

Thames – Sacred River by Peter Ackroyd.
Chatto and Windus 2007

All those who enjoyed Peter Ackroyd's splendid biography of London will revel in Thames, a book as majestic and awe-inspiring as the river itself.

In the course of fifteen glorious sections, Ackroyd traces the course of the Thames, from source to sea, and in so doing details almost every imaginable aspect of it. There is history and anecdote, plants and animals, geography, geology, and topography, architecture, business and, inevitably, weather.

Each chapter is so replete with information that in another author's hands it might be hard for the reader to sustain, let alone assimilate, but Ackroyd is such a master of language that the material flows beautifully.

Thames is not, however, just about the river itself, it is also about the people who, down the centuries, have lived and died on it and by it and had their lives shaped by it; from royal personages proceeding down it to coronations and executions to bargees and lock-keepers, and, inevitably, criminals too.

At the end of the book, in a chapter entitled An Alternative Topography, Ackroyd lists the names of all the principal places on the Thames' banks, from source to sea, explaining their names, providing a mini-history and mentioning aspects of contemporary interest.

Thames is a wonderful book by a writer at the height of his powers and a perfect tribute to the river that has shaped this country, on so many levels, more than almost anything else.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh