



By Permission of Heaven: The True Story of the Great Fire of London

Adrian Tinniswood

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A work of dynamic history that depicts in fascinating detail the cataclysm that was the Great Fire of London and the modern European capital that rose from its ashes.

"By Permission of Heaven" is a thrilling account of the Great Fire of London that makes terrific use of a vast array of first-person accounts and forensic investigation. The result is an impeccable achievement in historical storytelling that calls to mind equal parts Patricia Cornwell, Sebastian Junger, and Iain Pears.

"By Permission of Heaven" follows the conflagration from its beginnings in a Pudding Lane baker's kitchen in 1666 through the extreme devastation it wreaked. Adrian Tinniswood recounts the horror and wonder that gripped the city as the flames spread, destroying 13,200 homes, ninety-three churches, St. Paul's Cathedral, and every administrative building in the capital. While looting, savage violence, panic, and chaos reigned within the city and war raged without, hundreds of thousands buried their most precious possessions and fled, never again to see the London they knew.

Finely depicted here are the towering figures of Restoration England, such as Charles II, Samuel Pepys, and Christopher Wren, who played critical roles in the fire and its aftermath. Tinniswood also brings to life the schoolchildren, servants, clerks, and courtiers of the day as they watched the streets run with fire and the greatest city in Britain disappear before their eyes.

By Permission of Heaven: The True Story of the Great Fire of London Details

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From Reader Review By Permission of Heaven: The True Story of the Great Fire of London for online ebook

Carlton says

An enjoyable, readable and informative story of the Great Fire of London of September 1666 (350 years ago as I write).

It includes a brief introduction to the historical background (a serious outburst of plague in 1665 and war with the Dutch), which helps put the fire in context, and also several chapters about the aftermath, not just in terms of the rebuilding, but also political and cultural responses, with brief comment about key characters. Although written for the general reader with the brief historical background noted above, some familiarity with the general British history of the period will increase enjoyment and understanding. Having read Peter Ackroyd's Civil War last year, I was able to place some of the political/social implications quickly, which might otherwise be missed (or prove distracting).

Tinniswood leavens his historical narrative with plenty of interesting facts, such as 'Pudding' is a medieval word for entrails or bowels (the fire started in Pudding Lane) and touches of humour:

It is hard for a society which greets every winter with hysterical headlines about 'killer flu epidemics' to understand the effects of the plague. and

Sir Thomas took refuge in bluster. The fire wasn't all that serious, he said. 'A woman could piss it out.' And with that he went home to bed and a place in the history books.

There are also plenty of appropriate extracts from eyewitness accounts, not just from the justly famous Evelyn and Pepys, but also lesser known individuals.

I was lucky enough to be able to visit the exhibition on the Great Fire at the Museum of London and although there is inevitably overlap between the detailed book and the brief exhibition information boards, it was wonderful to see what fire engines and "squirts" used in the fire might have looked like.

Margaret says

A rattling good read. This is the story of the period leading up to London's Great Fire, the terrifying and confused days of the fire itself, and then the aftermath. Tinniswood has pieced together the human, political and economic consequences of this cataclysm in a measured, yet gripping fashion, recreating the period in telling detail. Who knew, for instance, that the clothworkers of Coventry would suffer so from the consequences of the fire? They'd just send down a £2000 consignment of cloth to London for export and it was consumed by the flames. Or that foreigners would come under the kind of suspicion and mistrust that asylum seekers here can feel in our own times? This is an evocative, gripping account.

Avis Black says

The author spends too much time on boring side details and not enough on fighting the fire, so the book lacks drama.

Nomanisan says

Scholarly but readable; author includes amazing information about the fire, its context, and its aftermath. I can now recognize the thinking of the time which said that there **MUST** have been involvement from the Dutch and French. The history I used to teach has come alive while I have been reading this book.

Tim says

Interesting read especially for someone interested in the history of London

Andrew says

To say this is exhaustive is an understatement. I feel like I know everything there is to know about every brick and scorched and scruffy Londoner. I found it detracted from the overall narrative unfortunately and it felt like a slog, despite it being about a massive fire. Maybe I'm just thick and need my history span around a pretty narrative.

Dara says

This book was my introduction to Adrian Tinniswood's work. If you could go back in time and experience the fire for yourself you would not have a better insight into the devastation. We are given experiences and vantage points from all walks of life, from kings to common people, as well as the attitudes and prejudices that fed the fire as surely as the wooden buildings.

Shane says

fascinating, vastly concise, great historical reference.

Mike says

By Permission of Heaven gets **3 Stars** for a well-rounded look at the 1666 Great Fire of London. Tinniswood takes us on a tour of middle 17th Century England just prior to the fire. England is at war with the Dutch and French. London has just suffered (and continues to suffer) under the plague (in 1665, over 7,000 people per week died of the plague in London). It is only 6 years since Charles II was restored to the throne. The heir to the throne is married to a Catholic and is suspected to be a Catholic himself. Being Catholic in England at this time is not a good thing. The title of the book is taken from a plaque that blames the fire on "Papists".

(view spoiler)

Being Catholic or even worse, a priest, could get you in big trouble: (view spoiler) Ouch!

The fire starts in a bakery and, aided by gale force winds, quickly spreads out of control. Tinniswood covers the spreading fire, efforts to fight it and the impact on the population. Over 70,000 people were left homeless but amazingly, the death toll due to the fire is only in the single digits. I was hoping for more on the fire and how the people survived the coming winter. Was the fire set or an accident? Much evidence says accidental but a Frenchman “confessed” to setting the fire and was convicted and hanged. Most everyone thought he was lying and not quite right in the head. Pinning down the cause was an interesting discussion. The King was adamant it was an accident because, if it was attributed to enemy action, he could lose his throne just like his Dad, Charles I. No need for a monarch that can’t protect his folks. Legally, the tenants of the houses and buildings would be liable to rebuild the structures if it was an accident. If it was an ‘act of war’, the landlords would be responsible for all repairs. How to figure out who pays to rebuild? Lawyers, of course:

The Fire Court was in session.

In the seventeenth century, as in the twenty-first, litigation was the Devil’s work. Claims heard under civil law routinely involved lots of money, lengthy delays, complications of Dickensian proportions; then, as now, the only sure winners were the lawyers. And the Fire of London promised to unleash a flood of actions the like of which had never been seen before.

Tinniswood spends some time on the legal wrangling after the fire and I found it interesting. He also brings in the rebuilding efforts and the architects. Christopher Wren is just an amateur architect but events conspire to bring him to the fore. I did not think Tinniswood spent enough time on the rebuilding efforts. Religion figures throughout the story, used to support various factions and their ideas. Overall, a very good recounting of the Great Fire. Any visitor to or resident of London will find this a great place to read about how London came to be in its current form.

iain meek says

Well researched and written. Fascinating to discover that many at the time regarded it as a Popish plot.

Sue says

Interesting documentary mixed with anecdotes of day to day life in the times and political background.

Meaghan says

This is an excellent piece of history, a gripping hour-by-hour account of the Great Fire of London and its aftermath. The descriptions, many of them taken from diaries of the period, make you feel like you were

really there. London was completely trashed -- picture New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, except with fire instead of flood. Yet, surprisingly, there were very few fatalities (perhaps a dozen or less), and London as a whole displayed admirable fortitude in coping with the disaster; it was able to stagger to its feet and begin rebuilding almost immediately.

If I can fault the book I may say that I think it began too slowly. There are forty pages of exposition, describing how London and its people were in 1666, before the Great Fire starts. But it's not a big deal, and I think connoisseurs of popular British history would really enjoy this.

Mercedes Rochelle says

The story of the Great Fire of London is much more complicated than I originally supposed. I did not realize that England was at war with the Dutch even as the fire started, and this hostility amplified an event already chaotic to the average Londoner. I also didn't know that the country was in the grip of an extraordinary gale which blew for days and was probably the prime reason the flames spread so relentlessly. What looks to us like a horrific natural disaster was taken in a different context by many contemporaries, whose paranoia increased as the fire spread. People were imagining arsonists throwing fireballs into windows, and foreigners were suddenly set upon by vengeful townspeople. Immigrants of Dutch and French descent were particular targets, and even the Duke of York made it his business to shield high-status refugees in his palace until the craze died off (and he was later reproached for this suspicious behavior).

Author Adrian Tinniswood gives us a day-by-day description of the terrible week surrounding the fire. It was interesting to see the map at the beginning of every chapter showing how far the fire spread by each morning. We get an excellent description of the confusion and frustration, and it was easy to see how things got out of hand. People moved their belongings once, twice, even more. Nothing was safe, even the crypt below St. Paul's, as printers, stationers, and booksellers were to discover, much to their chagrin. People were so busy taking care of their own stuff, most couldn't spare the time to fight the fire. And why bother, anyway? There seemed to be no stopping it. Pulling down buildings to create a fire stop was the main technique for fighting fires, and it only took one or two sparks (driven by the gale) to jump to the next building and create a new inferno. Soon the thieves stepped in and looted undefended property, adding insult to proverbial injury.

Once the gale stopped, the fire slowed. Halfway through the book, we see how the government tried to get things moving immediately. Plans for rebuilding the city were not lacking, though the will to make huge changes was fraught with conflicts of interest. Just surveying the thousands of vacant lots was an enormous task; added to that was compensation to be paid for widening the roads. Additionally, I was surprised to learn that tenants were responsible for rebuilding, not the landlord—unless the fire was an act of war, which helped explain why so much effort was spent in finding the alleged terrorists. The majority of Londoners were leasehold tenants, so rebuilding was a major issue. “While you were still reeling from the loss of your home, your business, quite possibly your stock and your personal possessions, you realized that even though you had no means of earning a living, you still owed your quarterly rent; and your landlord could still take you to law and force you to rebuild your house.” The King set up courts to find a compromise between tenants and landlords; many decisions gave the tenant a break on the rent or extended the lease to help relieve the stress: “if landlords couldn't be persuaded to contribute to the rebuilding, and tenants couldn't afford to do it themselves, then just how was London supposed to rise from the ashes?” This is so unfathomable to the 21st century reader, used to relying on insurance and government aid. How these people recovered from such a disaster is difficult to comprehend.

There was much to absorb regarding the great Fire of London and this book packed in a lot of information while still moving along very well. My only quibble is that so much emphasis was given to things that didn't happen (plans to rebuild that were rejected, architects and civil planners who went by the wayside) that by the end I was quite confused as to what exactly did happen! But I learned a lot about this event and in the future I will look at London with much more respect.

Jerry Smith says

In depth account of the Great Fire of London with a lot of detailed context and personalities. Sets the scene of the conflagration very well, England essentially (as we always have really) warring with the rest of Europe - notably the Dutch and French at this time.

There is a lot to learn about this fascinating period of English history and this book puts the fire in context. As a result there is a lot to read and the historical events are woven into the story of the fire that lasted several days.

Easy to read though so you don't need prior historical knowledge to get a lot out of it.

Susan Abernethy says

This is an excellent book. Read it a few years ago and am re-reading as research for a blog post on the The Great Fire. Really well written.
