

SCOTLAND on SUNDAY

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Round trip: the critic Robert MacFarlane's introduction to psychogeography recommended using a map and a wine glass.

Photograph: Phil Wilkinson

An A-Z for one track minds

STUART KELLY

Psychogeography

Merlin Coverley

Pocket Essentials, £9.99

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THIS slim volume sets out to answer the deceptively simple question "What is psychogeography?" It is no discredit to the author, Merlin Coverley, that an elegant explication is not forthcoming. Not only did the artists, writers and thinkers who practised psychogeography have radically different definitions of what they were doing, they disagreed about what form it should take, where it should be done, who had invented it and what it was supposed to achieve.



The critic Robert MacFarlane provides, if not a key to unlocking the mysteries of psychogeography, then a good beginner's guide. Take a map of a city. Place a wine glass on top of it, and use it to draw a circle.

Then walk, as closely as possible, the route you have traced, recording (in whatever medium) what you observe - graffiti, heritage plaques, architectural oddities, overheard conversations - and what mental associations the environments trigger. It's as simple as that. But, as Coverley's investigation into the history of the movement shows, something as simple as a city stroll can lead you into some pretty strange places, from English mysticism to revolutionary politics.

So who are the psychogeographers? The word was coined in 1954, in the first issue of *Potlatch*, the in-house and rather sophomoric magazine of a French avant-garde group called the Situationists. The entire print run consisted of 50 copies. The Situationists - the best known of whom are Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and Ivan Chtcheglov - evolved out of a loose coalition of movements trying to continue the revolutionary work of the Surrealists and the Dadaists.

Their aim was to combat the banality and conformity of everyday life; and psychogeography became a major element, in the form of the *dérive*. This was an aimless, intoxicated drift across the city which, they hoped, would make the familiar surprising and the mundane strange. Debord hoped it would uncover "the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously arranged or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals".

Debord desperately wanted to be groundbreaking, and therefore occluded the predecessors

who had wandered in the city before the term 'psychogeography' was born. These included the poet Baudelaire and the writer Louis Aragon, author of the novel *Paris Peasant*. The poet Arthur Rimbaud purportedly made up a verb derived from the hero of *Robinson Crusoe* - *robinsonner*, to let the mind wander, or to travel mentally. *Robinson*, the mysterious stranger, became a psychogeographic leitmotif in works by Céline, Weldon Kees, Simon Armitage and the film-maker Patrick Keiller.

The British tradition is rather different. Of those who actually use the word, only Iain Sinclair, the astonishing author of *Lights Out for The Territory* and *London Orbital* (where he charts his walk around the M25), seems a genuine explorer of the notion that Acacia Avenue is usually as unknown as the parts on old maps that said "Here Be Dragons". Claims have been made for JG Ballard and Peter Ackroyd, but to my mind their work is better described as "influenced by psychogeography". Sinclair, who has latterly found the term increasingly burdensome, once categorised writers as either pods or peds: those who stay at home and dream versus those who range abroad.

Historically, however, there are far more English language authors whose work might be considered psychogeography *avant la lettre*: Daniel Defoe, Arthur Machen, Thomas de Quincey and Robert Louis Stevenson. Coverley's book is not attempting to be exhaustive, but I was a little disappointed that he did not mention Heathcote Williams' *The Speakers* (which follows four lunatic Hyde Park orators), Patrick Hamilton or the Edinburgh thinker Patrick Geddes as part of this tradition. It is also regrettable that there is nothing on the notorious pranksters, The K Foundation. Many of the 'art events' detailed in founder Bill Drummond's 45 are psychogeographic in intent.

If the French version was about ennui-laden meandering while thinking about the days when you could have got up a barricade on this street, the British version was about surreptitiously slinking along, fumbling for the underbelly. It was about the arcane and the hidden, rather than the bourgeoisie and the banlieu collaborating on overthrowing the state.

INSTEAD OF following arbitrary circles, Sinclair walks around Hawksmoor churches, medieval gateways and murder sites. Psychogeography here is obsessed with occult forces, impermeable barriers that might be sorcery, might be class, might be twisted ley-lines, might be Docklands Light Railway.

A political agenda, nonetheless, does seep in: although the predominant tone of a writer like Sinclair is hysterical melancholy, his account of the Millennium Dome and the 'regeneration' around it is a masterpiece of veiled critique and wistful regret that so much expenditure is creating so little community.

The work of Sinclair at least proves that psychogeography is capable of producing innovative, idiosyncratic books; and they certainly succeed in disorientating the reader. I remember feeling a weird shudder while walking through Eastcheap when I saw a sign for 'Nicholas Lane', that being the name of a recurring character in Sinclair's novels. But why should it be London and Paris that monopolise psychogeography?

Both are, of course, capital cities with long and murky histories. Both have seen the execution of monarchs; both have their mythologies of murder, from Jack the Ripper to the Rue Morgue. Perhaps most importantly, both have underground train systems. As anyone who has travelled on the Tube knows, they have an odd side-effect: locations that seem far apart on the map are often remarkably close above ground. The Tube rewrites the city and renders it as a collage in exactly the manner the Situationists sought to achieve.

It would be a fitting tribute to Coverley's unfussy and informative book if it encouraged people in other cities to try psychogeography. Indeed, it slightly baffles me that neither Edinburgh nor Glasgow has produced work in this genre. Both cities have the requisite history, divisions,

legends and tensions. Perhaps the Unesco City of Literature might consider a psychogeographic event to complement the ubiquitous tourist guides?

Coverley's introduction maps the highways, if not the byways, of psychogeography. To fully appreciate the possibilities of the form, it's best to read this alongside, say, Sinclair's White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings or, better yet, before taking a walk yourself. As our high streets become clones of each other, and McDonald's sprout up everywhere from Beijing to Galashiels, psychogeography offers a crucial way of commemorating the local, the specific and all the idiosyncrasies that keep a place unique.

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Comments

1. Stuart, Aotearoa / 9:38am 24 Jul 2006

Bill Drummond's psychogeographical output is not limited to the work of the K Foundation or his book 45. Many of the "jobs" detailed on his website penkiln-burn.com have a psychogeography flavour, most famously his Soup Line, where he drew a straight line diagonally across the map so that it cut through Belfast and Nottingham and then proceeded to visit strangers who lived on the line and make soup for them.

This theme to Drummond's work goes right back to the beginning of his career, most notably his plan for Echo and the Bunnymen to tour the Northern Isles so that joining up the dots of the tour venues would produce a giant drawing of rabbit ears. Cheers!

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