London's Lost Rivers The Hackney Brook and other North West Passages

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I would like to give a warning, that this will not be a formal lecture. Instead, this talk will be the equivalent of a walk: I will walk through my knowledge and my instincts, such as they are, and, though I am going to talk about lost rivers in general, I will talk mainly about one river in particular, the Hackney Brook. This river actually forms the inspiration for a large book I have just published, called Hackney: That Rose Red Empire. It is the kind of underlying secret history of the place, and from an idea of thinking about that river, I will also take in some wider sense of London and its fantastic collection of lost rivers.

I am confronted with the subject of what is now seen often as a difficult borough, a working class borough that was on the slide, with an awkward council and a history of independent thought; a big, large, sprawling borough called Hackney. What that borough was originally was quite a desirable suburb. It was outside the City walls. It had a lot of market gardens. It had large houses, with orchards, and a tradition of pastoral framework - and that was all simply because of a river, which is now a lost river, called the Hackney Brook. I am going to give you the history of my engagement with the Hackney Brook, but I think we should, first of all, take the idea of the lost river as a whole, as a whole of London.

What do we define as a lost river? Are they rivers that have simply become degraded and used for industrial purposes, polluted - they are there but you hardly know they are there ? or are we talking about rivers that have disappeared, been culverted? I think it is more of the latter. In the mid-19th Century, there was a great moment when a lot of the little tributaries were culverted over because Bazalgette was introducing his great sewage system. It was a difficult and dangerous city to live in: taking water from the standpipes or from pumps in the street when there was a huge cholera epidemic. Indeed, such epidemics were regular occurrences, and therefore steps had to be taken. A sewage system was introduced, and at the same time, they thought a lot of these old rivers would have to disappear and to be absorbed into this sewage system.

In a sense, the greatest, or the most mythologised, of London's lost rivers is the Fleet, which we are very close to, and the valley of the Fleet going through here has been important to a lot of poets and writers, from Blake down to, more recently, Andrew Aidan Dun, who published a book calledVale Royal. His sense was that, if you were creating the New Jerusalem, it would depend very much on the meaning and the mythology of the Fleet River.

The Fleet River rose in Hampstead, in the Ponds, and came down the valley between us here in Barnard's Inn and Farringdon on the other side. It connected up with Smithfield Market, so it was a river that became polluted from the killing of animals. Smithfield market is one of the energising zones of a city so that the city develops around these various markets, which are gradually dispersed to the suburbs, in the same way that asylums and hospitals often go in the same way; that madness is a thing that has to be moved to the edge of a city, as Foucault tells us, and that defines the rim of a city.

In the same way, Smithfield is under threat now; Spitalfields has relocated already to Stratford, in the Olympic Park. These things happen, but the way that you move towards the market, the particular routes you take are charted. There are liberties; there are ways that you are allowed to move your cattle or animals through from the green spaces, like London Fields, where they were fattened, or Hackney Downs, moved through the streets, and those streets acquire particular qualities, in the same way that the places along these rivers acquire particular qualities.

The Fleet has been a resounding myth because it starts in that great sense of space on Hampstead Heath, where you are overlooking the city. You have memories of the type of thing as Constable's cloud paintings. You have this as really an open space, a free zone, and the city as an event horizon beneath you, and the particular route of that Fleet River, past St Pancras Old Church, which is one of the oldest religious foundations in London, now somewhat marooned by all the developments around King's Cross, and St Pancras Church, associated with the poet Shelley, who met Mary Shelley there, with Chatterton, who supposedly fell into a grave while visiting there, with Rimbaud, who lived in Royal College Street, very nearby, with Verlaine, and with Thomas Hardy, as an architect, who, when the railways were carving through the graveyard, got the job of tidying away the gravestones. So there is now a thing called the Hardy Tree, which is an amazing tree, surrounded by these gravestones that fill in all round it, like sharks' fins almost, and he wrote a notable poem about having to do this task.

So I think that there is a dark side with the rivers as well. There was a moment when Christopher Wren felt, with the Fleet River, that you could create a new Venice, and that at the opening part of the river, where the river goes into the Thames, there were bridges very elegantly put over it, and it was a kind of moment that is rather like that is happening now, in some ways, with the Lower Lee, that there is a kind of visionary sense. They did not have computer-generated realities, but they had drawings that suggested this was going to be wonderful, and of course very soon it was not, because the dead dogs were going in, it was foul, and it was sealed over and closed up, until you come to the point where Carol Reed is making his famous film 'The Third Man', in Vienna, and there is a great chase, with Orson Welles running through sewage systems. Orson Welles was not very keen on going down into sewage systems at all, and so they actually ended up doing a lot of the sound effects and even some of the visuals in the Fleet. It was done there, with other people doing the running. So it is a very adaptable space, and it is a space that is caught up with mythology.

Blake, talking about these secret rivers, in 'Jerusalem', says:

'The secret gardens were made paths to the traveller. I knew not of their secret loves with those I hated most. Hackney and Holloway sicken. Highgate's heights and Hampstead's to Poplar, Hackney and Bow, to Islington and Paddington, and the brook of Albion's River. We builded Jerusalem as a city and as a temple.'

So there is a sense that the hidden rivers are also sacred rivers and they are part of creating a new celestial city out of the degraded particulars of the city as it stands, and the pillars of Jerusalem, Marylebone and St Pancras and so on, creates a new city, which is what fascinates the poet Andrew Aidan Dun.

There is also a sense of the darkness of the water, the secret water, and Dun writes about that in his footnotes for Vale Royal. He says: 'The black stream is a ley line whose energies have become stagnant through neglect or negative through misuse.' So you have these two kinds of water.

At one time, earlier on in my career, in the late 1960s early 1970s, I was working as a painter and decorator in a house in Chepstow Place in Notting Hill. I was very interested to discover that this was precisely the address of one of the characters in the Robert Louis Stevenson story, 'The Suicide Club'. I was very keen on Stevenson at that point. It was a peculiar house, because it was very cold in the winter, when we were working there, often wearing coats and gloves to paint and scrape away the remains of what had been in this room, and around about one o'clock every day, I could hear this strange tapping noise. Then I realised, looking out of the window, that it was actually two people down below in a courtyard wearing mufflers, hats, coats, gloves, and dark glasses, playing table tennis! They came out every day and they played table tennis, and later, I discovered it was Donald McWhinnie and his wife. He was a producer of plays by Becket on the radio, and Harold Pinter, and they lived this completely sort of Becket/Pinter kind of life. It was completely mechanical. They did not speak a word to each other. They played for precisely twenty minutes, and then they stopped, whatever stage of the game, and went inside again, and I thought this is very haunting.

As I was walking back to the tube station to come back to Hackney at the end of the day, I saw these newspaper headline about a savage murder that had occurred in the next street, and it was of a poet who was writing the biography of Robert Louis Stevenson.

So there was a sense of the sort of darkness in this house, and then the owner got onto me and said that she had been researching it and she had decided actually not to go back and live in this house anymore, because she discovered that one of London's lost rivers was running under it. This goes to show that, if you are unaware of the river beneath you, that there is a kind of dark side to it.

I took a dowser with me on my journey to make sure I was going the right way for the Hackney Brook and he said that there is certainly a sense of disease patterns in London surrounding the lost rivers. I have researched them in relation to houses that are absolutely built directly over these rivers, without having a kind of sense of what the river is. The river flows near you as a kind of repository of dreams and as a kind of thing that is outside of time, and as a thing that definitely haunts the poets.

Andrew Dun, in his Vale Royal poem, writes, the Fleet River once famous for healing and medicinal waters, still runs under King's Cross today, and as late as the mid-19th Century, ran on the surface through a green and pleasant land. South of the Euston Road, at this period, it was already bricked over and buried. So he sees the purpose of this epic poem that he decides to write, just around King's Cross and St Pancras Old Church, to be in a sense doing the equivalent of uncovering or restoring this sacred river, the Fleet, and establishing this particular trajectory through London that takes in this valley, curves around a church, where you find engravings of boys swimming in the stream there, while people perch in the churchyard that is beneath it, and then down the valley of the Fleet. Alongside this are the myths of the black swine in the river. There is even a book called 'Black Swine in the Fleet River', about the 19thCentury myths of animals that got out of the slaughter pens and bred and lived in these. It is rather like Thomas Pynchon's idea of the alligators in the New York sewage system.

So there is the Fleet, and Dun takes it on further:

'The sacred river flows under the city at Farringdon. From Mount Pleasant, it falls to oblivion in Clerkenwell, and winds as a sewer under Saffron Hill. In Holborn, the Fleet is a secret ditch, the kingdom of typhoid, a conduit of bad air, including green slime and dog flesh, down to the water gate.'

I think that is an orthodox poem in its diction and in even its spiritual and psychic address. It is treating London as a city of mysteries, as a city of vision that relates to the traditions of William Blake, and something that can be uncovered by spending years of concentrated study looking at this one space, and walking it repeatedly, and tapping it, and trying to trace out the path of the river.

This, again, would relate to writers like David Jones, who is a religious writer who is very interested in the Roman presence in London. He uncovers inscriptions, sigils and signs by using drawing as well as text; he is making a book of the city and he is interested in these lost rivers.

Just as a contrast, I could take a modernist poet, who lived in the period in South London, Allen Fisher. Living in South London, he dealt with a different kind of river, and he did it in such a way that he took his practice from the American writer Charles Olsen, who was a poet who developed the theory of open-field writing, which was that, as a poet, you find your place on the Earth - in his case, the fishing port of Gloucester - and you research, in every sense, everything that you can find out about that place - the economics, the politics, the mechanics of fishing, the geology etc. - until you open up to a sense of the ocean beyond and the mountains under that ocean creating a new kind of mythical landscape. Fisher uses the same practice to look at South London and its lost rivers. He wrote a big epic called 'Place', which was assembled over a whole number of years and was then published in a single book. The first movement of this poem, which is based around Brixton, is that he wants to, and feels the necessity, of tracking and tracing all of the lost rivers, the things that are there, the kind of energy lines that he sees, which need to be known. He writes:

'If I take a river to its source, in this case, the Falcon Brook, there is two springs, and I follow its course from head to tail, to the Thames, and I may arrive from at least three projections; the source in the springs is not the actual source, but the first visible source, so that it is original, and the originality comes because of previous accumulation. After the sluice, I walked upstream, along a connected stream to the Neckinger, the course between Bermondsey Abbey and Thames, and parts of the flow are artificial, and, to make matters worse, Kent said that the stream near the Elephant Temple is the Tigris and this too is partly artificial. So I took the bus south, and I couldn't get the matter of this'if our streams are becoming artificial, our old, old sources will dry, and the trees we have planted to sup them will wither with them, nervously striking out for more nourishment to find poison flow that they are no longer strong enough to filter, so that the many channels become alike and indistinguishable, and our course is one of habit, disregarding any process we may need.'

So that, however different your approach is to writing about the city, whether you are a modernist, using numerous methods of research, combined with walking, bus trips, photography, whether you are a traditional poet writing in a strict form and drawing back to the teacher poets of London, then it seems that, whatever it is, you are drawn to the rivers.

Now, when I began on my project of writing a kind of memoir, personal history, local history, of Hackney, then very soon I felt that there were a lot of negative energies. I could see the things I would be satirical about. I could see hideous building schemes that had been imposed under the name of rushed development around the Olympics, where things like Victorian theatres were disappearing under very dubious pretences, that whole streets were being ripped down in a random fashion. There were a lot of negative things happening. What were the positive things? I did not want to start thinking about this place until I had something that I really felt strongly about as a kind of positive energy, and it was really seeing an engraving of the Hackney Brook.

It had only been culverted in 1861, so it was there as a presence, and if you saw the engravings of St Augustine's Church in Mare Street, which would be the kind of idyllic, iconic image of Hackney, then this river was passing right in front of the church. There was a footbridge over it. So bit by bit, I recovered the nature of this river.

The Hackney Brook is unique in the sense that I believe it is the only culverted tributary river in London that does not flow into the Thames, because if flows into the River Lea. It rises on what is now Holloway Road. It is really on the foothills of Highgate, but there are two springs on Holloway Road. It then sweeps around the Arsenal Stadium. It goes around Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington. It crosses the sandy ford there, on the Great North Road. It comes down Hackney Downs, on the west side. It crosses Mare Street, into Morning Lane, and then finally into the River Lea. There are wells and springs in Well Street and very often the same area still floods.

When I was walking it, I passed people in Stoke Newington, who told me that their cellars tended to flood whenever there were very heavy rains, and they blamed this on the presence of the Brook.

So the Brook is there, and the Brook was what I felt defined the area, because once you have laid it out, you see this valley appear, which has almost disappeared down under the weight of building and industry, but it is very much still there. The grander houses, as you recover the history of the borough, the ones with the orchards, the ones with the huge formal gardens, of which Sutton House is the only remainder, are perched on this ledge, where the Homerton Hospital is now, above this river. The river is the reason that this place grows up, and the history is lost. It is absorbed into other things; it disappears.

My sense of what is a river for London now was probably the M25 motorway, and this is another project I undertook a few years ago, because the Thames itself was not the kind of working river that had brought London to be what it is. The Thames had ceased to be a vibrant working river, with all of the quays and the docks and the liberties, and it had become a strip of heritage to be fought over; whereas the M25 motorway, which is this random motorway which entirely enclosed London, was like a working river. It had all the cargoes of the world, and it had all these service stations which were like docks where you pulled in. The new forms of life that were appearing in an urban world - the retail parks and the warehouses - all of those things are now out there rather than on the riverbank, and the riverbank is being turned into a place to live. It is a kind of photo opportunity. These estates are growing up, including Thames Gateway, some of them very randomly, on the flood plain. So this is a visible river, but its soul and spirit and meaning are being challenged; whereas the invisible rivers, which so many people are now keen on recovering, are, as it were, the kind of secret history of the city. I felt very strongly that I would have to engage with that.

I went to Old Ford, which is a lock, where the thin spout of water that now is the Hackney Brook comes out into the River Lea. It is at a point where there is a back river that goes into Olympic Park, and when the blue fence went up that entirely enclosed the Olympic Park, suddenly, the only way in was by water. So with a friend and a kayak, we managed to navigate, as if going up into the head waters of the Amazon, through this secret landscape, where there were dense vegetation and kingfishers flashing about - it was absolutely magical. This happened for maybe a month or so, until I made the mistake of writing about it somewhere, and the next time I went down there, there was a big chain stopping the way. However, on the opposite bank, where the pipes of the northern sewage outfall, the kind of thing that is absorbed the river, cross the River Lea, which is actually the point which was a Roman ford and a crossing, there is now a trickle of water. I began there, trying to find the traces of the Hackney Brook.

Old Ford was a numinous locale in London's deep topography. It was the crossing place on the River Lea, which was a major obstacle. It was a much broader stream. It was a border between cultures: between Vikings and Saxons, Pagans and Christians, travellers and fixed citizens, the living and the dead.

The critic, John Adlard, back in 1973, had the interesting idea that William Blake confused Old Ford with Old Stratford. Blake's Southeastern sweep, from Plate 31, Chapter 2, of 'Jerusalem' had always directed

my reading of London, and it anticipated every move that I made. He came down from Highgate, through Hackney and Holloway, towards London, till he came to Old Stratford, and thence to Stepney and the Isle of Luther's dogs, thence through the narrows of the river's side, and saw every minute particular, the jewels of Albion, running down the kennels of the streets and lanes, as if they were abhorred. Highgate through Hackney was precisely the journey of our lost river, the Hackney Brook, as it trickled down from the foothills to flow into the Lea at Old Ford. With a Sicilian photographer I searched out the point where the stream bubbled into the sluggish river, and there were two possibilities, but a closer examination of 19th Century charts inclined me towards a mean dribble a little further downstream, where the pipes carrying London's sewage crossed to the east bank and the Olympic Park. A new development had infilled the space behind us with a folded set of wings; a luxury prison.

Adlard, in his short essay, speaks of William Blake walking, in a single day, up to forty miles in the environs of London, but 'Jerusalem' is not the record of a gruelling hike. It is the heartbeat of a mental traveller. Loss, Blake's solar demon, blazes like a comet. He maps energies, not in the robotic voice of a sat-nav system, but with the rhythms of blood pulsing, hammering and driven onwards. What Adlard struggles with is the topography that detours east to Stratford, before heading down to the Isle of Dogs. It strikes me that he was not following the money, but predicting the swinish russ of unexploited brownfield sites. Docklands and the future Stratford City, with its Olympic rings and its satellite parks, all the tenderness of the soul cast forth as filth and mire, towers of hungry capital built in Jerusalem's eastern gate, to dominate and divide. Of stones and rocks, he took his way, for human form was none, and thus he spoke, looking to Albion city with many tears. So Stratford was no accidental station on the Silverlink itinerary, but Adlard is puzzled; he finds no mention of Old Stratford on any map of the period. He delves into London and Provincial, new commercial directory for 1827-8, issued by Poe & Co, in which Old Ford is described as 'a small village, pleasantly situated on the banks of the River Lea'. The directory also mentions an immense artificial mound or hill, like another Silbury or Beckton Alp, from the summit of which he glosses Loss might have viewed to advantage the London he was combing. It is a vision without boundaries. It is outside time and certainly not the limited prospect of pre-Olympic mud offered to the privileged few from Holden Point, the 21-storey Stratford tower block, where a fit and vulpine Lord Co throws back the silken linings of his deep blue jacket, like a fallen angel, to offer this virtual world with its mounts and its stadia, to investors prepared to mortgage a city's future on the demolition and ransacking of a mythical past.

I, as preparation for thinking about rivers, secret or otherwise, re-walked this route, this Blakian route, back to the Stratford Olympic Park, and noticed, or re-noticed, something that I had not seen for a long time. As you come out of Victoria Park towards a pub called Top of the Morning, there is a long wall, and on it, hidden by silver birch trees and other shrubs, is something which has been there since at least the early-'70s, and which effectively depicts the lost rivers of London. It is a long mural which shows the River Lea and shows Hackney as a sort of Arcadian landscape. It is a rather touching faded mural, now facing the entire developments of the Olympic Park, which are just behind it, and there is a hum that is in the air, of the cranes moving and the mountains of mud, all of which is in this vision of a river, as if the thing that they wanted to do first was to depict the river. There are no people. It is rather like, as Blake says, human form was none. There are no people. There is a river, so because there are no people, there is no particular sense of time; it is timeless, but it is permanent, and the only thing that is happening is that the cheap paint is peeling away, and these bright orange red bricks are coming through and kind of absorbing it.

As you pass out of this landscape onto the riverbank landscape, there is a very dramatic change in imagery, because what has happened as a result of this rush of new energy coming in, in terms of public energy, dynamism towards the 2012 event, is that there had to be a response to the walls they are filling up with computer-generated images of the kind of perfected, virtual reality future. It is something that does not exist, and probably never will exist, but looks quite impressive and convincing. It is exactly unlike what has been done on the wall. There are gleaming stadiums, some of which have already been cancelled, because we are moving into a kind of flat-pack IKEA Games now - there is no money for anything else. A lot of it will just be taken away and moved somewhere else. But nevertheless, around this landscape is this wall of extraordinary images, of things that do not happen and will not happen.

On the opposite bank, therefore, the locals, who live in Hackney Wick, a kind of strange community of artists and anarchists and squatters and others who are there, have started to work like crazy. On miles and miles of the walls and buildings around there are these quite violent and quite dramatic images that look almost Central or South American. They are a bit like Mexican muralists. They are a bit like Mayan or Aztec imagery. There are a lot of serpents and snakes and mouths and eyes. It is quite savage, quite dramatic, and the sheer physical quantity of work is extraordinary. At night, obviously, they get up onto a lot

of the buildings that are about to be demolished, and these serpent forms creep over the whole landscape.

I got very interested in those, and I started to photograph them and log them, and initially, the people who did them sometimes worked as teams clearly, but they did not take any credit for it. It was not 'tagged' in way that you will see in certain parts of the city, where Banksy, say, has operated. Although it was originally satirical in making comments on the city in a very graphic and effective way, it has become soon swallowed up by the apparatus of capital, which art and property all combine in interesting ways. These other artists were not like that. Some of them have begun to start signing their work, and I wondered what this really was about. It only made itself clear, in a strange way, when I read a book about the Mayan prophesies in 2012. There is a sense, apparently, that there is a 5,000 year cycle coming to an end in August 2012, and the moment of the winged serpent returns as the symbol of time, in a plural sense of time, and there are five suns, which are the five Olympic rings somehow, and there are other such links. I would like to read it as a response to the end of this particular cycle of time and to seeing this as a dramatic moment, when, having no money or funds, you create something like a kind of Xerox of Mayan pyramids and such, but without any solidity or any major cultural explanation for what you are doing.

It is a kind of extraordinary thing to see this enormous box called Westfield, which appeared there today. Part of the walk carried me into this landscape, and I went to see the place where I had first worked when I came to London, which was called Chobham Farm. It sounds absolutely delightful, but it was actually railway sheds in Stratford, where you unloaded the cargoes of the world, and, again, it was a case of the rivers dying. In the late-60s, the Thames was not a working river, the dockers were very restrictive in union practices, there was a movement to come inland and use the roads, and to therefore get around dock regulations, and they took on the cheapest labour. We were not aware, obviously, that this was happening. It became an industrial issue later, but initially, nobody knew, and really peculiar things used to happen there. For instance, one afternoon, a cargo of beautiful laundrette-type washing machines arrived, and we were just issued with sledge hammers and told to smash them all up because they wanted to claim it had been 'Damaged in transit' and to claim the insurance money! It was that kind of world, and coming back there now, I see the whole landscape has totally disappeared. Instead there are these gigantic earth dunes, which are quite exciting, and behind that, the long shed which is the Westfield Shopping Mall, which is really the thing that is underlying this whole development, which is anti-Blakian and anti-lost river - it is the opposite.

I had to oppose that, as I say, by making this journey, by making a specific walk, and the interesting thing was, having done it once, to confirm it by doing it again. The dowser was the one who really confirmed the point that the where the river came out was the point on the Lea where the northern sewage outfall crosses, and there are now blocks of flats grown up there. He also measured out the exact dimensions of the Roman road to Colchester. He would go along and said, 'Here, it stops, and here, it starts - you can feel the heat.' He made us hold our hands out, and you could actually persuade yourself you could feel something. So it is a significant spot.

What was most interesting was, as we curled round Victoria Park, you could see from what he was doing and from the geography that surrounded you, that there actually was the river base. You could almost see the river, right alongside the road, under a motorway, with a copse of wood, almost cut off, and to get to it, you have to climb over a fence and cross a road, and do all these sort of dangerous things, and having done it, what was extraordinary was to discover that there was a community of people actually living under the motorway there. As if there was actually a river they could draw on, even though they could not get at it, they had formed a hidden community right by the motorway - two sides motorway, railways, the whole thing - a lost landscape. They had painted their graffiti on the wall, and there were books there. They were not visible at that time, but it made me think of going into the Amazon, and you have penetrated through jungles, and you find a village that was just deserted - it was not there. I think these are the kind of things that happen with lost rivers.

I will finish with an element from this walk. All the time you are walking on this route of the lost river, you are seeing things that confirm the sense of what it had been and its significance.

I was looking for Berger's Paint Factory, which was on that route, on the edge of Morning Lane. This Berger is a family of direct lineage from John Berger, the painter and writer. Obviously the river was very useful in the production of paint, and they diverted the river - there are some very nice illustrations of that - to flow through the back of the factory. Apparently, the workers in this factory were well-treated, though they did get lead poisoning, which was not so good. Then the factory disappeared, and now it is a Social Security office of some sort, but the building has still got this quality. Indeed, it has even got the Jewish

prayer scrolls on it. It has got some very nice decorative elements, and when we went into the building and tried to find out if they knew anything about the history, it was a major thing to find some old person there who could confirm actually that it was Berger's Paint Factory.

Then, crossing Morning Lane itself, there were workmen from Thames Water who could not understand why, every time they dug a hole there, it flooded, before they could redo the new water pipes. It was absolutely on the track of the Hackney Brook, which curves round the corner into what was the grandest part of the whole thing, a series of marvellous watercress beds, which are now Tesco's.

I felt that what happens with the river, in the end, is that it becomes intertwined with another notion called the North West Passage, which goes back to all sorts of places, but one of them is Thomas de Quincey, in The English Opium-Eater, describes how he is completely absorbed into the dense gravity of the centre of London, and that the only way of navigating is to duck and dive through all the little alleyways and courtyards and to treat the centre as a labyrinth. This kind of area where we are now, where you work into these Inns of Court, secret ways take you in, there is a garden, and then you are flung out onto a street, you can duck and dive through alleyways and passages all the way down to the city, like water finding its way through. Well, de Quincey had a very strong sense of that, and he believed, in thinking of Frobisher and people, that there was a way of navigating London, that you hit this Northwest Passage, you find a particular street, particular ways of walking, and you move through another dimension. You get into a richer sense of time and place. That notion was picked up on by writers like Arthur Machen, who decided that the area he was talking about was Stoke Newington, which is exactly on the Hackney Brook. So I had this thing in mind as a sense of both escaping from the density of London and escaping from the complexity of dealing with Hackney, by way of river or a journey, and I will just read you this little bit about coming through Stoke Newington to finish.

'Hacking into tangled undergrowth, as clinging and dense and light-devouring as my book had become, bumping against obscured gravestones and the sharp wings of ivy-cloaked angels, I remembered what Poe and Arthur Machen had drawn from this area: confusion; doubled identities; a shift in the electromagnetic field. There was a long tradition, beginning with de Quincey, of searching for a North West Passage out of London, away from the restrictive conventions of time and space. The route these men hinted at seemed to have an intimate relation with the course of my submerged Hackney Brook - Abney Park, Clissold Park, pubs named after Robinson Crusoe, to the slopes of Highgate Hill. Machen called this part of London 'a terror incognito'. Obscure alleyways, with discreet, mysterious postern doorsand there is always a Machen theme. There's always an excuse to draw the unwary in: a search for Edgar Allen Poe's school, the one he actually attended, or the more engrossing fiction from William Wilson. Autobiography mulches down to let in richer weeds. Those who embark on a London quest always begin in a pub. They yarn, they misquote and they improvise. They walk, eventually, through a one-off topography they're obliged to shape into a serviceable narrative - language creeks, the dreamy village, the misty trees, the old rambling red brick houses, standing in the gardens with the high walls about them. There's a magic place, close to Abney Park, which nobody can find twice.

'Believing this consoling fable I suppose makes Stoke Newington possible: the self-confident, self-contained inhabitants, with their nice shops and the historic library and their surveillance monitors. Living here allows you to peruse the dangerously vulgar streets of lesser Hackney and to congratulate yourself on your good fortune. The villas of successful, non-conformist tradesmen survive, with their names on plaques and pubs.

'We enter a library and ask to be pointed in the direction of the local history shelves. 'There is no local history anymore,' says the woman at the desk. 'It's out-of-date!' All that's left has been relegated to a cardboard box kept under the counter, so I buy a booklet on Clissold Park that characteristically boasts of a connection with William Wilberforce and the Stoke Newington abolitionists, while turning a blind eye to fortunes built around the dark trade - sugar and slavery. There's a smudged photograph of a policeman feeding swans on a secret river.'

Thank you.