

Psycho Semantics

HIS WORKS MAY BE CELEBRATED AS FOUNDATION STONES OF MODERN PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY, BUT IAIN SINCLAIR REFUSES TO BE SEEN AS THE GENRE'S NEWEST PROPHET. HE TELLS PATRICK KINGSLEY ABOUT THE FOOTPRINT LONDON 2012 WILL LEAVE ON HACKNEY

For an author who supposedly personifies its revival, Iain Sinclair is startlingly ambivalent about psychogeography. "It's nothing to do with me," he says softly, swivelling on a Union chair after last week's Olympics debate. "It's a nuisance. It's something which existed in the late 50s and early 60s that disappeared for many years and then was reinvented simply as a provocative device. And now it's become pretty much anything you want it to mean."

Sinclair's attitude is unexpected: the man is an icon of psychogeography. He has published nearly 30 works associated with the subject, he's shot Super-8 films about it, and one of his early works, *Lud Heat*, went on to exemplify the London psychogeographical resurgence. Peter Ackroyd calls him a "visionary" of the genre. Will Self describes Sinclair's books as must-reads. And Merlin Coverley notes, in his introductory survey of the subject (called simply *Psychogeography*), that "if there is one person who is responsible for the current popularity that psychogeography enjoys, then it is Iain Sinclair."

Why, then, is Sinclair almost scornful of the genre? Perhaps psychogeography's transition – from a marginal, almost occult fascination to a very marketable, middle-class brand – has caused him to drift away from the subject. But Sinclair himself denies even this: "I never drifted into it! My use of it was pretty minimal in terms of my writing. At the start of my book, *Lights Out For The Territory*, I did do a V-shaped walk which was a sort of psychogeographical project. But the walking round the M25 [in *London Orbital*] – that wasn't a psychogeographical project. It was just a project of human perversity, a geographical project about deciding what London topography was and where London finished."

And what of *Lud Heat*, which explored the behavioural effect Hawksmoor's London churches had on their neighbouring, non-Christian population in the 70s? "That was not psychogeography; that was much more to do with an English tradition belonging to people like Alfred Watkins [a nineteenth-century archaeologist]. Though *Lud Heat* has become this psychogeographical text in retrospect, psychogeography was never even heard of or thought of at that time. The subject didn't occur to me when I was writing it. I was writing it simply from the perspective of a gardener."

Yet perhaps it's not surprising that the flag-bearer for such an ambiguous genre has such an ambiguous attitude to it himself. After all: what is psychogeography? No one seems sure. It's a very hazy idea. It concerns cities – traditionally London and Paris – and it involves walking: this much is certain. And it involves recording, with words or photography, what happens on one's

walk. But the purpose of psychogeography has always been unclear. For some, it's a means of examining how buildings affect our behaviour; for others, it's the more intangible 'reading' of a city. For the French, it was a political medium; for the British, it's more of a literary phenomenon. And whereas Guy Debord and his gang of 60s Parisian Situationists said it was subversive – a rebellion against typical,

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workaday city activity – Peter Ackroyd (author of *London: The Biography*) argues the opposite: for him, psychogeography is simply a way of recognising the way the city controls our every action. In short, then, psychogeography's only defining feature is its lack of definition. If the man who reinvented the concept can state that he "never was a psychogeographer" and even deny "much sympathy or interest in [the subject's] manifestations", perhaps this is only fitting.

But if Sinclair doesn't identify himself in psychogeographical terms, how exactly would he define his writing? Very simply, as it turns out: "I buy into a union between writing and walking. I think there is as much of that going on – or more – than what could be described as psychogeography. I have this notion that there are two kinds of writers: there's one called 'pods', and there's another called

'peds'. Peds are the kind of writers who very definitely have, within their writing, this rhythm of journeys and walks and pilgrimages and quests. And pods are these other writers who sit in a room and just draw the world to them in whatever ways they want to. And there is a very distinct gap between the two."

By his own definition, Iain Sinclair is clearly a walking writer, a ped. And it follows that his latest work, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*, while it

lacks "anything that could really be described as psychogeographical", is based on a series of walks through Sinclair's native ground in north-east London (one of which features Emmanuel's English DoS, Robert Macfarlane). It's a timely celebration of Hackney, an area already massively affected – for the worse, Sinclair feels strongly – by the new Olympic site. The book argues that while "Hackney itself is magnificent, it's always battling with a level of input from whoever's trying to control it from above, for generation after generation."

For this particular generation, Sinclair suggests, the battle is with the Olympic developers and their lackeys on the local council. "There is suffering on an enormous scale because of [the Olympic developments]... Local people have been kicked out, the building works have released toxins into the water, we've lost allotments, we've lost the football pitches in Hackney Marshes, we've lost fourteen swimming pools, cycle lanes..." And while Sinclair does see some advantages to the rebuilding – "quite conservative people have become very active as a result

of it" – in general he is despondent. "What I once thought was a disaster is now much worse than that: it's a catastrophe."

Yet perhaps there are encouraging comparisons between the Olympic site and Sinclair's old Hawksmoor churches? Will the former not contribute to London's palimpsestic nature in the same way as the latter? "No, I don't think so. I don't think any of this will last long enough to do that. The actual Olympic structures are so tawdry that they'll be gone soon, whereas the Hawksmoor churches are so massive that even though they went through periods of neglect, somehow they hung on. The Olympic site, by contrast, will be a totally transitional landscape. It has no notion of permanence. It's built to be destroyed, to be revised."

Sinclair's forthright views have seen him banned, hilariously, from his local library (where he was scheduled to give a talk) by the Hackney council. Publicly-wise, this was a blessing: "It proved the thesis of the book and it was a catastrophic piece of PR [for the council]. Instead of being a very small event with ten or twelve of us sitting around a library chatting about a book, I'm on the *Today* programme defending the freedom of speech." The underlying argument, however, still causes Sinclair rancour – "the whole thing was about mendacity, and spin, and lies" – and he's still visibly irritated by it all when his debating partner Andrew Gilligan, a hack who certainly knows about spin, swaggers into the room.

Gilligan joins in the Olympic grumbling. "I am simply going to leave town," he promises, before reiterating points he made during the debate itself: the Games will clog up the city; they'll be expensive. Sinclair smiles: "We're more or less obliged to have a major terrorist attack to justify the expense." Gilligan, ever the journo, turns to me: "There's your quote."

Iain Sinclair's latest book, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*, is out now.



Psycho paths

1943	Born in Cardiff
1970s	Studies at Trinity College, Dublin. Works as gardener in East London.
1975	Publishes <i>Lud Heat</i>
1991	Publishes <i>Downriver</i>
1997	Publishes <i>Lights Out for the Territory</i>
2002	Publishes <i>London Orbital</i>

VOMIT ADVENTURE (STARTS ON PAGE 13): Yes, it's so effective that it actually sickens you. That's the real reason why you're vomiting left, right and centre. Anyway, back to the adventure: you decide to go along to the hustings to give Norah back her virus. You need to attract her attention. »p29 Ask her a pertinent question. »p30 Vomit all over CUSU.