

Books

2000 years of 'London': You'll feel you've lived every one

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

There are longer books than *London*. There are certainly books that take more time to read. Bear both in mind while you're slogging through Edward Rutherford's new bestseller.

Imagine driving along an unfamiliar residential street, peering at dimly lit houses, looking for a certain address. You come to realize that the house numbers are going by twos, from 1106 to 1108 to 1110; the address you want is *miles* away. The speed limit is 25 and you grimly resign yourself to a long, slow ride. This is *London*.

An episodic history of the city told through the (fictional) lives of those who lived through it, each chapter of the book opens with the year Rutherford has set us in, and sometimes those chapters just progress too damn slowly. It's hard not to feel as though you'll *never* get to the days of the Beatles, much less Margaret Thatcher.

Like his only-book-you'll-read-this-summer counterparts, Marguerite Young and R.L. Delderfield, Rutherford specializes in hefty historical romances that lack a great deal of drama. They're books that you can start and stop anywhere, ideal for whiling away a vacation, although hauling *London* about could result in excess-baggage fees. His books

LONDON: The Novel

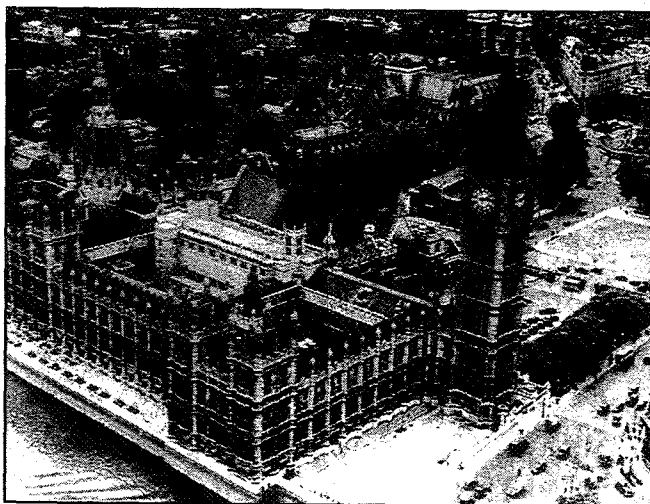
By Edward Rutherford
Crown, 829 pages, \$25.95

have strong, solid, definitive titles: *Sarum: The Novel of England*, *Ruska: The Novel of Russia*. (I guess *War and Peace* was just a novel of Russia.)

"LONDON" BEGINS at the beginning. I mean, *really* at the beginning: "Four hundred million years ago, when the continents were arranged in a quite different configuration. . ." Rutherford then moves on to Caesar's attack on England in 54 B.C., then life in 251 A.D., when "the province of Britain was calm," and on and on until the present, stopping and starting, skipping one year, two years, 10 years, 200 years.

He drops us into the city's history whenever something exciting is about to happen — a famous fire, riot, scandal, remark — and then triumphantly informs us of the event's importance: "So another landmark in English constitutional history was made"; "England's great Peasant Revolt had begun"; "Medical history has since conceded that the baby was probably legitimate"; "Julius Duckett had just invented government debt"; "The Stuart age had begun."

Rutherford is less interested in



holding our attention with simple character-based entertainment than in capturing *what it was like*. Wielding his prodigious research, he demonstrates the sweep of many institutions, natural and man-made — government, industry, marriage, sex, disease. He's ambitious, positively Micheneresque.

As in Michener's work, the shift between narrative and research is often bumpy. Discussing the misadventures of a prostitute, Rutherford writes, "Margery very clearly had the burning sickness." The story is

then interrupted for a quickie lecture: "It was a form of syphilis, though less severe than the strain which would appear in later centuries. When it had first come to Britain is uncertain; but, though the infection may have been brought by returning crusaders, there are clear indications of its presence on the island already from as early as Saxon times." Then, without a word of transition, back to Margery. The effect is to drag us out of the story and into the present.

The occasional "whilst" notwithstanding,

the writing isn't terrible, outside of a few egregious linguistic sins, e.g., "But who can ever say, in statecraft, what is theatre and what is real? One mirrors the other."

The area in which authors frequently violate the boundaries of good sense and taste, dialogue, is handled by Rutherford unusually and, ultimately, forgettably. Most of his characters are commoners possessed of limited vocabulary and imagination, and their lines are appropriately, well, limited. Even the celebrities who have occasional cameos don't fare all that well. At one point Rutherford introduces us to a young Geoffrey Chaucer, who grows up to utter some wretched lines: "I could tell dozens of stories and fit them all together. I shall call it the *Canterbury Tales*." An exception is a chapter titled "The Globe," set at the dawn of the 17th century and starring a flamboyant young playwright, a contemporary of Shakespeare. He strives to be witty and pithy, and the dialogue throughout the section is bright and entertaining.

Ultimately though, the characters' lines, while free of anachronisms, hold not a shred of interest for us. There's something to be said for cleverness, even at the risk of sounding a tiny bit artificial.

THE MUNDANE dialogue is indicative of the book's scale, which stays resolutely tiny. A few of the

individual dramas make entertaining, even tense, stories, but none lasts long enough for us to care about many of these small people and their small lives. Rutherford's attempt to counter the great-men-create-history myth is admirable but makes for less-than-compelling reading.

The same family names pop up frequently throughout the centuries, their characters occasionally sporting a Helpful Distinguishing Physical Characteristic (like the patch of white hair and webbed fingers that survive dozens of generations). But unless you keep checking with the extensive family tree that opens the book, you'll never keep all the names and places straight.

Not that it matters. Though the novel's sheer bulk affords it a certain mad grandeur, none of *London* actually leads to anything. The final hundred pages are no more thrilling than the first hundred. They're not supposed to be, they aren't.

Rutherford never does give us Margaret Thatcher or the Beatles. He gets to World War II ("The Blitz") with just 26 pages to go and, perhaps out of deference to the many marvelous postwar English novels, lets his grand saga quietly fizzle out.

Ultimately, *London*, like much historical fiction, has too much history and not enough fiction.

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