

# **THE RIVER OF LONDON**

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# INTRODUCTION

Through the flats that bound the North Sea and shelve into it imperceptibly, merging at last with the shallow flood, and re-emerging in distant sandbanks and less conspicuous shoals, run facing each other two waterways far inland, which are funnels and entries, as it were, scoured by the tide.

Each has at the end of the tideway a narrow, placid, inland stream, from whence the broader, noisier sea part also takes its name. Each has been and will always be famous in the arms and in the commerce of Europe. Each forms a sort of long great street of ships crowded in a traffic to and fro. For each has its great port. The one Antwerp, the other London. The Scheldt is the name of the first, which leads to Antwerp, and makes the opportunity for that great market of the world. But the second is the River of London, much older in its destinies, and probably more destined to endure in its functions of commerce.

I know not how to convey that picture in the mind, which the eyes do not see, and yet by which a man is haunted if he has read enough of books and seen the maps, when he comes up through the Narrows of Dover Straits from the wide, empty seas three days behind and knows that there lies before his owner a choice between the eastern and the western gate. That choice is in the case of every ship determined long before. She has the dull duty to do of turning to the right or to the left, and her orders bind her to the river of the Netherlands or of England as it may be. But if you will consider many centuries

and the changing adventures of business you will still—as you pass northward between the two shores of Flanders and of Britain, and as you see their recession upon either side of the northern way which opens before you—understand that doubt upon the future and the rivalry of the two rivers which is soon to be so deeply impressed upon the politics of our time.

I could think of the Scheldt and of the Thames as two antagonists facing each other before conflict across a marked arena, which is that of the shallow, tumbling, and yellow water of the North Sea; or as two forces pitted one against the other, streams each of which would force the other back if it could find the strength; or as two Courts in a perpetual jealousy one of the other, intriguing and making and losing point after point in a game of polity.

When the statisticians have done their talk—and very brainless it is—of resources and of metals, two opposing *lives* are left standing behind either of the great towns, and either of the great sea rivers. The one is the experiment of the modern Germanies; the other is the founded tradition of England; and the more closely a man considers each of these the greater contrast does he discover between the causes of either's energy of come and go.

A third great tidal river is also concerned with these seas, also helps to determine their commerce, also supports its great inland town. That river is the Seine, and I shall, in the pages which follow, use the Seine also for the example it affords in the analogies and contrasts and parallels which I propose to draw. But it is the Scheldt and the Thames which still remain the greater opponents. The united political life of Gaul, which

was inherited and transformed by the French Monarchy, forbade the growth of a great commerce to the north. Paris became not only the political centre of France but its main market as well, and to-day the water carriage of Paris—that is, the traffic of its port—is greater than that of any maritime town in the country. Only if Normandy had developed as an independent state would Rouen have become what Antwerp and London have become. Rouen would then have been, without doubt, the point of transshipment between the inland and the maritime waterways, and the distance of the town from coal would hardly have affected it more than does the distance of London. Its situation as a political junction would have determined its greatness. As it is the Lower Seine may be set beside the Scheldt and the Thames for an illustration in their topography and in the origins of their human settlements, but it does not afford a true commercial parallel to-day, and Rouen is no third rival to the two great ports which are before our eyes and in this generation struggling for primacy.

It is the custom of sailors to speak of that water by which they approach a great town under the name of the town. Men coming up from Yarmouth Roads inland do not speak of the Yare, but of Norwich River. For, to the sailor the river is but a continuation of, or an access to, his port, and the Lower Thames is thus universally known from the sea as London River. The term is an accidental one, but it contains the true history of the connection between the stream and the town. The Thames made London. London is a function of the Thames, and it is in such a connection that I propose to regard it in this essay: London as the great crossing place of the Thames, and as the custodian and fruit of what early may have been the chief

ferry, but has for nearly two thousand years been the chief bridge; London as the market of which the Thames is the approach and the port; London as a habitation of which the great street is the Thames, a street for centuries the main highway of its people, lost for a time and now recovering its ancient use; London as the civil and religious head of revenues which were drawn from the Thames Valley; and London as the determinant, through its position upon the Thames, of English military history.



## ERITH

This intimate connection between the city and the river we all instinctively feel, and the two are connected together as no other waterway with its capital can be connected throughout Europe. For the Thames is all that every other river is to every other capital, wherever some great stream is connected with a chief city. But whereas in every other case it is but one or another of the functions of such a stream that history can

remark, in the case of London it can remark them all. Little sea-borne traffic reaches Paris by the Seine; the Tiber could never be a street for Rome; Vienna neglects the Danube; Antwerp protects no great crossing, nor has ever been the nucleus of a State; Rouen—the nearest parallel—was not the strategical pivot of Normandy, nor ever formed, as London forms, a chief fraction in the economic power of its province. The two rivers which are sacred to Lyons never fed that town; the Rhone watered but did not lead to Arles. The towns of Lombardy depend upon the fertility of the Po Valley, but the stream is nothing to their commerce or to their political eminence, and Milan, and Venice, and Turin are independent of it. Saragossa was the mistress of Arragon, but the Ebro did not make Saragossa, and as for Madrid, the trickle which runs below Madrid is best described in the story of the Spanish patriot who was dying of thirst after battle, but upon being offered a cup of water, said, “Give it to the poor Manzanares.” Lisbon and Cadiz are maritime, not fluvial, and look where you will throughout the civilisation of Europe you will not find, save in the case of London, this complete interdependence between a great town and its river.

In tracing or establishing this intimate bond between London and the Thames one must guard against an error which the modern reader rightly suspects and is justly ready to criticise or to deny when it appears in any piece of historical writing. That error is the error of materialism.

A generation ago it was universal, and there was no phenomenon in the story of England or of Europe from the emplacement of a city to the growth of the Church which was



not traced to inanimate causes superior to, and independent of, any action of the Will. This philosophy narrowed, distorted, and dried up every department of knowledge, and while the area of learning increased with a rapidity hitherto unknown, the spirit inhabiting that conquest was starved. It was as though the time could not contain at once the energy to discover and the energy to know, and as though the covering of so vast a field in so short a period was achieved inevitably at a cost of profundity. That a bias towards the mechanical and the necessary should be present in the physical sciences—in chemistry for instance—is to be expected, that it should have invaded biology was less excusable, but that it should have been permitted to affect (as it did) the business native to man—his building, his institutions, his very dreams—was an excessive blunder, and the spirit of all the younger men to-day is running if anything too strongly in reaction against that ebb-tide of the soul. They reject the dogmas of their fathers which would bend everything man has done to material circumstance, which would talk of man as the slave rather than the master of his instruments, and which, in an argument absurdly circular, “interpreted history in the terms of Economics”:—and they are right.

Even in the sphere of topography, where the physical limitations of human action are the main subject of the writer, they expect a full admission of the soul of man and even—which is very wise—some recognition of that mysterious genius which inhabits every place and is perhaps its vital part.

They are right. No one can see the marriage between London and its river without wondering in what degree things other

than ponderable and measurable things may enter into the habitation of man. There is nothing man does, of course, which has not in it the soul. But it may be also true that there is nothing done to man wherein some soul is not also. Now the homes of man and the air and the water and the wind and the earth, against which in part and with which in part those homes arise, are so woven in with his fate—which is a spiritual fate—that we must properly lend to these insensate things some controlling motive; and we may rightly say, though only by the use of metaphor, that all these things have a spirit within them. I cannot get away from it that the Thames may be alive, and London most certainly is.

But all these things, though one may put them in the form of statements, are really questions; and questions to which no sort of answer has yet been discovered.

## II

### THE APPROACH UP RIVER

There is perhaps no journey in the world in which the past and what now is and the links between them stand out more clearly stratified than a journey up the Thames upon the tide from the Sea-reach to the Pool.

I will describe it; for it is upon a physical experience of this kind (I mean the seeing of history through the eye to the north and to the south of the narrowing river and the feel of the stream under one) that any historical essay upon the River of London must be built.

I have heard it said that the experience is a common one, seeing that so many thousand men of the articulate, travelled, and experienced class (who can relate their experience to some purpose) have entered London by river. Any one (I am told) who comes in from the East or from Holland to the docks will know what I mean. But I do not think this is so. I do not think that the thing seen rapidly from the decks of a liner, perhaps cut short at Tilbury, perhaps missed because the voyage is at night, is quite what I intend to emphasise. Nor am I certain that the proportion of those fifty miles is accurately seized when they are experienced from the height of some great steamer whence the strength and nature of the stream, its ebb and flow, its local life, are missed.

It is so with all other great ports. The myriads that come in nowadays to England by the Mersey have no opportunity for judging the estuary, the meaning of the opposing shores, nor that character of south Lancashire which lies before their eyes in the mist and is so singular a factor in the makeup of England.

I think that to know the River of London the journey must be made from the sea upwards, in something not larger than a barge, in a motor boat, or in a fishing vessel, or little half-rater, and taken upon one tide with an easterly wind, as all the men of the past took it, making the great port upstream under the weather they had chosen. In this way, with little freeboard between one's feet and the changing level of the broad water, and with not too rapid a passage of the stations upon either bank, and with some true measure wherewith to gauge in detail what one sees, one can understand the river. It was in a progress such as this that the painters came to understand the Lower Thames, and nothing has nourished a more national art than this valley, though its interpreters have been rare.

You see five successive stages clearly marked in such a voyage.

You see, in the first place, that everything up to the very gates of London must have been, at the beginning of our history, as desolate as any province in Europe. The rare places at which high and firm land comes down to the modern stream are, as it were, isolated, and live a life upon the defensive. Nowhere (as we shall see when we come to examine London as a crossing place) does some good habitable site stretch down to either opposing bank. There is no natural gateway upon the Lower Thames; no twin villages defending a gap; nor the projection from the north as from the south of tongues of high land or

even good arable land, the proximity of which, one to the other upon either shore, would give humanity to the river. All the miles of it are desolate marshes, either to the one side or to the other, most commonly upon both, and the few spots where an exceptional formation has given firm building ground and fertile fields as well close to the river have something about them exceptional and, as it were, beleaguered. It is a gross and an unhistorical exaggeration to say (as many of our academic people are saying) that all that valley was a flooded lagoon until historic times. It was not that. But it was a long succession of very wide, watery marshes, with knolls of slightly higher land standing up therein. Consider, for instance, the view to the northward, from the height just above and east of Dartford. There you have two good miles of what was marsh and still is largely marsh to the main stream, and beyond, upon the farther shore, another three or four miles of the same flats, with odd, exceptional rises at Rainham, at Aveney, or upon the edge of the flat of Upminster. It is the same from the Abbey Wood, east of Woolwich. Plumstead Marshes and Barking Level made one morass, four miles wide at least, or nearer five, drowned twice a day into a great level sheet of water, until some civilisation came to dyke up the tidal stream and confine it to the central bed, which it had scoured in its windings through such a desolation. Now of all that primitive effect of waste, abandoned places very much remains in such a journey as I have suggested. It is true that a wall of earth everywhere controls the flood to-day, and that the traveller in his boat does not see, as he would have seen two thousand years ago, the glint of water to the north and south at high tide over tufted grass and drowned banks of mud for miles upon either side of

his going. But he still sees in so many places as to make them the chief note of the lower reaches, at least, great Flats without a soul upon them, unbroken by tree or house or hedge, and plainly saved by artifice alone from flooding. This run up the Lower Thames is, save for the exceptional approach of high land in one place or another (as at Gravesend or Erith) like a sail through the Fenland, and this character of desertion, silence, and morass, the oldest foundation of all, is still quite plainly the background of what one sees and remembers when one comes up the River of London to London from the sea.

So much, then, for the first layer.

The second should by right be Roman: but nothing Roman remains; no, nor anything of the Dark Ages. Unless we believe what is probable enough, but not proved in any way, that the great containing walls of earth (notably that round the Isle of Dogs) were Roman work, we can distinguish nothing in such a journey to mark the first thousand years of Christendom. Far out beyond the Sea-reach, Reculvers was a Roman station in the estuary, but the ways have eaten it away. No great monastic nucleus of the Dark Ages could be founded in that inhospitable land. There was no palace of the kings standing near the central stream until the neighbourhood of London was approached. There was not even a fortress. Indeed it is odd to think how empty all that approach from the sea to the greatest of the western Roman towns was and remained. It was not until the Middle Ages began to flower that the Lower Thames put forth any human signs—at least of such a sort as have come down to us. The remains of them are very few, but they are distinctive.

Of all that life of the Middle Ages which the English countrysides preserve in so many visible relics—and especially in a host of parish churches surpassing all of the kind in Europe—the Lower Thames has but one clear instance remaining to the eye; and that is the little isolated church of St. Clement's. Rainham is too far from the water, the legends and associations surrounding the well of St. Chad are also too distant to count in the picture. The endowed foundations of religion either stood remote from the river-bank or have disappeared. London, but for the Great Fire, would have supplied in this the emptiness of the lower river.

But for that capital accident in the history of the city, which renders London so different in outward aspect from all other great European towns, the Middle Ages would still break upon one in a sheaf of spires showing over the flats from Woolwich Reach, at least, and perhaps from farther down the stream. But that accident—the Great Fire of the seventeenth century—has left London stripped of the Gothic and, alone of the great capitals of Europe, no impress of our four hundred years of Gothic remains with the traveller as he comes upstream. When we consider the two parallels to London upon the Continent—the parallels I have chosen as ports upon the two great tidal rivers of the north-west—Antwerp and Rouen, the loss will be apparent.

For miles and miles over the flats of the Scheldt the sailor making for Antwerp sees the high steeple upon his horizon fixed against the sky, and, late as was its building, this watch-tower of Antwerp is of the true Middle Ages; Europe was still Europe and one when its last stone was laid.

Still more does the sailor making for Rouen have the Middle Ages before him as he rounds the Ferry Reach and comes up northward into the sweep of the river before the town. In spite of the extraordinary and meaningless gate which the new travelling bridge makes for the city, its cathedral still dominates the whole view; surrounding it, the high pitch of St. Vincent, the belfry of St. Maclou, the rebuilt towers of St. Ouen, give their character to all the smoky basin of houses between the Seine and the hills.

A far more splendid sight was the Gothic group of London as one came upon it up river before the Great Fire. A score of spires stood in varying height and perspective before the master spire of the cathedral. Old St. Paul's upon its hill carried the loftiest cross in Christendom—far higher in the air than Strasburg; and old St. Paul's had been built, as had nearly every great monument of the Middle Ages, with a special eye to the landscape whence it should be seen and which, in a sense, it should control. The huge and somewhat ill-proportioned pyramid of St. Dunstan's by the very excess of its bulk made a landmark which is the first thing to strike us when we look at a sketch of the river made at any time before 1665. We are fortunate, moreover, in our retention of such memorials. No other northern town, I think, possesses a complete panorama of its appearance in the first half of the sixteenth century such as London possesses in the great work of Wyngaerde in the Bodleian. And though the seventeenth century, with its triumph of engraving, produced a great number of such documents throughout Europe, Visscher's drawing is unique in its importance, while we have at the end of the series Hollar's



careful delineation of the square mile of ruins after the Great Fire.

This is perhaps the most remarkable piece of pictorial evidence open to English history, and any one who will look at that long string of churches burnt out to shells, and of private houses reduced to a few feet of black and crumbling wall, will see what a revolution in the outward aspect of the river and of its port, and what a breach in the outward continuity of London the Great Fire means. The Conservative temper into which the English fell (with regard to their externals, at least), after the sixteenth century, would have preserved the architectural past of London (and that to our own day) much more perfectly than the past of any great city of the Continent has been preserved. It seems due to the national spirit that a view more ancient even than that of Rouen should greet the traveller coming in by Thames; but the accident of the Great Fire has forbidden it.

On the contrary, the note of the approach to London nowadays from the Lower Thames is a note peculiarly and strongly modern. It is as though the abnormal expansion of our perilous Industrialism in the last hundred and fifty years had not only conquered but obliterated the eighteen centuries from which it suddenly arose. Here and there an odd survival left remaining of deliberate purpose serves but to emphasise the capture of the Lower Thames by that crazy mechanical giant so recently born and already so blind and old. You have the noble front of Greenwich, you have the charming little "mail" opposite, you have, most distinctive, perhaps, of all the survivals upon the river, the Fort of Tilbury. Save for these a huge and hardly national commerce, plainly suffering the domination of a few,

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