

The last of Sinclair on London?

An interview with Iain Sinclair

Phil Cohen

Livingmaps Review

phil.cohen@livingmaps.org.uk

Iain Sinclair delivered the second William Bunge memorial lecture, organised by Livingmaps, at University College London on 21 June 2017. A video recording of the lecture is available in [YouTube](#). Phil Cohen interviewed Iain before the lecture, an extract from which is transcribed here.

Phil Cohen [PC]: *What was your main aim in writing 'The Last London' and how do you situate the book in relation to your other writing about London?*

Iain Sinclair [IS]: Well that's an interesting question because in a way the book has been cooking away since I first started thinking and writing about London. It started about 1975, when I was working as a gardener in Limehouse, and the book I wrote then called *Lud Heat* was the first that looked on London as a kind of scenographic map. It was about the influences which buildings have on people and from that point on I was thinking about London in those terms. Living in London and writing about London was so interconnected. But I think that today we have to begin to think about London in a completely different way. It is unrecognisable from the city I started off writing about in 1975.

So I don't separate this book from the others, because it contains aspects of those early works. It was as if this book was a long time in the gestation, and I had to go through a long process of derive of digressions, to get to it.

PC: *The title, which is rather intriguing, invokes the famous Victorian narrative painting, 'The Last of England' by Ford Maddox Brown, with two passengers on the deck of a ship looking out with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension as they say farewell to the white cliffs of Dover and set sail out for a new life in Australia. I was wondering whether this*

painting influenced the choice of title, or in some way was making a metastatement about where you were coming from in writing the book.

IS: Yes the figures are rather like characters in a Dickens novel, they seem to be launching off into a new world, but actually they are not. They are just sitting in a garden in Hampstead posing for Ford Maddox Brown. The painting was in my mind in the sense that I had given the book this subtitle, 'Real Fictions from a True City', because I was interested in these kind of ambiguities, because I conceived of the book as a kind of novel, wrought out of these fictional projections. Behind the title was also a film by Derek Jarman in which he has these strange figures set against the background of Millennium Mills in Silvertown, a vision of an apocalyptic city, which in Jarman's case, refers back to Jacobean London, a city that was alive and convulsed with energy and geography, where someone like John Dee could be both an imperial geographer and a magician, a conjuror of spirits. All of this was in mind when I was writing the book, about the occulting of politics and its impact on the city now.

PC: *At several points in the book you talk about London becoming a kind of cruise liner, so I suppose the question becomes whether it's time to jump ship or to steer the ship in a different direction?*

IS: Well I hope the life boats are there, strong and stable. When I started to give talks in other European cities, like Barcelona and Palermo, I noticed that there were these vast cruise ships parked up, giving the people on board such a strange and partial view of the countries they were visiting. These strange maritime entities were like enormous floating buildings and reminded me of a building in St Leonards-on-Sea called Marine Court, which is copy of the bridge of the Queen Elizabeth.

Over the years it formed an interesting community. Sydney Little, who was a town planner, put in a scheme which included a great lido, and an underground swimming pool, as well as Marine Court. It was part of a project for a modernist city which got destroyed by the coming of the Second World War, so it was like another metaphor for England, its failed or remaindered modernism.

PC: *It occurred to me that there might be another sense in which 'Last' could be read. As someone who has expended a good deal of shoe leather navigating the densities of what it means to be a Londoner, does it perhaps have the connotation of a shoemaker's last,*

something that provides an enduring template for your journeys, but which is perhaps being worn away, or worse, is no longer relevant in the age of Google Earth and virtual travel?

IS: I hadn't thought of that, but I love the idea! The pedestrian has been downsized. The trend now is towards cycling -it feels green and good, but in fact it's all about money. There is quite a dangerous collision between different modes of transport in London and the pedestrian is continually being pushed to the margins. So yes, in that sense the Last London might refer to the death of the kinds of explorations on foot that have been the foundation for my observations of the city.

PC: *So what does it mean for you to be a Londoner today?*

IS: I am not really convinced, even after all this time that I am a Londoner, other than in the sense that almost everyone in London is a migrant. Most of us are from somewhere else. We've been sucked into this place that was set up to be a *polis*, a centre, having all the wealth, the facilities, and the glamour, which would draw in the scattered tribes and engage with this thing that would be a city, yet they would also remain colonial serfs. Growing up in a provincial small town I was drawn to London for all the obvious and usual reasons. I wanted to be part of what was going on and I also wanted the anonymity that a great city gives you. I feel that I am really a passerine, who has been trapped into this engagement with it. And in that sense *The Last London* is a liberation, a passport to move on and try other things. In any case the means I have used are no longer adequate to the task of mapping the complexity of what London has become.

PC: *A final question. How do you locate your work in the tradition of literary modernism, and in particular American fiction, in relation for example to the writing of John Dos Passos, or Burroughs and the Beats? You have been very critical of hyper-modernism in architecture and town planning, of someone like Rem Koolhaas, for example, and his notion of junk space. If you had to find a correlate to your writing in contemporary urbanism, what would it be?*

IS: I don't think there could be a parallel to the kind of writing I do in architecture, because architecture is such a different discipline. I was doing an event with Jonathan Meades the other night in Mile End, and we were talking about Le Corbusier and his notion of a *unité d'habitation*. He actually lives in one of Le Corbusier's blocks, and he stresses how much it is a hybrid form, combining elements of sculpture, art and architecture. I think the kind of writing I do is predatory and incidental and if it was a building it would be completely

ramshackle. The only building I can think of that embodies my whole approach to writing about London is Nicolas Hawksmoor's church in Spitalfields. Because you look head on at that building and it's a history of architecture, with each period from the Classical through to the Gothic. Its heaped up one on top of the other, a vertical stack that somehow stays as a unity and works. That could be a model for a form of writing that moves through all these different streams of time but somehow coheres and holds together. It's not pastiche like in postmodern architecture. It's grounded in his own practice as a surveyor, and he wanted to use all the architectural plates at his disposal and make them into a stack. In contrast the new developments around Spitalfields often keep the Georgian facade as a kind of artificial historicising quote stuck in front of a usually ghastly office block. That has nothing to do with the kind of writing I aspire to.