che ne ebbi io, invece, iniziano su quella specie di grande campus ospedaliero che era "Harperbury Hospital", poco a nord di Londra. Due inverni indimenticabili quelli del 1962 e l'anno successivo 1963. Restano prova del fatto le lettere che scrivevo a mia madre (allora, a quei tempi, nel "profondo sud" da cui provenivo, erano ancora pochi quelli che si potevano permettere il telefono!) Ne ho riletto una a proposito della furiosa e storica nevicata del 1963 nella quale scrivevo testualmente "Cara Mamma, credo che se le cose continuano così, tra nebbia e neve, non vedremo mai più il sole in questo Paese".

Mi accorgo di avere detto molto poco del libro di Christine Corton, un libro che ha tanto entusiasmato il giornalista, scrittore e saggista scozzese nella sua lunga recensione. Allora, come ho detto, era un cronista dell' "Observer" mentre io lavoravo in quell'ospedale mentale. Chi vuole saperne di più su questo posto, ormai uno dei tanti "derelict places" - "luoghi scomparsi", può andare al link.

A me interessa qui riandare con il pensiero a quei giorni. Posso capire, così oggi l'artista Monet cosa intese fare dipingendo tutte quelle tele in maniera quasi ossessiva, sempre sullo stesso tema: "la nebbia". Solo cercando di "leggere" e magari squarciare quel denso, magico, misterioso e tragico velo, si può comprendere la sua presenza nella storia di questa città e non solo di essa. Forse di tutti gli uomini, la "nebbia" che offusca la memoria e ne condiziona anche fatalmente i destini.

Il libro della scrittrice inglese non l'ho ancora letto, è in arrivo via Amazon. Ma posso dire che da quanto si dice nella lunga recensione, la "Great Fog" è stata da sempre presente nella mente sociale e culturale di questo Paese. Ricordo una famosa frase-aforisma, sempre usata quando si vuole mettere in evidenza la forte tendenza all'isolazionismo inglese: "Fog on the Channel, the Continent cut off" - "Nebbia sulla Manica. Il continente isolato".

Ora che la nuova legislazione è riuscita ad avere la meglio sui cattivi comportamenti e sulle speculazioni degli uomini, in termini di inquinamento, e sono riusciti ad eliminare l'uso di carbon fossile artificiale, il classico "coke", per il riscaldamento della metropoli nei milioni e milioni di camini e fornaci, Londra ha cambiato faccia. Non è più quella di una volta. La città non soffre più dei tanti mali di cui ebbero a soffrire tante generazioni per secoli. Non a caso nel libro la scrittrice parla di come quella grigia e fumosa città che era Londra abbia ispirato tanti artisti e scrittori rimasti famosi nella storia della cultura inglese.

Si possono ancora vedere sui tetti delle case di Londra milioni e milioni di camini di case e fabbriche, per fortuna oggi spenti. L'orizzonte urbano contemporaneo risulta radicalmente mutato, come cambiate sono le relazioni sociali e i relativi comportamenti umani. Chi non conosce le descrizioni nelle storie inventate di scrittori come Charles Dickens, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad, T S Eliot? L'autrice del libro è riuscita, secondo il recensore, a far convergere la sua sensibilità storica e letteraria, su di un'opera, il suo libro, che vive la narrazione con l'occhio di un dramma visivo, quasi una tragedia che riesce ad animare la città nella sua grande forza di trasformazione e cambiamento.

Un ricordo legato al carbone e alla nebbia insieme ce l'ho anche io. Intendo ricordarlo a me stesso a distanza di tanti anni, prima che vada definitivamente a scomparire nelle pieghe della nebbiosa memoria. Proprio in uno di quelle notti del mese di dicembre del 1962 da cui Neal Ascherson si muove all'inizio della recensione del libro della Corton, io ero di servizio in un reparto dell'ospedale. Questo luogo era come un grande campus sul quale erano disseminati tanti reparti, chiamati "villa" oppure "ward", decine e decine di "cottages" che ospitavano i pazienti.

Una rete stradale interna li collegava. Da una parte il settore femminile, dall'altra quello maschile, al centro i grossi edifici amministrativi e quelli riservati al personale nel quale risiedevo. Sul bordo esterno la "farm", la "dispensary", la cucina centrale, all'ingresso la biblioteca, la scuola di nursing, il laboratorio di analisi, i campi da gioco, tennis, bowling, golf. Una realtà umana e sociale del tutto autosufficiente vissuta da circa duemila persone. Prati ed isole floreali facevano da sfondo a questo paesaggio tipicamente inglese, lievemente lievemente ondulato pieno di campi verdi seminati a grano d'estate, ricoperti di neve e di nebbia d'inverno.

Quella notte di dicembre del 1962 ero di servizio notturno in un reparto tranquillo dove ero stato assegnato. I turni erano organizzati in maniera ciclica. Avevo frequentato il corso per il diploma e mi stavo preparando agli esami. Avevo chiesto di lavorare di notte per aver più tempo da dedicare allo studio. Si entrava in servizio alle venti e si smetteva alle sette del mattino. Il reparto era tranquillo, nessun caso o malato difficile, era una "villa" di "patient-workers", gente quasi normale in grado anche di svolgere lavori pesanti o leggeri, che lasciava il reparto durante la giornata e svolgevano le loro mansioni altrove. Venivano anche regolarmente retribuiti.

Faceva freddo, c'era una forte gelata, un pò di neve residua, molta umidità. Le luci si accendevano alle tre e mezzo del pomeriggio. Per arrivare al reparto dovevo fare un bel pò di cammino nel parco. Mancava qualche minuto alle otto, faticai non poco per trovare la giusta direzione nonostante la forte illuminazione a neon gialla. Mi aspettava una lunga notte che avevo però programmato di studio in vista della prova per gli esami del primo anno. (Lo superai poi, quell'esame, sia detto per inciso. Con la borsa di studio che il "Ministero della Salute" ci diede, mi pagai il mio primo volo Alitalia della mia vita: Gatwick-Naples via Firenze!)

Il fidato James, collaboratore-paziente, aveva acceso il grande camino che si trovava al centro della lunga camerata del dormitorio. Di fianco aveva collocato una abbondante riserva di "coke", una delle parole magiche che hanno concorso al dar vita allo "smog" - "smoke+coke+fog" fa nascere "smog". Mi preparavo a studiare, godendomi il tepore di quel classico camino vittoriano mentre i pazienti dormivano e tutti insieme formavano una delle più poderose orchestre del sonno che si potesse immaginare. Erano previste due visite di controllo da parte di ufficiali sanitari, una poco dopo l'entrata in servizio, l'altra verso l'alba, qualche ora prima della fine servizio.

Chi controllava dava uno sguardo ai registri, segnalava qualche emergenza, dava disposizioni impreviste. Alla prima visita, Mr Dawson mi trovò intento a guardare la TV, con alcuni pazienti. Disse che era molto difficile circolare senza perdersi. Una nebbia e un gelo che li potevi tagliare a fette. Allora c'erano tre canali nazionali che trasmettevano a colori, BBC1, BBC2, ITV. Le news, ricordo, che davano gravi disagi sia per il gelo che per la neve e la fitta nebbia che copriva ed avvolgeva, come in un sudario, gran parte della parte meridionale del Paese. Facemmo qualche veloce considerazione e poi svanì nel nulla. Mi preannunciò che sarebbe passato alla solita ora il "Night Chief Superintendent" mr Brickell, a noi tutti noto per la sua pignoleria, rigidità e professionalità. Una prospettiva da notte di incubo.

Quando spensi la TV e mandai a letto i pochi pazienti che facevano resistenza per andare a dormire, diedi uno sguardo attraverso la finestra al mondo esterno. Non vidi altro che un muro plumbeo che diventava sempre più spesso. Non tentai nemmeno di mettere il naso fuori per paura che quel fumo nero me lo potesse tagliare. Mi distesi sulla poltrona, rinforzai il grande camino con alcuni pezzi di quel nerissimo "coke" e cominciai a leggere quel libro sulla fisiologia del cervello che ho ancora da qualche parte tra i miei libri.

Erano da poco passate le ultime "newsreel" di mezzanotte e sembrava che dovesse accadere la fine del mondo. Una sorta di apocalisse con l'arrivo di un giustiziere. Mi sentivo comunque confortato dalla musica trasmessa senza interruzione da quella sessantina di esseri umani con un quoziente di intelligenza al di sotto della media. Nelle due camerate condividevano il loro spirito e il loro corpo con il dio del sonno nell'orchestra diretta dal maestro Morfeo.

A questo punto non so più come continuare, nel senso che di quelle quattro-cinque ore successive non ricordo assolutamente nulla. Il coke aveva fatto il suo lavoro. Il mio cervello era stato letteralmente paralizzato dalle esalazioni. Se non fosse stato per il telefono della saletta dell'ufficio che si mise a suonare senza interruzione, non dico mi avrebbero trovato stecchito insieme ai pazienti, cosa impossibile data l'ampiezza del dormitorio, ma di certo qualcosa di brutto sarebbe accaduto. Nessuna traccia di mr Brickell, il temuto controllore, mentre fuori il colore grigio di quel muro di nebbia della sera prima era diventato più nero del coke.

Vorrei saper descrivere la sensazione che si prova quando il cervello viene paralizzato da qualcosa che ne condiziona il funzionamento. Che so io, come quando si ha un incubo, si ha la febbre alta, si è in preda all'anestesia, ad una droga o all'alcol. Ci fu un momento in cui ebbi come la sensazione di una presenza, un qualcosa o un qualcuno che uscisse fuori di me, come una sorta di sdoppiamento, una divisione, un distacco dell'essere, una doppietà. Come quella di un sudario, la sensazione di una nebbia avvolgente che ti trascina

altrove ...

Ecco, tutto questo mi ha fatto ricordare la recensione di questo libro. Mi è servita per non solo per fare un "amarcord" personale, ma anche per riflettere sulla "nebbia" nella quale sono avvolte le nostre esistenze e sulla impossibilità, diversamente dalla storia della nebbia di Londra, di poter cambiare le cose della nostra vita.

Dal mio blog, post pubblicato in data 24 ottobre 2015 <https://goo.gl/CaJ1ds>

P.S. Il libro poi è arrivato e ogni tanto lo rileggo e ricordo ...

Michael says

London Fog reads like student work because it is student work. That would be OK, but unfortunately it is not good student work. It is essentially a thesis that only made it to the annotated bibliography stage: a collection of quotations about the famous London fogs taken from literature, memoirs, letters, and miscellaneous sources. Instead of being woven into the advertised "biography" of the fog, lamentably, they are simply paraded past us along with capsule summaries of the plots of the novels they were taken from and biographical sketches of the observers. Where there is analysis, it is poorly grounded in the evidence and often contradicts itself. Glaringly missing is anything but the most superficial explanation of what the fogs really *were* and what really caused them. It does impress on you that London fogs were quite awful, which is something, but it's something that could have accomplished in three pages.

John Newton says

You might not think of London's fog as something that can be described in a biography, a subject with a life span. Corton, however, explains the phenomenon was born in the 1830s with the rapid growth of London and the rise of industrialization there and then finally ended in 1962, with the last major fog.

The London fogs that are her subject are not simply misty days, but fogs (or as we would call them today, smogs) that were produced thanks to coal smoke in the air, combined with winter cold fronts settling over the city and trapping the polluted air in the Thames River valley. For nearly a century and half, a combination of reluctance on the part of both industrialists and domestic users of coal produced these fogs that would settle in for days at a time. Any American readers like me who have some vague idea of those fogs having been pleasantly spooky and atmospheric will learn how thoroughly unpleasant, or rather toxic, they were. Yellow or black thick mists that killed livestock as well as humans, either in accidents or from exacerbating breathing problems among the sick and elderly. The final death toll is still disputed but around some 2,000 deaths can be arguably ascribed to one of the last great fogs, in 1952—the one which was successful at rallying forces that wanted to eliminate the pollution caused by coal in London.

Corton's book has two main themes. One is the metaphor of fog in literature (and, mostly in shorter digressions, in painting and photography). She leads her readers through novels—Dickens, Conan Doyle,

James—and poetry that present fog as a metaphor for confusion, spiritual malaise, the corrupting influences of urban life, and, later, to its surprising (given its toxicity) nostalgic associations with a vanishing England. The concentration of fogs in the East End of London also helped cement its identification with poverty, criminality, and even immigrants.

Her other theme is fog as a medical hazard and environmental problem to be solved. Corton doesn't draw explicit analogies to other environmental issues, but they were hard for me to miss. For decades after the health hazards of the fogs were clear, the will to eliminate them was lacking. There was no central ministry that viewed the issue as theirs. Industrial and domestic sources of pollution blamed each other, the deaths they caused could be disputed (would someone have died of bronchitis even without the effects of these fogs?), and ideas about the acceptable limits to state power led some to argue for a natural right to burn coal if one chose to. Even something as simple as placing restriction on emissions from freighters docking in London was slowed because of fears of retaliatory measures by other countries. It was only after the devastating 1952 fog when, thanks to both the rise of the welfare state (and a belief that it was incumbent on such a state to address the issue) and better scientific research on both the health impacts of fogs and the exact levels of toxins in them, that the Clear Air Act was passed and implemented. As London converted to smokeless fuels for heating, the London fogs ended and it lives on today mostly as an essential element of any movie or novel set in London in the 1880s and '90s, when the fogs were at their peak.

Of the two different themes, I found the literary discussions a bit repetitive. She summarizes the plots of many novels to eventually explain the metaphor of fog in a particular work or for a particular writer. The scientific and social issues around fog interested me more. Fortunately there's enough of both themes that any reader interested in either of them will enjoy Corton's book.

Todd Stockslager says

Review title: Clear view from all angles

The subtitle calls it a biography, I shelved it as history, but Corton's study of London Fog could easily be classed as science (meteorological, geographical, environmental), travel writing, political analysis, and literary criticism. The Fog was first reported as a meteorological occurrence common to London earlier, but the true London Fog was born with the explosive increase in coal fires driven by the Industrial Revolution and domestic coal fires and furnaces. Corton documents the etymologies of the terms "London Fog", "pea-souper", and other terms used to describe and name this very London phenomenon (midnight darkness at noon, yellow/brown muck that stings the eyes and sears the lungs) and traces its beginning to the 1830s, its peak maturity to the 1880s, and its death to the final reported fog in 1962.

The birth of the fog coincided with the early Victorian era of Charles Dickens, and indeed his writings on the city and its fogs has defined our perception of it since. Corton devotes an entire chapter to a literary exposition on Dickens's use of fog within his stories, and shows how other writers picked up and then modified the theme moving forward. She also shows how contemporaries (both London born and foreign visitors; the difference in their descriptions and opinions are interesting) viewed the Fog and how it shaped behavior and perceptions, especially of women and criminals.

The science and political part of Corton's narrative are well woven together, as press, public, and government began to question what caused these increasingly common and more caustic events to occur, and consider ways to reduce them, prevent them, or survive them. She reports the history and the debates which started to

arise in the mid 19th century, leading to frequent but not often successful legislative attempts to curb the causes; it is interesting to learn that while both industrial and domestic coal usage was identified as possible causes, the British public was staunch in defending its right to burn coal for cooking and heating even well into the 20th century when cleaner alternatives were widely available.

A major portion of the book is given to Corton's examination of the changing literary uses of London Fog and cultural responses to it. While Dickens shaped the early perception of the phenomenon around criminality and poverty, later writers extended their use of the Fog as plot elements and metaphors for immorality, horror, romance, science fiction, and post-Great War ennui. And Corton doesn't ignore the visual representations of the Fog, including many reproductions of paintings, cartoons (from Punch and other comic sources), and newspaper lithographs and photographs. These artifacts really show the changing contemporary views of the Fog in the visual representations.

While Corton's light, literary, and factual style of presenting the Fog from all angles makes this a worthwhile journey for many readers, who is the core audience that will benefit most? I think the literary examination of the use of the fog in Dickens and later writers is the most complete, as befits Corton's academic background and earlier academic publications, so I would recommend this as a must for citations in that field. But the casual reader of any interest will still find London Fog a clear winner.

Penny says

An interesting idea for a book but it didn't take me long to realise I'd soon reach a point where I'd read all I ever wanted to read about fog.
This point was around page 75.
Nice illustrations though.

Jarvo says

There haven't been serious fogs in London fog, of the kind we describe as pea soupers, as 'Dickensian' or as 'London particulars' for over fifty years but their legend lives on. I was recently asked by a taxi driver in Florida's Boca Raton why London was so prone to them, and the taxi driver was very surprised when I said that they were really a thing of the past. But they clearly hold a place in the wider imagination, up there with guardsmen in red uniforms and big furry hats or ravens in the tower or punks with spiky mohican haircuts among popular conceptions of London.

This is an interesting, worthwhile book which struggles because it does a few things quite well, rather than one thing brilliantly. The author is most at home with something old fashioned lit crit, and the book works best as a history of novels (in particular) in which fog plays a part. This is really more or less all novels set in London over a one hundred and fifty year period. She tends to say that posh writers (Dickens, Henry James) do clever things like use the fog as a symbol or metaphor whereas with genre authors and the like it is background or a narrative device. But she also deals with some key issues in environmental history: why did the fogs occur? (roughly speaking the burning of coal in domestic fires and industry) why did it stop? (coal was banned and the industry moved elsewhere). This isn't her home ground and she is well short of the treatment offered in Peter Brimblecombe's *The Big Smoke* (Routledge Revival, 2012) in that regard. Moreover one of the great conundrums of the book is that the fog is above all a visual thing. She does deal with the visual arts (including cinema) but this is really in passing, and she is more at home with words. The

book though is blessed with a wide range of very well produced illustrations, some of which are only mentioned in passing, but which often say more than the text. Which brings me to my last point. I don't think I've ever read a better produced book. Typesetting, leading, paper, typeface and illustrations are, without exception, elegant without being at all showy.

(One note of frustration - this year's challenge was to read a backlog of books I'd received as gifts: with Christmas and more gifts around the corner it looks like I'll be a couple of hundred pages short...)

K.J. Charles says

Excellent. Vivid, readable, obviously hugely well researched, and written in a very engaging way. A terrific account.

Alex Sarll says

The mist these past few nights has borne about the same relation to the old London particular as a terrier does to a wolf - and being asthmatic, I'm hardly complaining about that. Still, especially after such an unseasonably hot October, there was a delight in the sense of London returning to its proper form - by which is commonly accepted an occulted form, with streetlights twinkling in the mist, buses become strange leviathans and parks turned otherworlds. This is, in other words, fertile territory - which Corton doesn't do the best job of exploiting. The acknowledgments confirmed my suspicion that this book had begun life as a thesis, later having its remit expanded; that 'Biography' in the title seldom feels like more than a grab for the Ackroyd audience. It is of the order of non-fiction which contains much that is worth knowing, without ever coalescing into a good book. There is far too much repetition both of themes (do we really need quite so many *Punch* cartoons of impish linklighters?) and sometimes of entire quotations. Numerous very similar science fiction stories foretelling London's death by fog are recounted in a minute detail that serves only to obscure the genuinely interesting ways in which they differ (the degree, for instance, to which the citizens are blamed for their fate). Dickens is introduced as an exemplar of the 'realist novel', an angle which only ever serves to make him look absurd, especially when his contrived plots and allegorical characters are then examined in minute detail. The prose does bad things, things we all did when writing essays in a hurry but which an editor really should have caught - one finds representatives being represented on committees (when clearly they are by definition doing the representing), a passage explicated as exploring the difference between "bad chemicals" and "good chemicals", and one caption so bathetic it haunts me:

"This is one of a series of photographs taken by the American photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn of a foggy day in London in 1909, though it concentrates more on the atmospheric wintry scene than on the fog and its consequences for traffic."

How can a photograph whose entire subject is a foggy scene be said not to concentrate on fog? Why should a photograph of Kensington Gardens have any regard for the effect on traffic? What exactly are you trying to say here, and why didn't anyone help ensure you said it?

For all that its annoyances are many, and multiply towards the end (deadline panic?), this is by no means a terrible book. Corton's literary criticism may be infuriating, but she's much better on the history of the fogs and especially on their representation in visual art. I suspect I'm just frustrated by the sense that there's a brilliant 120-page book being smothered in this 330-page mess as surely as any bronchitic Victorian in a pea-souper.

Stacia says

I had put this book on hold at the library and it became available at the worst possible time, leaving me only a week or so of actual reading time. I didn't realize from the blurb that this is more of a literary history than anything, a history of London's fog as it appears in various works of literature, which isn't nearly as interesting to me personally. I might give this another try in the future, but unfortunately I didn't have enough time to finish it this time around.

Leah says

The story of The Smoke...

From the early 19th to the mid 20th century, London spent large parts of the winter months shrouded under dense and dirty fogs, so thick that people quite literally could walk into the Thames without seeing it. Corton sets out to tell the two stories of the fog – the actual one of what caused it and how it was eventually defeated, and the artistic one, of how it was used atmospherically and metaphorically in the literature and art of the period.

As the Industrial Revolution got underway, factories began belching their coal smoke into the air of a city that was already at the heart of a great Empire and, for its time, huge – a mass of people, living cheek by jowl, often in intolerable conditions of poverty. And in winter, these people would huddle round their coal fires adding to the polluted atmosphere. As the population grew, so did the smoke. The location of London meant that it was already prone to mists and with the addition of all this coal smoke, the mists became fogs – fogs that worsened throughout the 19th century, reaching their peak in the 1880s and 90s, but remaining significant for several decades after that, until finally legislation and health concerns abated the worst of the pollution.

Corton tells us that Herman Melville coined the expression “pea-soup” to describe the thick consistency and colour of the London fog – yellow, as pea-soup was commonly made from yellow peas at that time. But it was Dickens who first made use of the fog in literature, descriptively at first but later, as he developed as a writer and as fogs worsened, as a metaphor for the corruption and social degeneracy of the city.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds...

... And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Gradually the fog became such an all-pervasive feature of London life that other writers began to use it in similar ways. Corton gives many examples, from writers famous or forgotten, showing the different ways they used fog in their work. Sometimes it would be used as a cloak for hideous crimes, sometimes as a tool to show the poverty, not just physical but also a poverty of aspiration, in society. Some writers used it as metaphor for the restrictions placed on women, while others allowed their female characters a freedom they could only have when shielded by the anonymity that the fog gave. And as the fogs worsened, a sub-genre developed of apocalyptic fiction – the fog shown as finally sucking the life from the inhabitants, or as a cause for moral corruption so severe that it and the inevitable destruction of the city that followed took on almost Biblical proportions.

Artists, too, became increasingly fascinated by the fog – the colours in it depending on the type of pollution and the invisible sun above. And not just local artists – famous artists travelled from Europe, America and even the Orient to try to capture this phenomenon. (I guess once they managed to pollute their own cities enough, they were able to stay home!) The book is wonderfully illustrated with examples of this art – I read it on my Kindle Fire which is good for colour illustrations, but I wished I'd been reading the hardback.

Alongside this, Corton tells the story of how the fog impacted on people in real life and of the long fight by reformers to have the use of coal smoke regulated and reduced. The story of the beginnings of the fog and the various theories that were propounded as to its cause fascinated me, as did the descriptions given in journals and newspapers of how it actually felt trying to get around during a fog. Corton shows how real-life criminals could use its cover for their activities, including the linklighters – the boys who carried torches to light people as they travelled – who were notorious for their criminality. The dangers for women in particular are emphasised, with a feeling that they were unsafe in the fog without the protection of a man.

At first, I also found the tale of the political fighting to do something about the fog interesting but, after a while, I began to find the telling of it too detailed, especially the Parliamentary side of it, and it began to drag. I found I was increasingly glad to get back to the literary and artistic sections. The problem of the fog decreased gradually over the 20th century, but wasn't finally resolved until the 1950s. As a result, Corton continues her story of how it was used in literature and art well beyond the Victorian era, but as the fog faded, so did its usefulness as a metaphor. Corton makes the point that writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, though writing well into the 20th century, often based their stories back in the 1880s and 90s so that they could use the fog to its fullest effect.

Overall, I found this great in parts and rather dull in other parts. The effect of reading for review is that I have a tendency not to like to skip, otherwise I would fairly early on have been jumping the sections relating to the various politicians and reformers. The sections on writers and artists were of much more interest, to me at least, although here I did feel that sometimes Corton was stretching too far, and drawing conclusions about fog as metaphor that aren't always justified by the reading of the books. But then this is a fault I routinely find in literary criticism. Despite that, one that I am sure will be enjoyed by anyone interested in either crime or literary fiction of the period. And it occurred to me it would be great as a research tool for any writer out there wanting to set their book in the London of that period...

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Harvard University Press.

Brenda Clough says

All right, but nothing very exciting.

Jill Meyer says

I am disappointed with British historian Christine Corton's "London Fog: The Biography". A thick and well-researched book, it was much less non-fiction - which is what I had hoped for - and much more discussion on how the famous "pea soup" fogs were portrayed in literature, film, and art. She writes how authors as diverse as Dickens and Mark Twain made the fog - thick, yellowy, and often poisonous - parts of their novels. And she shows some of the beautiful artwork derived from the fogs. But very little on the history of the fog and its affect on the populous.

I suppose if you're looking for a book on the London Fogs and how they were expressed in the arts, this is the book for you. For others looking for straight social history, you'll be disappointed.

Bill H. says

Really interesting account of the intense fogs--the pea soupers--characteristic of London, especially in the 19th and the first half of the 20th Century. Apart from the make-up and causes and health effects of the fogs, Corton is interested in the cultural uses or influence of that atmosphere in the work of artists (impressionism) and writers.

World Literature Today says

"London Fog is a fascinating account of London's climate from the seventeenth century to the 1960s, when pollution abatement measures began to have a real effect. Exhaustive research surveying accounts from the famous and obscure, residents and foreigners, artists, cartoonists, and authors creates a weighty mass of testimonies on the appearance, smells, psychological and social effects of London fog through the years." - W. M. Hagen

This book was reviewed in the September/October 2016 issue of World Literature Today magazine. Read the full review by visiting our website:

<http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2...>

Paul says

Way back in my childhood I remember my father, who is a Londoner, talking about the Smog's that they

used to have. These 'pea soupers' basically rendered the capital incapacitated until they cleared. These were the result of the location of London combined with vast amounts of pollution from open fires and industry and not only did people struggle to move around in them, they were killers too. The fog held in suspension poisoned the population, provided cover for crime and other nefarious activities and caused all manner of accidents on the days that they existed. They were last seen in the 1960's after the government of the day finally passed and enforced the Clean Air Act.

London became known as the City of Fog and this seeped into the art and literature. This book just on this weather phenomena, Corton peers through the gloom to bring us the stories from history, excerpts from writers such as T. S. Eliot, Robert Louis Stevenson and of course Charles Dickens. There are a large number of artworks, cartoon and photographs included in the book adding to the atmosphere. The photos are particularly poignant as they really show just how bad it was to live through. The research that has gone into this is extensive, as the 60 odd pages of notes attest. Occasionally the prose could be a little dry and academical, but there was normally something interesting along out of the murk to pique your interest once again.
