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CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNERS AND IMMORTALS



London began in swamp – an empty plain near a wide winding river, surrounded by low hills and not much else. We don’t know when the first houses arrived there, but we do know it was a long time ago. In 2010 the remains of a large timber building dating back to 4500 BC were found in the Thames mud, near the present site of Vauxhall Bridge, so we can assume there have been people in the London area for at least 6,000 years, although things remain murky until AD 100, when the settlement became the capital of Roman Britannia. Even after that there were many dark years. There’s sparse information about Roman London, and even less about what happened after the collapse of Roman rule, when it’s thought that the city was abandoned. The next good lead comes in the ninth-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which says that the city was ‘refounded’ by Alfred the Great in AD 886.

Alfred was usefully occupied not just in burning cakes, but also in building and fortifying the wall, developing a new street plan, and acting as an early literary patron who summoned religious scholars to translate some of the great Latin works into Old English. Still, the products of any wider literary scene were either sparse, or have been lost in the mists of time.

Things come into sharper focus in the medieval period. Yet even then, most early mentions arise in passing. Quite literally so in the case of Richard of Devizes, a monk from Winchester who walked through the city sometime in the late twelfth century. He didn’t recommend

that others should follow. ‘You will come to London,’ he wrote. ‘Behold! I warn you, whatever of evil or of perversity there is in any, whatever in all parts of the world, you will find in that city alone.’ He next provided a long list of all the fun to be had in the area, with its ‘effeminate sodomites’ and ‘lewd musical girls’. Less amusingly, he also became the first person to use the word ‘holocaust’ in reference to a massacre of the city’s Jewish population.

In the same century, William Langland (c.1332–86) grew up and became a ‘loller’ and ‘idler’ in the Cornhill area of London. But nothing is certain about his life, since all the information we have comes from the text of his own *Piers Plowman* – a poem where reality is never certain and real life elides with dreams, allegory and mystical Christian quests. This visionary work is thought to have been written in the years between 1370 and 1390, making it contemporary with another great Middle English poem – and the one that is credited with changing and shaping the English language for ever: *The Canterbury Tales*.

It was in London, in the final years of the fourteenth century, that Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343–1400) produced his long series of stories recounted by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. Crucially, instead of writing in French or Latin, the dominant literary languages of the time, he chose to compose his verses in a Middle English vernacular – one based on his own London dialect – and so helped set the template for everything that followed.

He also set another useful pattern for London literature by kicking things off in a pub. *The Canterbury Tales* starts in the Tabard on Borough High Street, a real-life tavern which was only pulled down at the end of the nineteenth century. (These days, the site is occupied by a business called ‘Copyprints’, which seems appropriate for the spiritual home of a work which became in 1478, thanks to William Caxton (1422–91), the first book in English to be printed on a commercial printing press.)

Even though Chaucer’s talkative pilgrims soon leave the Tabard and head towards Kent, London makes repeated appearances throughout the narrative. There are references to ‘draughts’ of ‘London ale’;

there's chatter about seeking 'chanterys for souls' (endowments for a priest to sing masses) in 'Saint Paul's'; and local taverns in Cheap-side and Southwark are name-checked. Madame Eglantine, Chaucer's prioress, also speaks French with a cockney accent – 'And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly, after the scole of Stratford atte Bowe'. ('Fetisly' means fluently, 'scole' is school . . . You will easily work out the rest.)

And then there's the fact that Chaucer was a Londoner himself. He was probably born in the city around 1343, and his father and grandfather were established London vintners. The latter was murdered near his house in Aldgate in 1313, a time when the area was notorious for its after-dark thefts, rapes and murders. Luckily, Chaucer survived, and lived for much of his life at 2 Aldgate High Street, in a twin-towered gatehouse that he got free of rent on the proviso that he allowed troops to use the towers in time of attack. (Which means that they presumably used it in 1381, when Wat Tyler and his angry followers stormed into the capital from the countryside during the Peasants' Revolt (see p. 27), passing directly under Chaucer's windows.)

Chaucer was a busy man. He worked as a courtier, diplomat, civil servant, and Clerk of the King's Works. He also studied law at the Inner Temple – and who knows how he also made time to write *The Canterbury Tales* (especially after 1374, when Edward III granted him a daily 'gallon of wine' for the rest of his life). Yet he managed it, producing endless ribald jokes and thousands of lines of exquisite poetry. He continued to work on *The Canterbury Tales* almost until the day he died.

Chaucer's last years were spent in Somerset, but he moved back to the capital in 1399, taking a lease on a residence within the close of Westminster Abbey. He also became the first person to be buried in Poets' Corner, a stone's throw from his home, in late 1400. Very few other landmarks from Chaucer's time remain: the closest you'll get are St Paul's (although the building Chaucer knew was destroyed in the Great Fire) and St Botolph Aldgate (which, while it has also been remodelled, has stood on the same spot for over 1,000 years). If you want to get a taste for something a little less devout, head over