

A stylized illustration of the Big Ben tower in London, colored red and blue with a white clock face. The tower is positioned to the left of the word "Londoners", which is written in a large, bold, serif font. The letters of "Londoners" are colored in alternating red and blue, matching the tower's colors.

Londoners

THE DAYS AND NIGHTS
OF LONDON NOW—
AS TOLD BY THOSE
WHO LOVE IT, HATE IT,
LIVE IT, LEFT IT,
AND LONG FOR IT

Craig Taylor

LONDONERS

LONDONERS

The Days and Nights
of London Now—As
Told by Those Who
Love It, Hate It, Live It,
Left It, and Long for It

CRAIG TAYLOR



An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

The first and last names of some of the individuals featured in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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FOR MATT WEILAND

What is the city but the people?

—SHAKESPEARE, *CORIOLANUS*

No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection.

—ITALO CALVINO, *INVISIBLE CITIES*

If there is just one London, I have two arsens.

—A THAMES RIVER BOATMAN

CONTENTS

Introduction	xiii
A Note About London	xxxix
Prologue Simon Kushner, <i>former Londoner</i>	1

PART I

ARRIVING

Kevin Pover, <i>commercial airline pilot</i>	7
Raymond Lunn, <i>on arriving from Leeds</i>	9
Jane Lanyero, <i>on arriving from Uganda</i>	18
John Harber, <i>a tourist from America</i>	19
Farzad Pashazadeh, <i>on arriving from Iran</i>	22

GETTING AROUND

Emma Clarke, <i>voice of the London Underground</i>	29
Nicky Dorras, <i>taxi driver</i>	34
Emily Davis, <i>cyclist</i>	36
Craig Clark, <i>TfL Lost Property Clerk</i>	38
Noel Gaughan, <i>driving instructor</i>	44
Nick Tyler, <i>civil engineer</i>	47

SEEING THE SIGHTS

David Doherty, <i>on Buckingham Palace</i>	53
Bruce Smith, <i>on Big Ben</i>	62
Philip and Ann Wilson, <i>on the Tower of London</i>	66
Tim Turner, <i>on “Londin”</i>	67

EARNING ONE'S KEEP

Ruby King, <i>plumber</i>	71
Kamran Sheikh, <i>currency trader</i>	74
Mary Forde, <i>publican</i>	82
Ruth Fordham, <i>manicurist</i>	84

LOVING ONE ANOTHER

Alina Iqbal, <i>a love story</i>	91
Peter Davey and Milan Selj, <i>a couple who met on Parliament Hill</i>	98
Mistress Absolute, <i>dominatrix</i>	99
Jay Hughes, <i>nurse</i>	102

GETTING ON WITH IT

Nikky, Lindsay, and Danielle, <i>students</i>	105
Paulo Pimentel, <i>grief counselor</i>	107
Liston Wingate-Denys, <i>personal trainer</i>	111
Smartie, <i>Londoner</i>	114

PART II

CONTINUING YOUR JOURNEY

Peter Rees, <i>City Planning Officer, City of London</i>	125
Davy Jones, <i>street photographer</i>	132
Joe John Avery, <i>street cleaner</i>	136
Jill Adams and Gary Williams, <i>bus operations specialists</i>	140
Paul Akers, <i>arboriculturalist</i>	144
Elisabetta de Luca, <i>commuter</i>	149

GLEANNING ON THE MARGINS

Sarah Constantine, <i>skipper</i>	153
John Andrews, <i>angler</i>	162
Mikey Tompkins, <i>beekeeper</i>	167
Christina Oakley Harrington, <i>Wiccan priestess</i>	169

FEEDING THE CITY

Adam Byatt, <i>chef</i>	173
David Smith, <i>Director of Markets, City of London</i>	178
Peter Thomas et al., <i>New Spitalfields Market traders</i>	181

CLIMBING THE PROPERTY LADDER

Ashley Thomas, <i>estate agent</i>	199
Robert Guerini, <i>property owner</i>	204
Stephanie Walsh, <i>property seeker</i>	208

Nick Stephens, <i>squatter</i>	213
Mike Bennison and Geoff Bills, <i>residents of Surrey</i>	216

PUTTING ON A SHOW

Henry Hudson, <i>artist</i>	221
Martins Imhangbe, <i>actor</i>	224
Laetitia Sadier, <i>singer</i>	230
Rinse, <i>rapper</i>	233
Darren Flook, <i>art gallerist</i>	237

GOING OUT

Dan Simon, <i>rickshaw driver</i>	243
Daniel Serrano, <i>cruiser</i>	249
Emmajo Read, <i>nightclub door attendant</i>	254
Smartie, <i>Londoner</i>	259

PART III

MAKING A LIFE

Jo the Geordie, <i>who stayed in Newcastle</i>	271
Stacey the Geordie, <i>who came to London</i>	274

GETTING ALONG

Ed Husain, <i>commentator</i>	281
Abul Azad, <i>social worker</i>	286
Nicola Owen, <i>teacher</i>	289
Guity Keens, <i>interpreter</i>	297
Lucy Skilbeck, <i>mother</i>	302

KEEPING THE PEACE

Paul Jones, <i>home security expert</i>	307
Colin Hendrick, <i>police officer</i>	310
Nick Smith, <i>eyewitness to the London riots</i>	320
Mohammed Al Hasan, <i>suspect</i>	323
David Obiri, Jeremy Ranga, and Keshav Gupta, <i>barristers</i>	325
Charles Henty, <i>Under-Sheriff of London</i>	331
Barbara Tucker, <i>protestor</i>	334

STAYING ON TOP

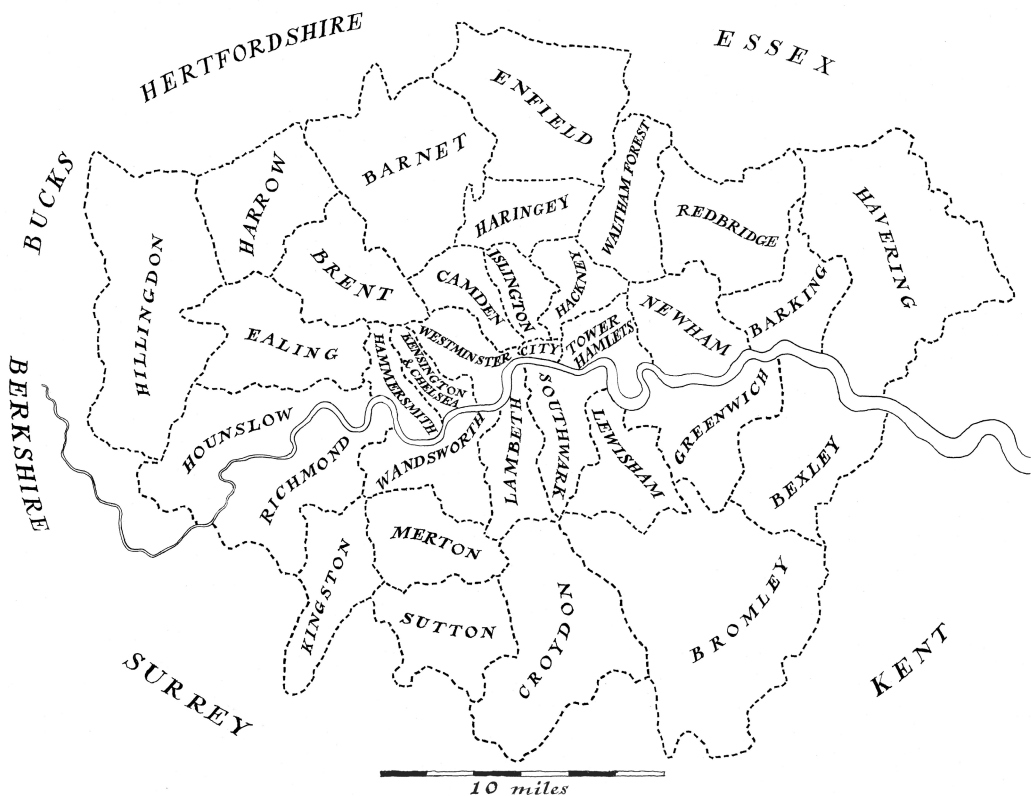
Stuart Fraser, <i>Chairman, Policy and Resources Committee</i>	339
Toby Murthwaite, <i>student</i>	341
Paul Hawtin, <i>hedge fund manager</i>	343
George Iacobescu, <i>CEO, Canary Wharf Group PLC</i>	350

LIVING AND DYING

Alison Cathcart, <i>Superintendent Registrar, City of Westminster</i>	355
Alex Blake, <i>eyewitness</i>	360
Perry Powell, <i>paramedic</i>	365
John Harris, <i>funeral director</i>	373
Spencer Lee, <i>crematorium technician</i>	380

DEPARTING

Michael Linington, <i>seeker</i>	385
Rob de Groot, <i>antique-clock restorer</i>	388
Ethel Hardy, <i>old-age pensioner</i>	392
Ludmila Olszewska, <i>former Londoner</i>	394
Smartie, <i>Londoner</i>	396
Kevin Pover, <i>commercial airline pilot</i>	398
Acknowledgments	401
Index	405



GREATER LONDON

A NOTE ABOUT LONDON

WHEN WE SPEAK OF LONDON today we typically mean what is administratively known as Greater London. It is made up of thirty-two boroughs plus the very small City of London, the historic core of the city—also known as “the Square Mile” or simply “the City”—and today the financial center of the metropolis. Each of the thirty-two London boroughs is governed by a local council, while Greater London as a whole is governed by a mayor and an elected assembly known as the London Assembly. Greater London is more or less ringed by the M25 motorway, also known as the London Orbital. Altogether, Greater London spans more than 600 square miles—approximately twice the area of New York City—and includes about 7.5 million people. They are known today, as they have been known since at least the fourteenth century, as “Londoners.”

ARRIVING

KEVIN POVER

Commercial airline pilot

THERE ARE CERTAIN TIMES OF the day when you're flying into London, and you're held—the skies are that busy—and it's just like bees around a honeypot. You'll be flying back in across from France, say, coming over north of the Bay of Biscay, past that nubbin sticking out south of Calais, and it's all nice and relaxed as you head for Heathrow or Gatwick. Then you hit the London frequency on the radio and suddenly everyone's jabbering away. There's a million and one voices on and the controller's not got five seconds to take a breath. You get a frequency, talk, and then get off the frequency. They'll tell you what you need to do, and then you get out of the way. It's busy, you're gonna hold, everyone wants to get into London. Those planes are heading to London for a reason, and the people on board want to be there for a reason.

It can be absolutely glorious flying across Europe, coming into London on days when all the sea around the south coast is an awesome blue. If you're on the approach for Heathrow, out to

the right you can see Wembley before the river, and out to the left you can see Wimbledon. You're flying over and then you can see the runway in front of you. So you've got Heathrow, Wembley, and Wimbledon, and you're like, this is great. You come in and you pick out these views of these monumental areas and it's all there. Obviously it's all shrunk—if you ever visit Wimbledon, it's a massive area—but up there it just looks small.

When you come into Gatwick, they like to dance you around southern England, to keep you away from London City airport. You can arrive from any direction, but they'll feed you around and then you will end up south of Gatwick and you'll circle around the Mayfield area, they call it, around Tunbridge Wells, and then they give you headings to turn you on to the runway centerline. You're usually on the westerly runway, because the winds are that way. What you see is beautiful countryside to the left, you've got the South Downs and you can see the North Downs as well, the light and dark greens of the ever-changing Downs. And then you see the city out to the right-hand side, and on a clear day it is magical. You can just see everything so clearly: you've got the beacon on the top of the HSBC Tower at the center of Canary Wharf, and from there you can work your way across the city. On a lovely day when all is calm it's almost angelic. You don't touch the thrust levers. You keep the engines at 58 percent. You coast down as if on rails, tickle the control column back, grease it on.

But London has crosswinds. Nothing's stable. Nothing's set. It can be tough work, too. If it's rough, you might duck into the gray clouds at 15,000 feet, into the mist and murk, where you can hardly see 200 meters in front, and you have to follow the white beams of the leading lights, just follow their intense glow right in. Some days you might hear a cheer and a load of clapping when you land. After that you might get ten seconds, or eight seconds to slow to sixty as soon as you're on the ground and then

they're telling you to vacate the runway. It's London. Someone else has got to land.

RAYMOND LUNN

On arriving from Leeds

I CAME TO LONDON ABOUT seven weeks ago, from Leeds. I'd finished my degree and wondered what I was going to do. I'm an ex-offender, I've committed crimes in the past. I was actually a career criminal, made my living out of crime from the age of ten to about twenty-two. I'm thirty-seven now. So it's fifteen years since I've last been in trouble with the police and once I graduated from university I thought, right, I need to challenge what's affecting my life. What was affecting my life was my past and the law that says an ex-offender has to tell any prospective employer about their previous conviction. My conviction was for attempted armed robbery on a post office, and I got three years for it. That conviction's never spent. I will always have to tell anybody who ever asks me about that conviction. It makes it very difficult to find work. So I came to London. London attracts people to it who think, like me, that the streets are paved with gold and that if you come to London, your life will change. It's well known, that dream. It's been going on for hundreds of years in London.

I arrived in Victoria Station at six o'clock in the morning, at the coach station, feeling quite optimistic. Feeling that at the end of the day, I'd be in some sort of hostel or something. I had my backpack stuffed with my clothes, a few books about crime and rehabilitation—Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives*, Descartes—and an old laptop. And my dissertation as well, my actual dissertation from university. That's

basically it, because I'd got all my possessions down to a minimum. I think I threw away about twenty black bags of personal things and I gave away forty of my academic books to the British Heart Foundation and cancer shops. That was a massive weight off my shoulders. It was almost like I'd gone into a Turkish bath and been rubbed down and gone out clean. Suddenly you was new.

It was cold and overcast when I arrived. I wasn't sure where I was going. I'd printed off the names of quite a few different organizations to get in touch with, but it was early in the morning and I ended up talking to this old man who was homeless. We went for a coffee and sat back down on the ground outside Victoria Station. This guy had been homeless since the 1970s and he's one of those homeless where that's his life. That's what he's chosen to be. The sort of person you'd gladly give a pound to if he asked for it. He didn't seem to be an alcoholic. But he had quite a lot of ailments because of being on the streets so long. He told me about a place round the corner from Victoria Station where the homeless get breakfast. I think the doors opened about 8:30, so we sat talking and then went to this place. That's when I became scared.

The people who were there—alcoholics, drug users, foreigners—were definitely from the bottom of the barrel in terms of where they were in life. There was one guy in front of me who ended up sitting on the ground pissed, and when he pulled up his trousers, all I saw was severe bruises, yellows, blues, blacks, reds. Then there was the background noise, lots of little arguments and whispering. I had quite a good backpack, and I had clean clothing on, clean nails. Whereas everybody else had a sort of dirty street look. I became paranoid at that point thinking, my bag's being eyed up, I'm being eyed up. I was petrified in terms of getting my phone out. You'd see people with cans of lager and other alcohol in their pockets.

Eventually the doors opened and they let in five at a time. By that point I didn't want to go in. But I was told that they could point me in the right direction of getting accommodation or assistance. So I went in and it was cavernous, painted drab colors, and there seemed to be these little corridors going into all sorts of different places. I just followed it round and that's where the servery was. I think I got three sausages, four bacon, two eggs, tomatoes, and beans for about £1.50. It was brilliant. But the staff seemed to treat the clients like schoolchildren: keep in a line, don't do this, don't do that. They'd obviously been through it every day, but for me it was demeaning. When I told them that I wasn't an alcoholic, I wasn't a drug addict, and I didn't have any substance abuse or anything, it was like they didn't want to know. I'm homeless but I'm not eligible for their help because I don't have any support issues. So that was the first drop, the first hit in the stomach.

I then got a Tube up to Camden Town. I went up there to look for a place where I could get onto the Internet. I have a Twitter account, a Facebook account, so I had all sorts of different connections with organizations what could possibly help. I found a Wetherspoons pub near Camden Lock, so I got myself a pint of cider and tried to forget about the stress and worry of the morning and become optimistic again. I got online, started typing on Twitter what was going on. I had all sorts of different ex-offender organizations watching me on Twitter, so I put it on Twitter: I'm homeless but I've not got an alcohol problem or a drug problem. Nobody's willing to help me, blah, blah, blah. I rang some organizations, and I got the same response. Because I had no needs as such, other than housing, nobody was prepared to help and I became angry. I did. And then out of the blue I got saved via Twitter. An organization based in Camberwell, South London, were watching my tweets and they said, Come in the following

day and we'll do an assessment and see if we can help you. I was absolutely over the moon.

I knew it was very likely I would be sleeping on the street that night, but that didn't bother me too much. I had plenty of warm clothing. I was walking round Oxford Circus for a bit when it started getting late, and I came across Cavendish Square. I climbed over the fence and found a fountain with benches round it. Well, there was another two people on the benches. They never said anything. I never spoke to them, and I got myself onto the bench opposite them. We couldn't see each other because of the fountain. I thought that was quite good and I was knackered. My backpack had everything in it so it was heavy, I'd been walking round all day, and I was grateful for just getting the backpack off my back and my boots off and giving my feet some air. There were beautiful buildings round the square, typical London, large, turn-of-the-century buildings, some modern, some not, but it was quiet because there was no bars or pubs or anything. Occasionally you'd hear a van or a car or whatever. And then I heard these little rustling sounds. It was all the little mice going up to the fountain and the bins to the side and I was grateful that it was mice and not rats. I ain't got a problem with mice.

He leaves his Guinness behind when he excuses himself to smoke outside the pub in which we were talking. A rickshaw passes on the way to Soho Square. Through the window I can see him scanning the street, looking left, looking right. He returns to the table, sits down, and runs his hand over his close-cropped brown hair. He's got bags under his eyes.

When I woke up, the square was open. I sat up and watched the sun rise and just took in everything round me, the day starting, and London waking up. The traffic began to get busier and busier, and then I started thinking, this backpack is way too

heavy, so I decided to take my books out and place them neatly on the bench so if anybody walked past and fancied a book they could take them. That's what I did. Hopefully somebody's got some absolute joy out of them. The best possible scenario is that somebody who's never really thought about crime and punishment found them and that's made them aware of something they weren't aware of before. If somebody saw a person like myself who was an ex-offender as an equal, not as a second-class citizen or somebody who should be forever punished, but as someone who can be productive in society—I'd be very happy.

The next day I made my way to Camberwell. I found the offices. Sat there nervous. I could see they were a little bit suspicious. I was there with my backpack, and even though I'd slept rough that night I was still clean. Not the typical homeless guy, probably. But once we'd gone through the assessment, they said, "Yes, we're going to help you find accommodation." But it would take a few days, and it became obvious that I was going to be on the streets for a bit longer. They told me it was important that I be found by spotters while I was on the street. They go searching for homeless people and register their details, and you're only classed as officially street homeless if you've been found by the spot team three times in a week. I took in all the advice and thanked them for letting me store my laptop within those premises because it would make me a target.

Now I was waiting for phone calls, waiting to be found while I roamed the streets for the next however many days and nights. Camberwell's got a crime problem at night so it was a danger for me to be there, so I went a little bit farther toward the river, to the park at the side of the Imperial War Museum. It seemed to be out of the way of any sort of issues, gangs or anything like that.

I was tired by the end of the day, it was dead, nobody round. I just thought, what am I going to do with myself? It was a case of having to just sit there and wish your life away, watch the day disappear and night come and go. Later on, when it was really late, I managed to kip down under a tree. It was very uncomfortable. I was waking and falling asleep, waking and falling asleep. And then I was woken at five o'clock in the morning, I think it was, by the spot team. They gave me some leaflets about where I could get food and a shower, reminded me I needed to be spotted three different nights, and let me be.

It's always better, once they've found you the first time, to end up back at that location because then they know where to find you. So that night I went back to the Imperial War Museum and drifted away in a daydream. Time in the moment feels forever. Why was I here? Where was I going? Sometimes I'd daydream that things would work out; but sometimes the nightmare would come in and go, no it's not. Somebody's going to mug you and stab you. Somebody's going to do you in.

There's a pub near the Imperial War Museum and it sounded quite close and quite loud. That would piss me off—not the loud noise, but the people enjoying themselves. It weren't long ago I was doing the same thing, and suddenly I'm homeless. You start thinking negatively about them, because you start believing that they have negative thoughts about homeless people—that you're a scrounger and you don't deserve the help. All you can hear is their laughing. I found myself becoming a sort of separate species to them.

I started watching pigeons and magpies and squirrels, they would help you drift off into a different thought process. The crows always have back bits missing. They're a bit scruffy in London, aren't they? In Leeds they're all quite smart and dappy, but not here. They're hard here. At one point there was fifteen mag-

pies in one tree, going up and down, dropping off the tree, doing something, and one would be arguing with the other. And the pigeons, they want to rule the world. They are hatching plans as we speak and you can see them look at you as if to say, "Yeah, we'll get you!" You see one without a leg and he's still going on, you know, "I've got you!"

You become enthralled by nature because you're there for hours, you start to see that they have personalities. They argue with each other. They fight each other. Watching magpies arguing with crows is brilliant. The crow seems to be the big boy, but the magpies always keep on coming back going, "Ha, ha, you haven't got the white bits though, have ya?" Know what I mean, eh? Your imagination just runs with it and it's funny, you feel you're touching nature or you're just a part of it. And then the night closes in and you can hear the traffic decreasing and the pubs getting louder and then getting quieter as people are going home. It's at that point you think, now's the time to go to sleep.

A few days later I got a call from the homeless organization who said they'd spoken to a social letting agent and they had a property in mind for me to look at. I felt happy because I was becoming desperate. I wanted to give in and go back to Leeds. I went up to Cricklewood to meet the agent who was going to show me the studio flat. To be honest I wouldn't have cared if it was a shed, I'd have said yes.

The flat was one room and in it you've your fridge, cooker, sink, and a couple of cupboards on one side, a window on the other side and a bed, a foldaway table with two chairs, and a separate bathroom and toilet. I thought, ideal. This'll work. So I said yes. I was told I couldn't take it until the next day, but I was able to leave some bits from my backpack in the studio flat. I took out

my writing books, my dissertation, some clothing, some boots. I wasn't sure what I needed while I was still on the street, so I kept a lot of things in the backpack. I was just happy that it was lighter and more manageable. I then went back to South London feeling very happy and optimistic; things were going to change. I'm going to get sorted out, I'll get a job, I'll get this, I'll do that. But I was starving as well.

I knew that one of the sandwich vans comes round the church up near Waterloo Station round ten o'clock at night. So I made my way to the church. On the way I bumped into two homeless English guys. They'd walked from somewhere near Norwich to London in three days. They would beg and then buy alcohol, and what struck me was their generosity. They had two sips between them and they gave me one. One of them was from Newcastle, a Geordie, and they're funny people anyway, but the stuff he was coming out with, I mean, I just couldn't stop laughing. They hated London, so they were going to walk to Eastbourne or Brighton. This one guy, a Falklands veteran who'd been shot, he showed me the scars. You could see they were bullet holes. After leaving them I felt really sad because this guy had donated his life for the protection of our imperial wealth and is now bloody homeless on the street. He'd chosen where he was now, but I'll never forget the humor and I'll never forget the generosity. They asked me to go with them. I said no, no.

At the church I could see people within the grounds. There were these Roman pillars, a bit of shelter and that. They were loud. They were drunk. I went up to this girl who I'd seen in the center and asked if this is where the sandwich van comes. She went, "You can fuck off an' all!" I just thought, you don't even know me, I don't even know you. I sat on a bench outside and thought, I'm not moving. This quite big lad, thickset, came up and just started talking. We found out we were both from Leeds