



London Fog: The Biography

By Christine L. Corton

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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.

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Editorial Review

Review

Christine Corton takes a subject that is now scarcely more than a heritage item?like gaslight and hansom cabs?and puts it where it belongs among the great public-health movements of the 19th and 20th centuries... Of course, fog was not solely a public-health problem. With the help of wonderful contemporary illustrations, Corton vividly describes the chaos it brought?pedestrians groping, traffic crawling, accidents, crime and drunkenness soaring. The melting, blurring, looming transformations of fog seemed to symbolize the dissolution of society itself. Writers saw the possibilities, and Corton pursues their metaphorical fogs through every kind of moral, psychological and social disintegration. Charles Dickens, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, all are here?plus a mass of fascinating and forgotten popular literature?their cultural meanings perceptively analyzed... This is a rich and multifaceted book. (*The Economist* 2015-11-07)

Brilliant...**Corton** has a deft historical, literary and visual eye. While tracing the birth, maturity and death of fog, she pays careful attention to the ways it affected everyday lives and locations...But her real interest is in the way fog played in the imagination. For centuries, she shows, novelists, essayists, cartoonists and painters used fog as a metaphor for human relationships and the moral order...Corton's book is an unsentimental and elegant reflection on a world that has passed. (Joanna Bourke *Daily Telegraph* 2015-11-14)

Engrossing and magnificently researched...**Corton**'s book combines meticulous social history with a wealth of eccentric detail. Thus we learn that London's ubiquitous plane trees were chosen for their shiny, fog-resistant foliage. And since Jack the Ripper actually went out to stalk his victims on fog-free nights, filmmakers had to fake the sort of dank, smoke-wreathed London scenes audiences craved. It's discoveries like these that make reading *London Fog* such an unusual, enthralling and enlightening experience. (Miranda Seymour *New York Times Book Review* 2015-11-01)

Endlessly entertaining... **Corton** has done a prodigious amount of research into the phenomenon of the 'pea-soup' fogs that enveloped London at regular intervals throughout the Industrial Age... Corton's book is merrily chock-full of illustrations... But the real star attraction in these pages is Corton's exuberant omniscience about her subject. She seems to have read every tenth-rate serialized novel in the whole of the Victorian and Edwardian literary shrubbery, hunting out every mention and dramatization of the great fogs and in the process giving some truly wretched writers what will surely be the most intelligent reading they're ever likely to get. And she's got an equally good ear for reportage, finding piercing quotes from every era of the fog's domination... *London Fog* has enjoyed a nicely wide critical reception since its appearance, and it deserves every accolade it gets. This is tight-focus popular history at its finest. (Steve Donoghue *Open Letters Monthly* 2015-11-09)

The idea of a biography of fog in London might initially appear a doubtful enterprise, but in **Christine Corton**'s capable hands it works brilliantly. The liveliness of metropolitan fog is beautifully charted here in a long chronology from the Stuart era to the Clean Air Acts of the 1950s to 1990s...[A] most extraordinarily rich collection of material from scientific, journalistic, literary, humorous, artistic and medical sources...She has created a history of fog's material and immaterial culture...The text is interspersed with some astonishing visual material, appropriately placed, making the book a visual feast especially of little-known artworks, caricatures and photographs of great beauty. Corton's use of the perceptions of foreign visitors, especially those from China and Japan, is revelatory...*London Fog* is not just a literary exercise; it also charts the long trajectory of a deeply serious public health matter that we have yet to confront, as we should,

once again...This fine book has real substance, generously shared, and is very timely indeed. (Ruth Richardson *Times Higher Education* 2015-10-29)

[Corton's] fascinating history traces London's unique brand of photochemical smog from its surprisingly early birth in the 13th century, when complaints about the burning of 'sea coal' in London hearths began, through its malign maturity in the 19th, to its death throes in the second half of the 20th...The many well-chosen images in *London Fog* include works by minor painters of London scenes and by various illustrators, photojournalists and cartoonists playing on the terror, confusion and comedy caused by fog. These add greatly to the interest of Corton's book. (Catherine Peters *Literary Review* 2015-11-01)

Christine Corton's excellent book explores three questions: how people accounted for London fog, what they did about it, and how it became such an enormous, apparently inexhaustible cultural resource and metaphor...Corton has assembled an astonishing display of fog fiction...Corton has written a thoughtful, vivid, very memorable book. (Neal Ascherson *London Review of Books* 2015-10-08)

Ambitious...The book is substantial, well illustrated and beautifully written, with approachable scholarship...[An] illuminating book. (Philippa Stockley *Country Life* 2015-10-14)

[A] thorough and enjoyable book, not only for its historical account of what London fog was and when it began but for the rich seam of literature, spleen and death that they caused. (Philippa Stockley *Evening Standard* 2015-11-05)

This is an unexpectedly riveting book, scholarly, thorough yet eminently readable. (*Londonist* 2015-11-05)

Christine L. Corton, clad in an overcoat, with a linklighter before her, takes us into the gloomier, long 19th century, where she revels in its Gothic grasp. Beautifully illustrated, *London Fog* delves fascinatingly into that swirling miasma. (Philip Hoare *New Statesman* 2015-11-13)

As **Christine L. Corton** shows in her lively and engaging cultural history, for more than 100 years London fog did not only creep into people's homes and bodies. It saturated their way of thinking. If fog was an inescapable part of city life--in Dickens's famous opening to *Bleak House*, the word is repeated so often it sounds more like a curse--it was an equally omnipresent element in the cultural imagination. (Robert Douglas-Fairhurst *The Spectator* 2015-11-07)

[An] engrossing book...This book could almost make one nostalgic for the days of the pea souper were it not for the fact that it was clearly a terrible threat to health. (Daisy Goodwin *The Times* 2015-11-14)

London Fog: The Biography successfully captures the enormous impact this atmospheric had on a major city's everyday life. Ironically, the result is a portrait that is both well-defined and sharply delineated. (Amy Henderson *Weekly Standard* 2015-10-26)

An intriguing biography of the weather effect that defined a national character... An eye-opening and highly readable picture of London's reactions to the killer fog that has characterized it for centuries. (*Kirkus Reviews* 2015-07-15)

Corton undertakes a definitive study of London's 'pea-souper' fogs, deftly tracing the history of a weather condition that became a defining feature of the city in the world's imagination. As Corton shows, the fog, which first appeared early in the 19th century, proved a ready metaphor for an array of Victorian anxieties, from Jack the Ripper's reign of terror to a perceived decline in public morals. She perceptively examines the

literary manifestations of these fears in chapters covering a number of famous authors, including Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and T.S. Eliot. Readers may be surprised that the history of London fog requires a detour through the politics of the day as much as through literature; however, Corton proves a sensible guide through the labyrinthine parliamentary measures arising from public outrage over the ‘great killer fog’ and bureaucratic inaction in service of the manufacturers that were largely responsible for the pollution. Though the ‘London particular’ was finally legislated out of existence in the 1960s, Corton asserts convincingly that the fog will remain enshrined in cultural memory, a romantic if no longer accurate symbol of a great city. (*Publishers Weekly* 2015-08-31)

This anatomy of the impenetrable London pea-souper?from Dickens to modern times?is a delight. It is beautifully written, its historical learning is lightly worn, and its literary insights are intelligent, entertaining, and apt. (Andrew Lycett)

An admirable and enjoyable book, full of exemplary research. The writing is always clear and accessible, even breezy. (Jerry White, University of London)

One of the most characteristic and important features of London was its ‘pea-souper’ fogs, or smogs, which determined so many aspects of Londoners’ lives until the 1950s?crime, romance, commerce, and of course, health. A comprehensive work on the impact and influence of fog upon the denizens of London is overdue. (Anthony Wohl, Vassar College)

In the history of London, the Fog is a character in its own right. Now along comes a biography to do justice to this mysterious entity. Christine Corton’s *London Fog* is a valuable addition to the London canon. (Catharine Arnold, author of *Bedlam London and its Mad*)

Corton’s wonderfully detailed and original exploration of foggy London ranges from the earliest mists to the last great pea-souper of 1962...Her account is rich in memorable anecdotes and descriptions, gleaned from popular culture, literature, journals and contemporary letters as well as cartoons and art history: the book is also splendidly illustrated. (P. D. Smith *The Guardian* 2015-11-27)

London’s ‘pea-soupers’--opaque, yellowish smogs--were an environmental catastrophe, a cloak for nefarious activities and an artistic inspiration. An odiferous wig of soot from coal fires, sulfur dioxide and mist settled regularly over the city from the 1840s to the 1960s. In this richly nuanced history, scholar **Christine Corton** takes us from polymath Robert Hooke spotting a pall of smoke over London in 1676 through the killer fogs that felled zoo animals, spurred crime and caused traffic accidents, and that ultimately galvanized scientists and the government to craft the 1956 Clean Air Act. (Barbara Kiser *Nature* 2015-11-26)

If you want to know every last thing to know about London fog--the toxic, impenetrable moist soot that used to blanket the city in the winter--this is the book for you. Even to an outsider, it is fascinating, even astonishing, that the English put up for so long with a condition that killed people and often caused commerce to grind to a halt. (Donald D. Breed *Providence Journal* 2015-11-22)

A thoroughly researched and generally enjoyable account of the social, natural and cultural history of the peacoupers, from their first appearance in the early 1800s to the final fog of 1962. (David B. Williams *Seattle Times* 2015-11-22)

The sheer scale of the pollution described by **Corton** is hard to grasp...Corton leads the way, like a linklighter of old, through the poisonous clouds of times gone by, and arrives, eventually, at present day Oxford Street, where nitrogen dioxide concentrations are ‘worse than they are anywhere on earth.’ (Charlie

Gilmour *Independent on Sunday* 2015-11-22)

What makes **Christine Corton**'s *London Fog: The Biography* special is that it demystifies the sulphurous yellow mass that once plagued the city. In this nicely written and beautifully illustrated book, fog gets its proper due as the coal-laden, murderous monstrosity it really was, beloved of novelists from Dickens to Stevenson. (Philippa Stockley *Evening Standard* 2015-11-19)

Christine L. Corton's *London Fog* is an illuminating expedition through the literal and metaphorical meanings of pollution in the company of such artists as Dickens, Conrad, Monet and Hitchcock. (Mark Sanderson *Evening Standard* 2015-12-03)

Corton's eye for social history is superb. We are led with wit and intelligence through a London in which clerks in counting-houses are forbidden to leave their books lying open lest the sooty fogs blacken the pages...Corton is excellent on the extent to which, in the twentieth century and since, the close association between Victorian London and Gothic fog has clouded perceptions of Victorian life and art. (Richard Smyth *Times Literary Supplement* 2015-12-09)

Christine Corton's absorbing and handsomely produced book directs a steady beam at both the phenomenon and the place that made [fog] famous: London. (Anthony Quinn *The Observer* 2015-12-13)

In *London Fog*, **Christine L. Corton** guides us through the history of the 'pea-souper' (the phrase first used in print in 1849 by Herman Melville); from Victorian women, fearful of attack in the impenetrable murk, to the poets, artists and film-makers who thrived on its metaphorical potential; from the political rows over domestic coal fires to the dreadful 1952 Great Smog which claimed thousands of lives and was so thick that, even indoors, office workers could not see to the end of the corridor. (Sinclair McKay *Daily Telegraph* 2015-11-21)

No one, not even the most frenzied fog obsessive, could find fault with **Christine Corton**'s thoroughness. Wherever there's a reference to fog in nature or art, she seems to have tracked it down. But her book is far more than just a glorified laundry list of foggy facts. Rather it's a genuine biography in which she very cleverly treats fog less as an atmospheric phenomenon and more as though it's a real character?sinister, beautiful and elusive, but no less fascinating for that. (John Preston *Mail on Sunday* 2016-01-03)

In **Christine L. Corton**'s beautifully illustrated *London Fog: The Biography*, the mysterious mist takes center stage in all its noxious, stygian, primeval delicacy...Drawing on novels and poems, paintings and films, Corton's [book] is crammed with thought-provoking elucidations. It sounds hokey to say it, but she has shed a bright light on the fog. (Alexandra Mullen *Wall Street Journal* 2015-12-18)

Excellent, if dark. (*The Lady* 2016-02-12)

This detailed, well-researched study is copiously illustrated with prints, cartoons, paintings and photos of the metropolitan health hazard. It is the photos which convince us that it was not a myth...London fog became inextricably linked with the image of the Victorian capital. Sherlock Holmes, Jack the Ripper and Soames Forsyte all loom out at us from the past, under gaslight, wreathed in fog...The best place to read this engrossing but goose-bump-making book is under a sunshade on a Mediterranean beach in mid August. (Robert Carver *The Tablet* 2016-04-02)

It's a definite must-read for anyone concerned with air quality and environmental history. (Ashley Macey *Brit + Co.* 2016-04-22)

As Christine Corton emphasizes in her well-informed, original, and stimulating survey, the history of London fog is humorous and cozy but has aspects of the awesome and apocalyptic too. (Fiona MacCarthy *New York Review of Books* 2017-02-09)

About the Author

Christine L. Corton is a Senior Member of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and a freelance writer. She worked for many years at publishing houses in London.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Madeline Williams:

Nowadays reading books become more than want or need but also be a life style. This reading practice give you lot of advantages. Associate programs you got of course the knowledge the rest of the information inside the book which improve your knowledge and information. The knowledge you get based on what kind of guide you read, if you want send more knowledge just go with schooling books but if you want feel happy read one together with theme for entertaining for example comic or novel. The particular London Fog: The Biography is kind of guide which is giving the reader unforeseen experience.

Lorraine Prinz:

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