

*an interview with*

# I A I N S I N C L A I R



walked to Iain's house. I felt it would be a betrayal of the spirit of the thing if I didn't. So much of

Iain's writing is triggered by his walks around London. As it turned out he only lived ten minutes on foot from my friend's house. My hopes for an epic flaneur's perambulation (DeQuincey's search for the mysterious "Northwest Passage") ending in Blakean revelation were dashed. Aimless strolling or dawdling's the key: Observe the discarded city deeply and yet remain unattached. I, however had an agenda and a target and so it was bound to fail.

"Ah you've got your A to Z then?" Iain said knowingly when I arrived. A cartoon on the wall by Martin Rowson from the Independent on Sunday showed a back seat driver barking out directions for the house of Doctor Dee and other locations favoured by Iain, the London Psychogeographical Association and Peter Ackroyd. The punchline was that the navigator was reading from the Iain Sinclair edition of the A to Z. In light of such overwhelming evidence I confessed all. I should've known he'd only live up the road as I'd been going to Brick Lane market, passing Christ Church in Spitalfields and eating at Pellici's for years on my visits to the smoke. All had appeared in Iain's works of fiction at some time or another. He talked of Pellici's being the Kray's favourite cafe and then we settled down to the interview.

**PT: If you have any, what are the specifics of your writing habits?**

IS: I'll try and hit the flow, what I've previously thought about the day before and write solidly up 'til about 12.30 or so. Then take off out into the town letting whatever I've been working on kind of drift through my head in a very random way, generally something sparks off that you haven't thought about.

**That's important. The notion of flaneurs reading the streets is in your work. Would you agree?**

I've lived here for 30-odd years so this landscape is like a map of my own brain. I can go to different parts of it and trigger off different things. I can actually walk out into the very things I'm writing about and check on them. At the moment I'm working on a novel which is set in Wales and the West Country ...

**...That's quite a departure for you...**

It is, with most of my books and essays being concerned with London. I made a very careful series of maps and charts of what I'd like to do. And when you actually get into the writing it changes instantly and everything I'd pre-planned goes out the window, but that process has been worth going through. What happens is you have these disciplines, rituals you go through. You hope some overdrive kicks in and overrides everything you'd pre-planned and gives you a voice of the other, a sort of strangeness, a ventriloquism. Talking to the dead takes over.

**That's like a Shaman has a set ritual, a contained procedure to release something non-contained, out there...**

Precisely. I do think it's a magical act. You do a lot that may not quite work and then suddenly at some point you recognise that you're on a roll. Words just flash. You don't even know they're the right ones but you trust the process, and then, sometime later, you interrogate this material, see if it holds up. You niggle and shift and make your changes. I'm still influenced by the old Kerouacian notion of spontaneity and non-revision. At least in the initial writing.

**I think it's the same notion free jazz players had when they said "the music is coming through me" would you agree?**

Very much so. The voice comes through. I should have written this new book, 'Landor's Tower,' straight after my first novel, 'White Chappell Scarlet Tracings.' I did the ground work, took myself off to a cottage outside Hay on Wye. But things didn't work out. Now twelve years of

material has accumulated. I really believe in that long, long process of building up images. And then you just chuck it away. But it is in there and when you hit it you want the voices of these people who have vanished and gone to come through you. All you've done is go through a long process of training and preparation for this thing that's got to happen instantaneously. So it's two systems of time operating in one go.

**You seem to be picking up on stuff that was, for instance, reported in the news and left open ended...**

You see these things in newspapers, reports of events you have attended, or accounts of a subject you know something about and you realise how inadequate, how fictional, the report is. Wrong in detail, bent in interpretation. You go to the place that is mentioned by a journalist and you'll access a totally different and unexpected story. I've always been fascinated by these acts of detection. That's what I've been doing over the course of the years, visiting and getting to know the places. Strange patterns start to emerge that don't really resolve themselves until you've started writing. I think certain places have very heavy prints and if you blunder into this territory and your mind is cast in the right mode you start to do completely irrational things. It's psychic energy of a sort which has a recurring pattern throughout time. Which goes back to the very first things I ever wrote about the Hawksmoor churches, from working as a gardener around them. It's like the labourers building the pyramids trying to understand this mythic system which runs beyond it. I could see that crimes had always occurred in the same pattern across the map and it's intriguing to tease that out...

**The Hawksmoor churches seem to attract alcoholics as well...**

(Laughs) Indeed, yes.

**Your work plays with time in that it's almost the zen thing, that everything is in one big moment. "A series of constantly collapsing presents..."**



Yes. That's where I'm finding myself with 'Landor's Tower.' The time structure is complex because I wanted to operate in a perpetual present tense that allowed me to fade in and out of material that belonged in the 60's, in the 17th century and the 19th century. It's not immediately obvious to the reader that something strange is going on, reality and temporal expectations are being played with. You have to travel through journals, video tapes, quotations from books - all of which may or may not be fraudulent. The force

of voices from the past is so strong that I'm actually having conversations with people who died forty or four hundred years ago.

**I noticed your address contains the word "Albion" and I think this is appropriate. A historical name for England of Celtic origin but it suggests a mythical place. A fourth world kind of place, a similar example might be Kafka's Amerika with the "K."**

Yes. Well it's theoretically a total accident that we ended up here. There are millions of streets called 'Albion' in Britain. The thing was, strangely, having moved here it became the point of taking an interest in a Blakean sense of London as a mythological place.

**That's what "Albion" suggests.**

It's as if you were pre-ordained to hit this particular address. I'd lived in all sorts of different parts of London without ever settling to any of them, I really came to Hackney totally by accident because a friend had got a communal house where there was somewhere to stay for a time. Then there's a sense of recognition that somewhere you've never been to before suits exactly my project of how I wanted to work: Find somewhere and dig into it and turn out more stuff over a long period of time...

**I suppose it's important that "Albion" is in your address, as location and place is very important in your writing...**

Very important, yeah, very important.

**Could you tell us about your beginnings as a writer and the Albion Village Press?**

We'd all been loosely connected with film making in some way. I was trying initially to form myself into a company to work in the orthodox film or TV industry. Very soon it became apparent, as with publishing, (I'd written steadily through the 60's, small magazines, particularly in Ireland) that the way to do it was to do your own, take control of it, don't waste any more energy trying to go to meetings and raise money. You could do it quite cheaply here. The first books I published cost me about 50 or 60 quid. The printers lived locally and were happy to work with us and to design it and so on. They weren't going to make money, but you could sell enough through readings to do the next one. One book I did on Allen Ginsberg, 'Kodak Mantra Diaries' was based on a documentary film I did for WRTV in Cologne. We sold 1500 copies of that one, which gave us the money to publish smaller, stranger, lesser books.

**What was Ginsberg like?**

Very inspiring. This was in 1967 and we were living in Belsize Park, which was quite near the Roundhouse. The Dialectics of the Congress of Liberation were going on and that was when we did the film. West German TV said yes, they would pay

for a documentary. I'd never met him, but I discovered he was living in a fairly grand mansion near Regent's Park. I rang the doorbell. The woman who owned the house said you can see him, because there were strange people coming in and out all the time. He appeared and we said, there's only 2 of us but we'd like to make a film and he said "yeah, fine" and we started filming the next day. He was very helpful, he wasn't patronising in any way and he gave massive interviews. At the end I thought it was a pity not to do the book, because with film you're using short extracts. And I wanted to include everything we'd got on tape, not just with him but with R.D. Laing and Stokely Carmichael. It's a snapshot of that period of time which is interesting. Most of them are now dead.

**I believe you were in correspondence with Burroughs too...**

When I was in Dublin I edited a magazine. I got in touch with Burroughs, he gave us material, so I started publishing him before 'Naked Lunch' came out. He was living in Tangiers. I wrote off to him and was amazed to get this stuff back. They were open and accessible in those days, it wasn't like Burroughs was some remote superstar, he was somebody you could start corresponding with. After the film with Ginsberg I wanted to do one with Burroughs, the Germans were initially interested but I think they looked at Burroughs' work and panicked. We had a script ready, much more formal and organised than the Ginsberg one, which was really done off the cuff. Burroughs was up for it but then he got really tangled up with scientology and it became too difficult to get in touch with him. So it never got made. I visited him in Lawrence, Kansas years later to do a radio programme.

**This is after Scientology then?**

Oh yes this was not long before he died.

**So he didn't run you through the E-Meter first?**

(Laughs) No, no.

**Kathy Acker talks of "lineage" being important, tracing herself back through Burroughs. I think Ginsberg links with you via the Kodak Mantra Diaries and you in turn link via Ginsberg with Blake, which is evident in your writing. Would you agree? Which influences do you have,**

**what is it that you're building on and building with?**

Ginsberg saw himself as part of a literary tradition and Blake's prophetic voice spoke to him in Harlem. He launched 'Howl' on the back of that. He had a very strong sense of the English visionary romantic tradition. Not only Blake but Christopher Smart and Yeats. He could recite yards of Yeats' Crazy Jane poems, yards of Whitman. He was a scholarly and passionate individual, he wasn't a freak. He always recognised Kerouac as being a grander and more inspired talent than himself. He worked at it hard and he got there. But Kerouac had something that he, even as a poet couldn't reckon with.

**He did seem to help the others out, promoting their work...**

He did a lot for both Burroughs and Kerouac, he touted their manuscripts around and they all mythologised each other. They'd learned from what had happened in literary circles in Paris. That you bring your friends into it and gradually a kind of group emerges. It goes back to the wretched Bloomsbury group, it's always worked.

**Just from the point of view of giving the media something larger than one person to focus on I suppose...**

Yes.

**Do you see yourself as part of "lineage?"**

A lineage in my own enthusiasm. I don't know if I can claim it, but that's what I learned from, that's where I'm coming from. Writers like Celine. The visionary tradition by way of the beats and the Black Mountain writers. I've never been enthusiastic about English rationalism. English culture, poetry ... Larkin got side tracked into a very negative area. It's anti-european and anti world, small islander. From Evelyn Waugh to Kingsley Amis.

**The Situationists had the notion of the "derive," a drift through urban space. I think it links with "The search for the Northwest Passage" from DeQuincey's 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater,' which was taken up and used by psychogeographers, (the London Psychogeographic Association for one) like the search for the Holy Grail. Were you influenced by all this?**

Yeah. What changes is the interpretation. I've been doing what everybody else has

been doing for years, but now there's a convenient label, a franchise: 'psychogeography.' It goes back to DeQuincey, the Romantics. You wander this landscape without necessarily having preconceived notions, follow your impulses and drift into the street. Sometimes this is looked on as a derangement of the senses, a hallucinogenic high, a drug-vision transposed onto the town. Sometimes it becomes Situationism or Psychogeography or this Baudelarian dandy looking at reflections in windows. Sometimes it's Walter Benjamin. It is still the same human impulse to get out, to align yourself with what is out there and to treat the city as a kind of book or library, an open gallery, exploded museum. All of these things are true and it means covering the city from night to day and it means noticing the meat markets and slaughterhouses, the pubs, going underground to cellars and sewers and up into church towers. The theory and description is redundant as far as I'm concerned, you can apply whatever franchising slogans to the same impulse in whatever historical period.

**You said of tagging in 'Lights Out For the Territory:' "Urban graffiti is all too often a signature without a document, an anonymous autograph ... an announcement of nothingness ... erasure of the envelope of identity." Thing is, we're now so saturated with pop culture and information in general that Alan Moore called it "a carpet bombing of the mind which pounds our inner landscapes flat." Martin Amis said "the information is nothing." Do you think that tagging and the messageless nature of pop culture reflects the hegemony of big corporations over our media?**

A lot of it is just the projectile vomiting of alphabet soup. It's a kind of neurosis. I just saw tagging as a way of defining part of what we were talking about before, about exploded museums and galleries. Defining a bit of the city, therefore re-claiming it. It's like a Duchamp readymade, pick a wall or a train and define yourself. Then there's stuff like "Free Reg Kray" or "George Davis is Innocent" up there for years, the person in question is almost forgotten, the case is gone, he's guilty many times over. But this slogan is still up there with Coca-Cola and Ford, it's quite weird.

**This links back to your writing in that it's to do with space allocation and people trying to reclaim a bit of that space for themselves...**

Yeah, I certainly found when I hit a part of town where there is no graffiti ... I felt the energy level drop, something was wrong. The people weren't kicking enough. Even though the graffitied part looked like an eyesore you felt that people were doing something, saying something. I like the mixture in parts of London where political slogans, anarchist slogans, totally random doodles, signatures and tags were all mixed up into one massive soup.

#### **Great material for a writer...**

Yeah it's language again, back to collaging, the beginnings of modernism, which is also the beginning of psychoanalysis. The voices within. Then it's back to shamanism again. Spontaneous outpourings of nonsense language that you want to get down somewhere without having to go through official publication channels.

**On the surface, Patrick Keiller's film 'Robinson In Space' seems like a deadpan narration of places of interest in Britain. A kind of statistical blue plaque guide. Because everyone in Britain will be familiar with somewhere in this film, it is more potent than it seems. We are, as Alan Moore says, "half submerged within the text ... therefore reachable." The narrative is booby trapped with references to our own realities. I think your work is booby trapped with references to other sources or documents already encountered or to be encountered in the future. Would you agree with this?**

Yes. (Laughter.)

**...The HG Wells martian landing is narrated in 'Robinson In Space,' like the famous radio broadcast, i.e, as if it actually happened. "Robinson took me to see the crater ... the Martians destroyed most of Surrey." Fiction is then backed up by what at least appears to be fact: "500 tons of Mars is estimated to land on earth each year."**

Yes. That's the way to do it. I had a few problems with 'Robinson in Space' in that the film reworked the conceits of 'London' which had, at first viewing, taken me by surprise. You were thrown into this ambiguity of how much you were going to trust this narrative. It took quite a while to sort that out, the second time round you know where it's coming from. Although I'm very sympathetic with his argument, in a way I thought - even before 'Robinson' started - that there was nowhere to go.

They dropped off the end of the world. And it was quite interesting to see it in conjunction with a film like Andrew Kotting's 'Gallivant.' There is a kind of heroic shape to that quest. The meetings with people are much more random and strange, whereas Patrick's is like a lecture, it looks like a demonstration. That is why the book of Robinson works almost as well as the film ...

**...it is almost like a slide show...**

Yeah. The static camera films like a postcard.

**It's like a kind of Zen reality, the "stills" are movement within something that is non-moving. The camera does not move, the world does. Past present and future framed in widescreen. Again, a similar claim could be made for your work I think...**

Oh yeah, the anger which lies beneath all of this is converted into his take on history, which I am very sympathetic to.

**Language has great power. Mike Moorcock said "a cunning phrase can burn a town." How do you feel language is used and abused?**

I think language isn't taken seriously enough. Politicians are trained not to say anything, whatever question comes out they turn into another question or go on talking and the words are coming out but they have no resonance at all. Whereas with the best poets they know that every single half-word, every breath is important, a single phrase, as Mike Moorcock says, can burn down a town. I'm making a film with Chris Petit, called 'Asylum' an odd piece about the destruction of cultural memory. It features the poet Ed Dorn, as well as James Sallis and Mike Moorcock. Mike is the ultimate millennial artist. He has produced this huge archive of work. "The multiverse is a map of my own brain" he says. He's done everything from Tarzan comics and Sexton Blake pulps to vast panoramic novels like the Pyatt books. You hum it, he'll play it.

**When I was about 13, 14 and picking up on stuff like Burroughs, I'd go into WH Smiths and get what appeared to be sci-fi novels which turned out to be highly experimental stuff like the Jerry Cornelius books ...**

Moorcock, and especially Ballard had read Burroughs and were clearly interested, what with them writing for 'New Worlds.'

Moorcock's 'The Deep Fix' is straight out of Burroughs, all that cut-up stuff and the recycling of his stories. New Worlds was the liveliest thing that happened in British writing at the time.

**Moorcock also played with time in narrative in a very experimental way, in the 'Jerry Cornelius' stuff particularly.**

Yes, he also had the notion of a multiverse, which goes back to John Cowper Powys. This notion of multiple realities and jumping from one layer to another, characters appear and disappear. Moorcock's in Texas surrounded by all this material from Notting Hill, in total exile. It's like Burroughs in Lawrence, Kansas. They're all hiding out in some kind of writers witness protection program.

**Like James Joyce in exile in Trieste I suppose...**

Yeah. Moorcock's thought of as being this West London writer but he's roamed the planet recklessly. Another wife another country! Working like a 19th century writer, to order, a book a week, he wrote books in 3 days. Now it's getting tougher, living in Texas, there's no day-to-day material to draw on. Like Derek Raymond, he's remembering the fantastic city of his youth. If you don't drive - and Mike doesn't, despite owning a hatful of licenses - you can't move in Bastrop. You live and work in the bunker. It's a double exile. The whole project becomes survival, psychological, emotional, creative.

**It must be similarly strange for you writing about Wales from London, which is seen as your subject pretty much exclusively...**

Well, it's been a 12 year project so there were endless trips gathering material before I got to the point of writing. I'm actually enjoying it more than doing another London thing, because it allows me to be more fictional, it's pushing me to be wilder, more inventive. I can't simply open my door and check out the next paragraph. I'm having to confront images from my childhood, dreams of a landscape that may or may not exist.

**Your method enters your work. "Another day another notebook" goes into the text of 'Downriver.' We are mostly aware of you as the observer, sometimes even when fictional characters are employed. Is this a consciously developed facet of your style?**

My style came out of the Kerouacian notebook idea. He watched everything, but is a participant in what he's observing, so that's already a fictional device. The Kerouac that appears in his novels is not the Kerouac that appears in biographical accounts. Look at Burroughs' 'Junky.' Is it a pulp novel? Is it a document of what happened to him? With Proust and 20th century novel formations, the writer himself is a well of consciousness, he becomes almost a ghost in his own work. He's in the landscape to a greater or lesser degree. I'd prefer to be in there, rather than pretend it's all an abstraction at one remove.

*Iain Sinclair was interviewed by Steve Hanson, © Ptolemaic Terrascope, March 2000*

### **Bibliography**

Books:

'Kodak Mantra Diaries' - Albion Village Press 1969  
'Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge' - Vintage 1995  
'White Chappell Scarlet Tracings' - Vintage 1995  
'Downriver' - Vintage 1995  
'Radon Daughters' - Vintage 1995  
'Lights Out for the Territory' - Granta 1998  
'Liquid City' (with Marc Atkins) - Reaktion 1999  
'Rodinsky's Room' - Granta 1999  
'Crash' - BFI 1999  
'Sorry Meniscus' - Profile 1999

(All are novels except 'Kodak Mantra Diaries' which is a documentary work, 'Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge' which is a prose/poetry/essay hybrid and 'Sorry Meniscus' which is an extended essay on the millennium dome. 'Crash' was written about the Cronenberg/Ballard film)

His poetry collections include:

'Back Garden Poems,' 'Muscat's Wurm,' 'The Birth Rug' and 'Flesh Eggs and Scalp Metal.'

Iain has also written for The Guardian, Independent, Telegraph, Sight and Sound, Modern Painters and the London Review of Books. He has worked (with artist Dave McKean) on the text/graphic novel experiment 'Slow Chocolate Autopsy.' He has also made a series of films for Channel 4 with Christopher Petit, notably 'The Cardinal and the Corpse.'