

My Favourite Book

For our Win a Book Competition for April we asked members to nominate their favourite London History book. The entries were excellent. Here is a selection.

My favourite London history book is *The Knife Man* by Wendy Moore. It tells the incredible story of John Hunter, pioneer of evidence-based medicine at a time when some doctors were keeping alive old wives' tales and the worse-than-useless techniques of the ancient Greeks. I like it particularly for the sense of place. The idea that the Hunter brothers smuggled hundreds of corpses into what is now the site of the Covent Garden Apple Store; or visitors to the Odeon Leicester Square are sitting where Hunter once displayed his surgical specimens.

In fact, I liked it so much I even made a map of Hunter's London:
http://londonist.com/2009/09/the_london_of_john_huntermapped.php

- *Matt Brown*

Book of London

By Roger Baker and Iain Macmillan
Michael Joseph, 1969.

Spotting a secondhand copy on Amazon this morning for just 3p, this has to be one of the great bargains: I prize my copy highly. The Book of London is an exceptionally large format book depicting in hundreds of large monochrome prints a day in the life of the capital. Macmillan's rich and atmospheric photography provides the best possible snapshot of late-Sixties London, covering everything from the most famous sights to ordinary men and women at work in the traditional wholesale markets, the Square Mile and the West End, young people out enjoying themselves, men in bowlers dropping into their clubs for luncheon, and all the pomp and pageantry that makes London the great city that it is. At the same time the late Roger Baker's text is spare but engaging and informative - he was my mentor in the 1980s, although this is far from being my chief reason for recommending this splendid book - and whilst the format has been copied many times since it has never been done to anywhere near the same standard.

- *David Long*

My favourite book about London is "*London - a Life in Maps*" by Peter Whitfield published by the British Library because I love both London and maps.

- *Alison Venning*

This is something a bit different as it's a memoir, but its personal perspective of growing up in London brings the city's past alive in a unique way. The book (or books, as it's a trilogy) is *A London Family 1870-1900* by Molly Hughes. I'm a little biased as a north Londoner with Islington ancestors since the author grew up around Islington. However, it includes days out to events like the Boat Race, and Molly's detailed recollections of her life will enable anyone with an interest in London in general to learn something. The Spectator reviewed it as 'literally unforgettable', and it truly is. Once read, it stays with you, and I find myself returning to it often.

- *Emma Jolly*

My Favourite Book (cont.)

My favourite London History book is the excellent '*Underground London*' by Stephen Smith, it made me look at the city in a whole new light, and the brilliant writing style and engaging stories kept me gripped. Read the whole lot on about a day and it has inspired me to be inventive about my next 'Open House' visits.

- Alice Kershaw

My favourite London book is *Samuel Pepys' Diary*. We are indebted to the scholars who broke the code in which Pepys had written it to conceal his peccadillos with the ladies, not only because we can read of his amorous activities but because he paints a glorious picture of London at the time when it was making the change from the rigours of Cromwell's Commonwealth to the adventures of King Charles' Restoration. I treasure the moment when his attempt to get off with a woman in the theatre is spurned by her spitting orange pips in his face. Did she buy the orange from Nell Gwynne? Cromwell's officers of state, competent but commoners, are making way for Charles' aristocrats, if not incompetent, certainly, like their king, less assiduous. Poor Pepys has to run the navy on a shoestring. Plus ça change....but we enjoy his dashes by boat to the navy yards at Deptford and Greenwich along the Thames, the city's main thoroughfare.

Pepys lived through the plague. His description of the deserted, echoing streets is atmospheric and he catches the panic of the people as those who can escape pile their goods on carts and boats and flee the city. He was brave to stay, except for a brief spell when he went to the country, but not before burying his treasures, including his favourite cheese, in the garden. The Great Fire gave Pepys the opportunity to shine. He saw the fire early and reported it to the king, was dispatched to urge the vacillating and indecisive Lord Mayor to action and remained by the side of the Duke of York when he took over. There is a haunting moment at the end of the first day when he and his wife are rowed downstream to the south side and grieve as they watch London burning. Pepys survived the plague and the fire; he suffered inquisitions by Parliament and false accusations of papistry; he dealt with all sorts from the King to the Navy's jack tars. He described London when it was on its way to becoming the greatest city of the world and he missed nothing. His Diary is an engrossing read.

- Bill Johnston