August 7, 1997

'London': Greed, Lust and Glory on the Thames

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Books of the Times

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Unlike the New York of the televison police drama, London has never been the naked city, nor has its population ever been eight million. Still, a lot of people's stories are told in "London," Edward Rutherfurd's grand new novel, which traces the English city's history from the Druids to the Blitz.

In fact, so many people's stories are told that you have to keep consulting a chart at the front of the book, which lists the names of 131 characters belonging to some seven families, who intermarry, change their names, make fortunes, sink to poverty, act heroically, practice villainy, fight duels, make love, worship God, counsel kings, preach sermons, build cathedrals, write poetry and do all the other things that have made English history for more than two millenniums.

How on earth does one keep track of all these people through 21 episodes featuring the families' successive generations? The author makes it reasonably easy.

A Cambridge University graduate whose previous novels are "Sarum," a 10,000-year history of the city of Salisbury, and "Russka," a history of Russia, Rutherfurd is consciously trying to apply James Michener's techniques to the United Kingdom.

He gives the characters in "London" prominent physical traits like the long noses that characterize all the members of the Silversleeves family, or the patches of silver hair and webbed fingers that keep showing up on the Duckets, or rememberable surnames like Bull, Penny and Barnikel (so-called because one ancestor, a fearsome Viking warrior, disliked killing children and gave the order before each raid, "Bairn ni kel," or "Don't kill the children.").

Each episode is a punchy tale made up of bite-size chunks ending in tiny cliffhangers (kerbhangers?) And telling of greed, lust, revenge, loyalty, bravery, cleanliness and reverence. We cheer the heroes as they rescue maidens in peril, and hiss the villains as they twirl their mustaches. Rutherfurd's storytelling is often not subtle.

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`LONDON'
By Edward Rutherfurd
Illustrated. 829 pages.
Crown Publishers.
$25.95.

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But then plot and character profundity is hardly the point.

The purpose of "London" is to weave together the great events of English history and to embroider into that tapestry the famous figures. So typical episodes concern the invasion by Julius Caesar's legions in 54 B.C.; the pressures on Anglo-Saxons to convert to Christianity in the seventh century A.D.; the rise of chivalry and the Crusades; the uses of alchemy and the great stock-holding companies; the building of the Globe theater and St. Paul's Cathedral; the plague, the great London fire and Wat Tyler's rebellion, and the coming of the Industrial Revolution. We witness firsthand the lust of Henry VIII.

We overhear Geoffrey Chaucer deciding to write "The Canterbury Tales."

"Write it in Latin," advises a friend who thinks that English is evolving too quickly. "Don't let your life's work be swept away. Leave a monument, for future generations."

We watch a Puritan character embarking for the Massachusetts Bay Colony aboard a ship with John Harvard.

The fun of it all is seeing the pieces fall into place. The origins of words and place names: at the time of the Norman Conquest, "the land was divided into country shires, each with a shire reeve -- the sheriff -- who collected the King's taxes and oversaw justice." How to forge and link chain mail, design a coat of arms, build the Tower of London, transform base metal into gold, or at least convince the gullible that you can do so. Why the Glorious Revolution (1688) was neither revolutionary nor glorious, but "nonetheless, a great watershed" because "the religious and political disputes which had troubled England for more than a century reached a lasting resolution," at the cost mainly of the Catholic Church.

Certain shortcomings are inevitable. It's hard to identify with a city, and you know how everything will turn out. London will survive and expand. Yet for all the fun of the novel, Rutherfurd has some serious points to make: as the god of his creation, he sits back and pares his fingernails, allowing villainy to be rewarded and virtue to be punished, and passing no final moral judgments on his characters. What he seems to mean by this is that the ways of history are inscrutable.

More important to him is the wonderful distinctiveness of London.

As one character representing his views puts it: "London was always a city of large numbers of aliens who quickly assimilated."

He continues: "I doubt very much whether our Anglo-Saxon ancestry would make up one part in four. We are, quite simply, a nation of European immigrants with new graftings being added all the time. A genetic river, if you like, fed by any number of streams."

And he pulls off some remarkable effects, typical of them a description of a Puritan character named O Be Joyful Carpenter listening to the chiming of London's bells: "Louder and louder now their mighty ringing grew, clanging and crashing down the major scale, drowning out every puny tune, until even the dome of St. Paul's itself seemed to be resonating in the din. And as he listened to this tremendous sound echoing all around him, so strident and so strong, it suddenly seemed to Carpenter that he could hear therein a thousand other voices: the Puritan voices of Bunyan and his pilgrim, the voice of his father Gideon and his saints, of Martha, why even of the Protestant Almighty himself. And, lost

in their massive chorus, for a moment forgetting everything, even his own poor soul, he hugged his grandchildren and cried out in exultation:

" 'Hear! Oh, hear the voice of the Lord!'

"Then all the bells of London rang, and then O Be Joyful was joyful indeed."

What a delightful way to get the feel of London and of English history.

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Slate's list of the definitive nonfiction books written in English in the past quarter-century includes beautifully written memoirs but also books of reportage, collections of essays, travelogues, works of cultural criticism, passionate arguments, even a compendium of household tips. What they all share is a commitment to "mostly truth" and the belief that digging deep to find a real story—whether it's located in your memory, on dusty archive shelves, in Russian literature, in a slum in Mumbai—is a task worth undertaking. Far from soberly rational, these thinkers were as galvanized by the exhilarating spirit of their times as the poets Holmes usually writes about. Books of The Times. Book reviews by The Times's critics. Book reviews by The Times's critics. Latest. Search. Math: Notes on an All-American Family Thick: And Other Essays Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care The Unwinding of the Miracle: A Memoir of Life, Death, and Everything That Comes After The Yellow House: A Memoir. Stirring novels and short stories, thought-provoking histories, affecting memoirs and more. These are the books that captured our attention. —Naina Bajekal, Emma Barker, Judy Berman, Andrew R. Chow, Kelly Conniff, Eliana Dockterman, Merrill Fabry, Lori Fradkin, Lucy Feldman, Annabel Gutterman, Suyin Haynes, Nate Hopper, Cady Lang, Sam Lansky, Belinda Luscombe, Lily Rothman, Eben Shapiro, Lucas Wittmann, Elijah Wolfson.