

# *The Literary London Journal*

www.literarylondon.org



---

**Christine L. Corton, *London Fog: The Biography*, hardback, 391 pages, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015. ISBN 9780674088351; £22.95.**

Reviewed by

Nicolas Tredell  
(Freelance, UK)

*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 13 Number 1 (Spring 2016)

Pea-souper, London Particular, King Fog: these are the names applied to that amorphous phenomenon that first saw the light of day—by obscuring it—in the 1840s and that lasted, with fluctuating intensity, until 1962. Fog was blindfold and blinker, blocking clear vision; but it also opened vistas to the eye of imagination, shifting and blurring solid shapes, conjuring phantoms and phantasmagoria, creating *avant la lettre* a form of expressionist film. It worked in and on the body, sticking to the skin—in a Christmas Eve letter to his mother in 1876, Henry James called it ‘absolutely *glutinous*’ (qtd 132, James’s emphasis)—and penetrating the nose, mouth, throat and lungs oppressively, painfully and sometimes fatally; but it also eased the pressure of reality, lightened the load on the too solid and sullied flesh, momentarily relieved the body’s incarceration in hard-edged matter. It was an evil to be eliminated but also a source of comfort—by 1888, Henry James could take a benign view of the phenomenon that had been so unpleasantly adhesive 12 years before, writing in his essay ‘London’ that the ‘friendly fog seems to protect and enrich’ (qtd 138). It could even be a feature of the capital of which to be proud: *The Times* claimed on 11 December 1924 that the “‘London Particular’” is the true London Pride’ (qtd 244).

If London fog tended towards the condition of mystery, a clear material explanation of its increased frequency and obscurity and its distinctive colour eventually emerged:

The reason for the increase in the number of foggy days in London town was not some change in the climate but a rapid increase in the quantity of pollutants, above all from coal fires, that mixed with naturally occurring water vapour at times of temperature inversion to create a London fog, coloured yellow from the sulphurous emissions trapped beneath the cold air above the city. (14)

But this material explanation, important though it was in understanding and curtailing the phenomenon, was incommensurate with its cultural and social consequences. To explore these, Corton's 'biography' interweaves examples from a variety of verbal and visual discourses: literature, poetry, popular fiction and song (George and Ira Gershwin's 'A Foggy day in London Town'); painting, drawing, photography, cartooning; journalism, science writing and parliamentary reportage of the successive debates in the long struggle to exercise some legislative control upon pollution. She first gives attention, properly enough, to Dickens. Daniel Quilp, the villain of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is 'the Dickensian character perhaps most personally associated with fog' (248) and the opening of *Bleak House* is possibly 'the most famous passage on London fog to be found in all literature' (52). It is Mr Guppy in Chapter 3 of that latter novel who calls the fog 'a London particular' (with a lower-case 'p'). The canonical nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writers Corton also considers include Henry James, especially *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) which, like *Bleak House*, 'uses fog to sum up the condition of England, more precisely London' (218).

Focusing on a work that occupies an uncertain cultural zone between 'literary' and popular fiction, Corton contends that Galsworthy's six-volume *Forsythe Saga* (1906–21) offers 'perhaps the most sustained literary exploitation of London fog through the early decades of the twentieth century' (245). In *The Man of Property* (1906), for example, the first novel of the series, the young architect Philip Bossiney meets his death in the fog as he wanders distracted through London after his lover, Irene, has told him that her husband, Soames Forsythe, has raped her (although Corton does not mention it, Bossiney's distressed fog-wreathed wandering also made a memorable scene in the 1967 BBC TV series based on Galsworthy's saga). Corton's analysis prompts the thought that it is surprising that Galsworthy's powerful dramatisation of Soames's marital rape of Irene seems to have received relatively little critical attention in an era concerned to expose and challenge 'rape culture'.

Corton also examines Henry Green's late-modernist masterwork *Party Going* (1939), in which the characters are stranded at a London railway station and which foregrounds fog in its first word: 'FOG was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet' (qtd 268–9). She moves on to consider Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which is set in the great fog of 1952 and uses it as a metaphor for the disorientation, isolation and discrimination that its West Indian immigrant characters experience in a London that has 'a kind of unrealness' about it, 'with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city' (qtd 288) and where, when Moses Aloetta blows his nose, the 'handkerchief turn black and Moses watch it and curse the fog' (qtd 290). In Lynne-Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960), the protagonist Jane Graham, young, single and pregnant, falls to her

nadir in the fog, which, Corton suggests, figures in the novel 'as a metaphorical way of representing Jane's moral uncertainties and mistakes' (288).

Corton turns her demister on two texts that the fog machine of the critic and filmmaker have obfuscated, and her searchlight cuts through the haze to reveal Peter Ackroyd as a chief culprit in both cases. Quoting Ackroyd's description of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) as 'the greatest novel of London fog' (qtd 111), she observes that 'on close inspection there is in fact very little fog in it' and suggest that Stevenson's novel may 'appear foggy in the reader's memory' because of 'its obsession with secrecy and concealment' (111). Citing Ackroyd's assertion, in his introduction to the Penguin 2001 edition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890), that 'the urban fog has become part of the mystery of the Holmes adventure' (qtd 329), she remarks that 'London fog actually appears very seldom in the Sherlock Holmes stories' (329). It features substantially only in 'The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans' and *The Sign of Four* but in 'the overwhelming majority of Sherlock Holmes mysteries, the air is clear' (329). Corton concludes: 'The close association of London fogs with Sherlock Holmes described by Peter Ackroyd is purely a phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (329).

Such retrospective befogging is also evident in the verbal and visual representations of the real-life serial killer known as Jack the Ripper. While his murders were indeed 'committed at the very height of London fog's density and frequency, in the late 1880s', each was in fact perpetrated on a fog-free night (329). We might ask here whether the critical and cinematic fog machine contributed to obscuring the brutal visceral reality of the murders as part of the process of turning them into a form of popular titillation and entertainment.

Fog did not only feature in canonical or well-known 'middlebrow' writing like Galsworthy's; it also appeared in popular literature, and one of the strengths of Corton's book is its rescue of obscure texts from the fog of forgetfulness, not because they are necessarily of high literary quality but because they attest to the significance of fog, especially in fiction, as a plot device and a source of description and imagery. These include the Reverend J. Jackson Wray's novel *Will it Lift? The Story of a London Fog* (1888) which evokes the 'all-pervading fog' that 'had settled thick and dark and heavy upon street and square' (qtd 83) and uses fog to symbolise the impediments to the course of true love running smooth. William Hardinge's novel *Out of the Fog: A Tale*, also published in 1888, the year of the Ripper murders, shows its female protagonist experiencing the fog as entrapment and hoping it will not get too dense: 'if the fog should not thicken, she might, perhaps, be able to walk the length of the street to where those great iron gates shut off the Bloomsbury Squares' (qtd 129). In 1899, the American writer Hester Caldwell Oakley's short story 'Love in a Fog' appeared in the *Illustrated London News*; its viewpoint character, a young American called Ralph Brewster, helps a young woman who has got lost to find her way through an evening fog that is 'grim, relentless, omnipresent, like a melodramatic ghost, the clutch of whose clammy fingers no power other than the elements could shake off' (qtd 144). But when he seeks her out again the next morning, he learns she is a German princess whom an American commoner like himself cannot hope to woo and

win. The social barriers seemingly softened by the fog prove hard as steel 'in the mellow October sunshine' (qtd 146).

If fog, as a general term, suggests grey on grey, or at best fifty shades of grey, the London Particular's most distinctive colour was yellow; the term 'pea-souper' derived from a time when pea soup was yellow rather than green, a dish for the urban poor made from dry yellow split peas (18). In his *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent 1849–1850*, the American author Herman Melville, describing London fog, used the marvellous adjective 'gamboge' which is, in Corton's definition, 'a deep yellow pigment derived from the resin of the gamboge tree and commonly used to dye the robes of Buddhist monks, especially in Cambodia—the two names are related' (18). But if its trademark hue was gambogian, London fog could modulate through a broader chromatic range. In 1833, the exiled Italian writer Giuseppe Pecchio found it 'now grey, now red, now of a dirty yellow' (qtd 178); Amy Levy, in a poem included in her 1889 collection *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*, dubbed it 'dun' (qtd 91); Mary Glead Tuttiet, writing as Maxwell Gray, began her novel *The Suspicions of Ermengade* (1908) by claiming that '[f]og of the colour known as pea-soup' was 'in reality amber mixed with lemon-peel and delicately tinted with smut' (qtd 147); T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land* (1922), twice called it brown, seeing London 'Under the brown fog of a winter dawn' and later repeating the line with 'dawn' changed to 'noon' (qtd 239).

It was the painters, however, Turner, Monet and Whistler above all, who brought out London fog's full palette and its shape-softening capacity. As Corton points out, 'Monet consistently liked to show the eye's impression of the dematerialization of matter in his paintings' (184) and late Turner, and Whistler, shared this predilection. London fog served it well. Corton's book contains discussions and, helpfully, colour reproductions of works such as Turner's *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* (1835), Whistler's *Nocturne in Grey and Gold—Piccadilly* (painted 1881–3) and Monet's *The Houses of Parliament, London, with the Sun Breaking through the Fog* (1904). But, as with literature, Corton extends her search beyond the canonical and incorporates reproductions and discussions of less familiar works: for example, Charles Albert Ludovici's *A London Fog*, rejected by the 1863 Paris salon but shown in the Salon des Refusés, where (according to his son) the Emperor Napoleon III bought it because it reminded him of his days of exile in London; Giuseppe De Nittis's *Study of Westminster Bridge* (1878); Charles-François Daubigny's *St Paul's from the Surrey Side* (1873); John Atkinson Grimshaw's *Reflections on the Thames, Westminster* (1880); Charles Vicat Cole's *The Pool of London* (1888); *Big Ben* (1894) and *Nelson's Column in a Fog* (1904) by the Irish artist Rose Maynard Barton, whom Corton calls 'perhaps the only well-known female painter of foggy London' (191); C. R. W. Nevinson's strong but subtle *Victoria Embankment* (1924) which he painted, as Monet had done, from a room at the Savoy overlooking the river; and Stella Rankin's striking *London Fog* (1959).

Illustrations are also reproduced and discussed: perhaps the most remarkable of these are Japanese artist Yoshio Markino's *Fog: Ladies Crossing Piccadilly* and *Feeding the Gulls, Blackfriars Bridge*, which first appeared as illustrations in William Loftie's book *The Colour of London* (1907). There are cartoons as well, from *Punch* and other sources, which are both entertaining and revelatory of changing attitudes,

from the 1849 one that shows horses also wearing the 'fog-glasses' that were being marketed to people at that time for supposed ocular protection to David Langdon's of 26 November 1952 that shows two cars in a fog moving in opposite directions towards a head-on collision as each driver follows the central white line on the road, a marking that had been introduced only 12 years before, in 1940. The cartoon bears the caption 'These white lines are an absolute godsend in the fog' (293). Evocative photographs feature too in the book, such as James A. Sinclair's 'The Haymarket, Winter' (1913) and an uncredited one from 12 November 1954 showing an unnamed woman (who slightly resembles the young Doris Lessing) looking at a London Borough of Holborn poster that warns 'Be ready for the Fog' (312).

It is uncertain how far this is a posed or spontaneous shot and whether the woman is a real passer-by or acting the part; but the photo nonetheless focuses a question left unaddressed in Corton's book. *London Fog* draws on a rich range of archival sources but the voice of the woman or man in the street, of the kind of person who might have been looking at that poster, or, two years earlier, breathing in the last great London fog, is largely absent. Would the Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex yield up more material relating to the response to twentieth-century London Particulars of people without access at the time to public media? Have those who can recall living through the postwar London fogs—many must still be alive today—been sought out and their memories recorded? There seems scope for some oral history research here.

A further area ripe for more exploration is the role of film. Corton does address some examples: Hitchcock's early silent *The Lodger* (1927), based on Marie Belloc Lowndes's 1911 novel of the same title to which Corton devotes most of her attention; Val Guest's comedy thriller *The Runaway Bus* (1954), with Frankie Howerd and Margaret Rutherford; and the Doris Day movie *Midnight Lace* (1960); but there are surely further relevant films, or scenes from films, to be discovered and discussed, especially given the phenomenological similarities between fog and film.

There is also a broader question to be considered: is there any correlation between fog, as a phenomenon and a topic, and the structure, as well as the style and content, of certain films and literary works? In investigating the latter area, Green's *Party Going*, with its fogbound setting and formal intricacies, might be a good starting point. It is a signal strength of Corton's book, among its other virtues, that it seems likely to spark off investigations into this and a range of other questions. *London Fog* is a pioneering work that offers a coherent, well-researched and richly detailed narrative which is fascinating to read and which should prompt other scholars to cast further light on this capital obscurity.

### **Note on Contributor**

**Nicolas Tredell** is a freelance writer who has published on authors ranging from Shakespeare to Martin Amis. He is Consultant Editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Essential Criticism series and formerly taught at Sussex University, UK. His recent books include *C. P. Snow: The Dynamics of Hope* (2012), *Analysing Texts: David Copperfield and Great Expectations* (2013) and *Shakespeare—The Tragedies* (2014). New and updated editions of *Novels to Some Purpose*, his study of Colin Wilson's fiction, and

*Conversations with Critics*, his interviews with twenty leading writers, will appear this year.

**To Cite this Article**

Nicolas Tredell, 'Review of: Christine L. Corton, *London Fog: The Biography*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 13, Number 1 (Spring 2016): 68–73. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2016/tredell2.pdf>.