

Librarian's London: Visiting the City of Readers

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Each of us visits a different London. You spend time in the newer galleries and prefer a certain wine bar to the ubiquitous pubs. Or you arrive at your carrel in the British Library and stay there for a week or a month or a lifetime, depending on your research schedule. Unbeknownst to your family in Toronto, you're what tourism authorities call a "burial bore", a traveller who enjoys discovering the graves of famous persons in numerous churches and churchyards and cemeteries.

A Halifax reference librarian slips the surly bonds of her information desk every October to wander through London's military museums. A Montreal cataloguer and father of three teenagers takes them to the series of "youth-friendly" festivals and markets that are increasingly popular in Notting Hill and Chelsea. Desperate for architecture that is older and more dignified than her Vancouver condo development, a law librarian makes annual pilgrimages to Wren churches.

I concentrate on what I think of as the "city of readers". My schedule never varies: over the North Pole to Heathrow, via the Heathrow Express to Paddington Station, out the main entrance and across Praed Street to Norfolk Square, which contains rows of tiny inexpensive hotels and a gem of a park that is usually free of tourists. I walk up the steps of the Tudor Court Hotel, built in the 1850s as a residence for a single family and two or three servants. The current management has turned it into my personal refuge. I greet Witold, a Polish émigré who stands with great dignity behind the front desk. He hands me the key to my room, formerly a Victorian family's front parlour, with a bay window and a fireplace.

Witold knows my movements.

"You go to the park now?"

"Yes."

"You say hello to Albert for me."

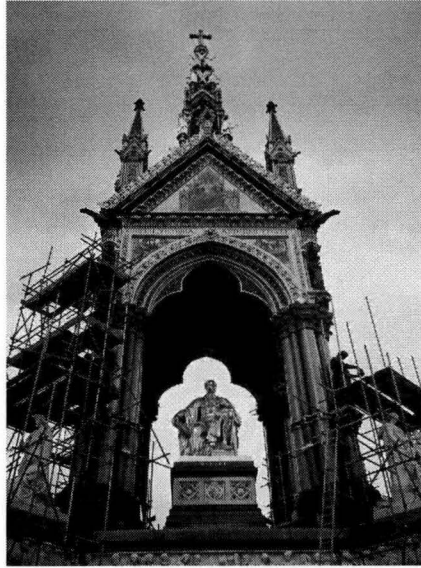
"I will."

"He looks good now."

"I hope so."

In fact Prince Albert looks better than ever. I stroll through Kensington Gardens to see him perched on his Memorial, an enormous mass of granite erected after his death in 1862. Recently he has undergone restoration and looks splendid. What is he holding? That's no laptop. It's a catalogue of the Great Exhibition of 1851, an event intended to demonstrate the

British Empire's superiority in all endeavours. The statues of many Great Persons wave swords or make commanding gestures to long-defunct armies. Albert, however, sits proudly yet benignly with his book, a posture that strengthens my notion of London as the City of Readers and inspires me to go in search of more evidence for its status as the traditional centre of reading in the English-speaking world.



I never tire of the standard historical sites. In Westminster Abbey I find myself in Poet's Corner, usually surrounded by a group of elderly couples from Florida.

"We stand before the tomb of Chaucer, England's first great poet," says the guide.

"He's the guy who wrote *Lord of the Rings*," says one elderly gentleman.

"No he didn't, Arthur," says his wife. "He wrote a bunch of tales. Toll-Keen wrote *Lord of the Rings*."

Arthur is undaunted. "Did they plant Toll-Keen here?"

"No," says the guide, a tall Oxbridge man who doesn't flinch. "He's buried in Oxford."

"I wouldn't mind seeing his tomb," says Arthur, who shows signs of becoming a burial bore. "I liked his stuff, and wouldn't mind paying my respects."

"You do that," says the guide.

Writers' graves constitute only one neighbourhood in the City of Readers. I spend most of my time with the living, many of whom are book dealers. In an age of rising rents and online selling, independent bookshops are not as common or as well stocked as they were a decade ago. Large chains such as Waterstone's and Borders have attracted a large portion of the book-buying market. But Hatchard's continues to do good business in Piccadilly, and Foyle's still thrives in Charing Cross Road.

Many used and antiquarian bookshops have moved outside London to towns with lower rents. Used book buyers include electronic customers from all over the world, drop-in tourists, and locals looking for relief from new book sticker-shock. A noteworthy used bookshop that remains in its original location is Nigel Williams Rare Books in Cecil Court, just

off Charing Cross. On the shelves is a fine selection of fiction, children's books, and miscellaneous items, all at decent prices. The proprietor is a respected book-hunter who sends catalogues all over the world and works hard to keep his stock interesting.

British book prices are generally high. London's libraries are constantly challenged to acquire new and expensive items that are often read to pieces in a few weeks.

"Take your Atwood," says Alice, a circulation clerk at a public library near Trafalgar Square. "You order a dozen copies of her latest, then she goes and gets short-listed for the Booker. So now you have to bring in another pile of copies, and they're dear. But the people who read them don't look after them as they should, and inevitably the bindings fall apart."

The City of Readers contains two of Librarianship's shrines. The British Museum and British Library are separate organizations, but the former still houses the famous Reading Room in the recently restored Great Court. Who among London's intelligentsia did not rely on the Reading Room after it opened in 1857?

"Karl Marx probably sat over there," says a Museum guide. "I don't know where Charles Dickens sat. But then he was a frenetic sort of person, and he probably moved around to different spots. George Bernard Shaw? I think he sat over there, but I can't imagine his sitting quietly. I don't envy the librarian who had to tell him to stop chatting."

Within walking distance of the Museum is the new British Library at St. Pancras. On the way, one item reminds you that London moves with the times: a Bloomsbury restaurant's neon sign advertising "Virginia Woolf Burgers and Pizza". Can you picture Virginia, Leonard and their friends sharing an "all-dressed?" And who would pick up the tab?

At the British Library, the first destination for many visitors is the John Ritblat Gallery, which displays over 200 manuscripts and books that you've heard about many times, but never seen. Until you walk into Ritblat, and there before you is a *Gutenberg Bible*, the oldest copy of *Beowulf*, and the *Magna Carta*. The security guard is accustomed to visitors' reactions.

"I've heard exclamations of joy and wonder in dozens of languages," he says. "Americans move along the display cases chanting 'Wow!' while Germans have a "dekko" at the manuscript of Handel's *Messiah* and start

singing the tune, usually off key. Then there's an old Japanese lady who comes every year. She goes over to the manuscript of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and bursts into tears. I'm not sure whether she likes it or not."

The British Library leaves any librarian exhausted, even after a brief visit. There are too many things to look at and think about and remember, and bibliographic overstimulation is bound to set in unless one makes an exit and obtains refreshment. Everyone has a favourite London pub; some of us have several. Returning by bus or tube to Paddington, I often end up at the Fountains Abbey, which Sir Alexander Fleming once frequented. From my table by the door, I can see the window of his laboratory. Spores from this pub floated across the street and through that window, contaminating Fleming's Petri dishes and forcing him to discover penicillin. According to the woman behind the bar, this piece of medical history proves that ale has saved millions of lives, including those of teetotallers.

On warm evenings, a picnic makes an inexpensive dinner. One source of nosh is Paddington Station, which contains everything from grocery stores and a sushi bar to a WH Smith book outlet that sells the latest novels and non-fiction, and a magnificent selection of beverages, sandwiches and desserts. A Paddington picnic costs much less than a meal at a local restaurant, and usually tastes better. A short walk takes you into the heart of Kensington Gardens, where you can dine by the statue of Peter Pan. The City of Readers builds statues to its fictional characters as well as its popular princes, since to book lovers the former can be even more important in a person's imagination than the latter. Although Witold has more respect for Albert.

"You see Albert?"

"Yes."

"You see lots of books today too?"

"Yes."

"Too many books?"

"Probably."

"You be smart like Albert and carry around just one book. Less trouble when you go through customs."

"That depends on the book, Witold."

"This is true. But one good book is not hard to find!"

Especially in the City of Readers.