

# *The Literary London Journal*



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## Review

**Ian Cunningham, *A Reader's Guide to Writers' London*  
London: Prion Books, 2001. ix + 293 pages, ISBN: 1-  
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London is a city with very rich and deep literary traces. In Ian Cunningham's *A Reader's Guide to Writers' London*, personal histories of different writers and their literary works come to synthesise the city's past, giving meaning to particular locations, such as Henry James's Mayfair, Charles Dickens's Camden Town and Holborn, and Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury.

A literary geography of Central, North, East, South and West London emerges through the writers' personal histories and their movement through the city. For instance, 'after nearly 20 years spent almost continuously at sea', Joseph Conrad came to write his novels in Victoria in Central London (87). Here, the local news provided writing resources. Indeed, Conrad used the story of the French anarchist Martial Bourdin, who attempted to blow up the Royal Observatory in Greenwich in 1894, 'in his 1907 novel *The Secret Agent*' (227). Charles Dickens's Camden Town in North London reveals its own significance, as he 'moved with his parents to a terraced house at 16 Bayham Street' (147). David Copperfield's room resembles Dickens's own bedroom 'in a tiny garret at the back of the house' (147) – a 'mean, small tenement, with a wretched little back-garden abutting on a squalid court' (148). *Bleak House* opens with a scene in Holborn, 'with London [...] in November' (79), and Dickens 'read his Christmas story', 'The Chimes', 'to a group of friends' in his friend John Forster's home in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

In 1931, 'shortly before Christmas' (175), George Orwell was arrested in Hackney, East London. Later in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell used his experience of incarceration to depict a scene in the novel. In London, rooms, houses and buildings are meaningful and, whether dwelling or visiting there, writers draw upon their experiences of these spaces in their writings. For instance, Charles Dickens lived in a house 'near the Five Bells pub in New Cross Road' in South London. It was the place where he 'could work in peace' (205) and where he completed some parts of *Great Expectations*. Chelsea in West London is

known as a 'fashionable riverside demesne [that] dates from the 1520s, when Sir Thomas More built himself a house near Cheyne Walk' (256). As Cunningham points out, Chelsea is very much the milieu of the 'seriously-minded, moralistic and irritable' and not very 'approachable' Carlyle, who also lived there (258).

The history of London can be read as the literary history of writers and their works and of different kinds of literary genres and styles. Yet London not only inspires writers, but also their readers who enjoy tracing the steps of authors and their characters. King's Cross Station, for example, is where 'Harry departs for his first term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry' (146) in J K Rowling's first Harry Potter novel. According to Cunningham, Senate House of the University of London 'was Orwell's model for the Ministry of Truth' in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (21). The British Museum is probably the most famous Bloomsbury institution, and its treasures, including a 'Grecian Urn', inspired John Keats (33). Virginia Woolf also uses the British Museum in *Night and Day* and the British Library in *Jacob's Room*.

Cunningham effectively conveys the point that even the same place in London may have many different meanings and moods. Even so there are some repetitions in the book, as well as places where the text might have been more tightly organised for the reader's convenience. For example, Cunningham tells us that 'in the winter of 1877' Henry James stayed at '3 Bolton Street with a sideways view – if he leaned far enough out of the window – of Green Park'; here he 'established the regular working habits that would serve him for the rest of his life' (2). Yet the reader must wait several pages to learn what James saw out of his window. It was the scene of 'the homeless men who could be seen sleeping there [in Green Park] every day', according to James's '1877 travel essay' – 'London at Midsummer' (7). Cunningham cites no particular edition or page number of this travel essay to facilitate further reading or research.

With its information organised in newspaper-like columns headed by the names of London locations, Cunningham's book reveals London's many different faces through a range of literary texts. Highlighting London writings and their use of the city as resource, the book is a great inspiration for readers interested in London and in the writers who once dwelt in this city. Ultimately, London itself becomes a text, its concrete and imaginary elements revealed through literature.

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