

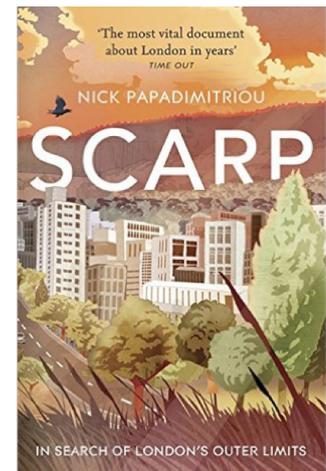
Nick Papadimitriou:

SCARP

Sceptre (2013) 288pp.

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Nick Papadimitriou's book is endorsed on its back cover by both Iain Sinclair and Will Self. It gives us a strong clue to the sort of territory that he will be exploring, and to the probability that this will be another eulogy to the edgelands. And so it is, although one with something of a difference. The geographical area in question is one of those neither-town-nor-country places that mark the London outskirts, a ridge of high land that lies to the north west of the city, running, roughly, from Harefield to Hertford. Papadimitriou has christened the area Scarp. It is, however, bound together by little else than the name, having, by his own admission, no obvious cultural currency or coherent identity. It is, he says, an imaginative construct, and one which 'persists in the infrastructural unconscious of the northern reaches of the city'. He treats it, not so much as a geographical or historical entity but as a living thing in its own right and his writing arises from the voices in which he hears it speak. All of which might serve as notice of the strange direction in which we are about to be taken.

Scarp reads at times like the documentary equivalent of magical realism. It slips regularly between fact and fantasy, with the boundaries between them becoming increasingly blurred as the book progresses. It begins in a small, though sufficiently unsettling, way with the insertion of invented detail into otherwise factual accounts. A series of fatal accidents occur along a particular stretch of the A41 and though the (real) details are gruesome enough we find them larded with such gothic additions as a crow that perches 'on a premoulded concrete street lamp... and mocks the events taking place beneath', or a roadside rat that emerges, while bodies are being stretchered away, to wander under the arc lights and steal ox-tail from a discarded shopping bag. As the book progresses such insertions become whole entities, swelling into paragraphs and extended passages, and eventually, whole stories. We meet Merops the rook, seemingly blessed with eternal life, who has been personally involved with just about every significant character in the area from Anglo-Saxon times onwards. Or 'John Osborne', yeoman of Tring, who, having seen his wife killed, becomes a killer himself, with the ability to dissolve himself into the landscape and reappear in a different age, only to kill again. Or Gloria, who, while considering suicide beside a railway track, gives us her account of a long and eventually broken relationship with the minor cult leader Raggadagga. Fatal accidents, murder, the contemplation of suicide... you might by now have detected a rather dark theme emerging.

Papadimitriou would argue, perhaps, that these stories are not his own constructs. They are voices that emerge from his encounters, 'regional memories' he calls them, a 'release into things found', or a subject matter that he 'feels out' as it 'brushes against the consciousness'. He calls the technique proximity flight which he defines as the use of the environment to 'trigger mental journeys to another place and time in which the same stimuli can be found'. He conveys this sense of otherness with what amounts at times to an almost religious fervour. A suburban site he walks through is described as 'an energy node', another as a thin place in the Celtic sense of the proximity of heaven to earth. One of his walks becomes a 'holy pilgrimage', whilst on another he achieves 'a state of ecstatic union with the Middlesex-Hertfordshire borderlands'. In the ultimate

act of spiritual self-dissolution he declares 'I am not Nick Papadimitriou: I am Middlesex'. There were echoes, I thought, of William Blake, wandering the London streets, hearing voices and seeing angels in the mulberry trees on Peckham Rye. Here however, in the obsession with sudden death, suicide and separation are no songs of innocence – just those arising from a bitter personal experience.

It is the autobiographical passages, detailing parts of Papadimitriou's upbringing within sight of the Scarp, which provide a third thread to the book. These are the accounts of a mother who fled the family home when he was still young, abandoning him to a depressed and defeated father, of a youthful infatuation which seems to amount to a frank admission of stalking and, most of all, of his arrest and imprisonment for an adolescent act of arson. Papadimitriou has a lot, it seems, to be bitter about.

Against this backdrop his long rambles become a salvation of sorts, and they are illuminated by his gifts of imaginative construction and close observation. As a naturalist myself, it was his descriptions of plants (of which he has an extensive knowledge) that often impressed themselves upon me - a green that was 'spattered with the white stars of lesser stitchwort', the Herb Robert that had 'crocheted' leaves, the poplars that formed silhouettes 'pointing up towards an early star'.

Papadimitriou has called his overall approach 'deep topography'. It is, he says 'a transmission across time confounding the thought that all has been swept away' while later he describes it as 'an organic interface between the human world and processes of longer and deeper duration'. I have considerable sympathy with this quest to hear lost elements of the past still speaking in the present but increasingly it seemed to me that the topography we were exploring here was not north west London so much as Nick Papadimitriou. Rather than the 'infrastructural unconscious' of the land it was that of Papadimitriou's mind that was being revealed and unravelled. The landscape was the canvas on which he was able to project himself and the book, in the end, perhaps, more therapy than topography.

And after Nick Papadimitriou's confessions, one of my own. I did not, to begin with, like this book and, if I had not been reviewing it, I might have desisted with my reading. I found its self-conscious tone disconcerting, its initial mixing of factual events with fictional details an irritation, its subject matter seemingly different from what its Introduction had set it out to be. But somewhere along the way that changed. Reading late into one night I realised, quite suddenly, that I had been hooked, captivated by this difficult, edgy, mystical journey using landscape as a way in to one man's life and mind.