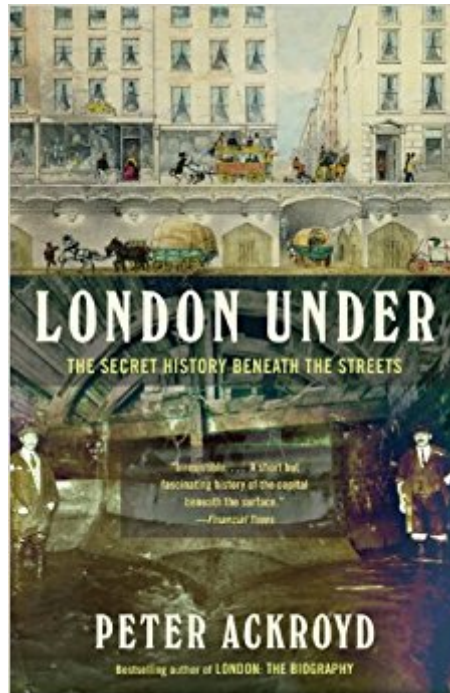




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# London Under: The Secret History Beneath The Streets



## Synopsis

In this vividly descriptive short study, Peter Ackroyd tunnels down through the geological layers of London, meeting the creatures that dwell in darkness and excavating the lore and mythology beneath the surface. There is a Bronze Age trackway below the Isle of Dogs, Anglo-Saxon graves rest under St. Pauls, and the monastery of Whitefriars lies beneath Fleet Street. To go under London is to penetrate history, and Ackroyd's book is filled with the stories unique to this underworld: the hydraulic device used to lower bodies into the catacombs in Kensal Green cemetery; the door in the plinth of the statue of Boadicea on Westminster Bridge that leads to a huge tunnel packed with cables for gas, water, and telephone; the sulphurous fumes on the Underground's Metropolitan Line. Highly imaginative and delightfully entertaining, London Under is Ackroyd at his best.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Irresistible. . . [A] short but fascinating history of the capital beneath the surface." The Financial Times "Wondrous. . . Ackroyd follows seemingly all the rivers, streams, pipes, sewers and tunnels that ever crisscrossed the city." The New York Times Book Review "There is perhaps no other English writer today as dedicated a Londoner as Peter Ackroyd. . . A memorable homage to [London]." The San Francisco Chronicle "Beautiful. . . Each chapter has a vital story full of intriguing detail. . . Ackroyd writes with his usual enthusiastic flair, and entertains us with chthonic demons and

treasures. • The Columbus Dispatch “Relentlessly interesting urban mythology, from unearthed Roman galleys to subterranean Cabinet War Rooms. • New York Daily News “Throughout the book, Ackroyd is not just interested in London’s hidden relics; he’s interested in what they and the idea of an underground mean to a culture. London’s underworld is a shadow or replica of the city, and it is also a shadow of ourselves and our thoughts, the stuff that’s discovered when we open the trapdoor. • The Daily Beast “Anyone intrigued by this tumultuous city will devour London Under in a few transporting hours. . . . Packed with revelations. . . . Ackroyd’s stylistic brilliance explains why the book remains a rattling good read. • The Independent (London) “For Peter Ackroyd, the subterranean world holds a potent allure. London Under, his brief account of the capital’s catacombs and other murky zones, manages to radiate a dark mystery and sulphur reek. . . . Fascinating. . . . Peter Ackroyd illuminates the shadow world within us all. • The Spectator “With quick, deft stitches he sews the fantastical and the familiar into a macabre sampler of the city that exists beneath the feet of its citizens. • The Times (London) “As ever his research is meticulous, his scope expansive, his writing definitive. Every sentence is delivered with judicial gravity and command. . . . Once again, Ackroyd shares his vision of a mythical city most do not see. • Time Out “For Peter Ackroyd, the subterranean world holds a potent allure. London Under, his brief account of the capital’s catacombs and other murky zones, manages to radiate a dark mystery and sulphur reek. . . . Fascinating. . . . Peter Ackroyd illuminates the shadow world within us all. • The Spectator “With quick, deft stitches he sews the fantastical and the familiar into a macabre sampler of the city that exists beneath the feet of its citizens. • The Times (London)

PETER ACKROYD is the author of *London: The Biography*, *Shakespeare: The Biography*, *Thames: The Biography*, and *Venice: Pure City*; acclaimed biographies of T. S. Eliot, Dickens, Blake, and Sir Thomas More; and several successful novels. He has won the Whitbread Book Award for Biography, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and the Somerset Maugham Award, among others.

(Note: This review is of the hardcover edition.) "Order and harmony are the properties of the lighted world. All below is shapeless, formless, void. Forgotten things, discarded things, secret things, are

to be found deep below." - from LONDON UNDER Author Peter Ackroyd's previous book, *London: The Biography*, was a prodigious achievement albeit mildly schizophrenic. Here in LONDON UNDER, Ackroyd embellishes his story of the city with aspects of it that he perhaps felt he didn't fully explore on the first go. Even in its hardcover edition, LONDON UNDER isn't a large volume - only 205 pages measuring seven inches by five. In fifteen chapters, Peter burrows below the streets to reveal what remains of times past and what is extant at present. Among the former are burial crypts, forgotten wells, walls and streets, sunken boats, personal artifacts, and the occasional hidden treasure. Among the latter are sewers, the Tube, and secret government warrens. Spanning the centuries of both are the ancient rivers and streams that still flow into the Thames, e.g. the Fleet River: "On the corner of Warner Street and Ray Street, in the road before the Coach and Horses pub, a piece of grating can be found. If you put your ear close to it, you can still hear the sound of the river pulsing underneath. It is not dead." (Note: As in exercise in current Web technology and capability, find the street intersection mentioned using the satellite mode of Google Maps. Then, transition to the street view with the little yellow man. You too can find that street grating.) Furthermore, the book is about people below ground: those that constructed, scavenged and toured the sewers; those that built, sheltered in, and ride the Underground. And those that have died below the surface. Even about ghosts. LONDON UNDER is certainly not an in-depth survey, so to speak; its length doesn't allow for that. The evolution of the city's sewage and underground rail systems provides most of the material. But even then, the structure of the book is more of a congenial and simplified summary focusing on the more interesting highlights. If you want more detail on any particular topic, then you'll have to look elsewhere, e.g. *Necropolis*, which surveys London's role as a burial ground both past and present. The reader with no interest in London will not even find it worthwhile to crack open the pages of this little book. But, because I love this city more than any other place in the world I've visited in my sixty-four years, I'm giving it 5 stars because it totally engaged my memories of the place and my constant desire to return. "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." - Samuel Johnson

How can a book by Peter Ackroyd be disappointing? He is among the most erudite of contemporary historians. His works are the perfect balance of historical fact and engaging writing. He is a gifted writer of fiction and non-fiction. Any reader familiar with his work would expect 'London Under' to be another example of his considerable skill. Instead, as other reviewers agree, this little book is a disappointment. Perhaps readers should be grateful that it is so short, because it is a clumsy collection of facts hastily flung together and coupled with vague gestures towards historical analysis.

Here and there a few shining sentences show Ackroyd's brilliant touch. The rest of the book reads as if a junior researcher had arranged a series of notecards for the author to glance at in his spare time. Chronological hiccups and non sequiturs litter the pages. Glaring omissions will disturb readers with even the slightest interest in the subject; how is it possible, for example, for a study of underground London to make no mention of Churchill and the Cabinet War Rooms, other than in a caption for a photograph? Dull lists of dreary facts bore even the most avid reader; compare Chapter 12: The War Below with the Wikipedia page 'Air-raid shelter'. Only die-hard Ackroyd fans need read this and prepare, my friends, to be disappointed.

Very interesting but it became tedious when the author would list off the streets or areas underground tunnels ran under as if I was a London cabbie. I don't know where all those places are! Really, a series of maps would have illustrated the points much better (but probably shaved 30 pages off at least).

Since my team is building an archaeology model of a section of an earlier time of London, this book served an fascinating background with lots of unique stories and data. The book arrived on time and was well packaged.

If you love London, you'll enjoy this book. Peter Ackroyd shows us a London we've never seen before by going underground. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the history of the city and what lies beneath the pavement and buildings. It was fascinating to learn about the various public works projects that led to today's London. Amazing to think that entire rivers were buried beneath the city. And to learn about what the men who built the sewers and underground endured. This is an original take on a city that's been written about extensively. If you live in London or are visiting, it would be great fun to take this book and look for the landmarks Ackroyd points out in the book.

Perfect background for those planning to visit London. Fast and well written. Ackroyd gives just the right insights to enable us to recognize and appreciate the noted sites when we see them.

There seems to be no subject that Peter Ackroyd can't make sound interesting - and even a bit romantic. His prose makes history come alive - almost touching on poetry at times - and the riches underground in this book are fascinating..

I am a college history professor who hates it when my students ask for books with more pictures. It used to make me think they were just lazy. However, I found myself wishing for modern images when reading this. There are some images, which are great, but I wanted to see more. I read this book in a day, partly because it is "short" book--meaning that it is not as tall or wide as a normal paper back. The best chapter by far was the one on the Mole People, but there were some chapters I found myself skimming just to get through with them.

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