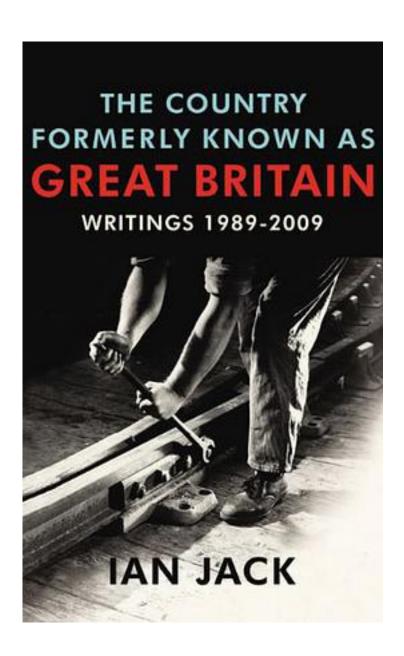
The Country Formerly Known as Great Britain



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出版者:Random House UK

出版时间:2009-09-01

装帧:Hardcover

isbn:9780224087353

In this selection from over twenty years of reporting and writing, Ian Jack takes us to a place of which there are now only memories and ruins: the Great Britain that gave us the Industrial Revolution, a nation that led the world in feats of engineering, a Britain of empire, a place of vital cities, each with their own unique identity, a country whose residual presence can still be found in the strangest corners of the world. These pieces set out to deal with contemporary Britain – national disasters, football matches, obesity, 'chavs' – but are drawn back in time, vexed by the question of what came before. In 'Women and Children First', watching the film Titanic leads to an investigation into the legend of Wallace Henry Hartley, the famous band leader of the doomed liner, and a journey into the Lancashire mill towns of the early twentieth century; 'The 12.10 to Leeds', a magnificent report on the Hatfield rail crash, begins its hunt for clues in the eighteenth century in the search for those responsible. We travel further afield, finding vestiges of a vanished Britain in the Indian Subcontinent. Here we meet characters like the maverick English missionary, scientist and linguist William Carey, credited with importing India's first steam engine, or Mr Goonawardene, a wise lunatic who spends his days at Colombo railway station – men whose stories are only possible because of the British empire. And then there is the incredible history of McCluskiegunge, the still-inhabited Anglo-Indian enclave whose founder envisaged an independent homeland for the mixed-race people of the empire. This wonderful collection brings together Ian Jack's most important and brilliant pieces. Full of the style, knowledge and intimacy that make his work so special, they are the perfect introduction to the work of one of the country's finest writers.

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