

Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Simon King, Amy Blier-Carruthers, Roberto Bottazzi (eds),
Walking Cities: London
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Over the last twenty years or so a certain kind of literature on walking has emerged in Britain. It is most commonly called ‘psychogeography’, a term appropriated from Guy Debord’s Situationist writings of the 1950s and 1960s, though other terms have been coined too (Phil Smith’s ‘mythogeography’, for example). Much more so than Debord’s psychogeographic *dérives*, however, British psychogeography is often concerned with the retrieval of lost, often personal, histories and the way that these interact with place. These walkers explore urban fringes and liminal spaces, holding a desire to look again at the familiar. *Walking Cities: London* finds its niche among this literature, though, I would argue, sidesteps it to some extent too.

It is an edited collection of nineteen essays on walking in London, by artists, writers, musicians, architects and geographers. Each contributor considers walking to be a key part of their practice, research or creative thought process. The essays vary in length, pace and style, and are organised into six sections: *Site, Night, Writing, Monuments, Music* and *Dialogue*. These sections seem more like loose placeholders than rigid labels, as they slip from one to another, with several essays that could fall into more than one category. While some of the authors narrate long blister-inducing walks (Peter Sheppard Skaerved’s route along a stretch of the Thames from Hampton Court to Wapping, pp. 281-311), others walk us round and round a single spot (Sean Ashton’s walk up a spiral staircase at Russell Square tube station, pp. 143-49; or Ahuvia Kahane’s essay on Nelson’s Column, pp. 223-48) or explore a single straight stretch of road (Tottenham Court Road pp. 83-100; Mile End Road into Whitechapel Road, pp. 331-40). And while some essays take us to unexpected parts of London (such as southern areas of the city undergoing urban regeneration, pp. 27-48) others describe walks in well-known locations, aiming to refresh our perceptions of them (as in Adam Kaasa’s walk around the Barbican, pp. 51-64). The book seeks to speak, as its introduction tells us, ‘of how the city exists as *many* cities, multi-layered, constructed from a myriad of overlapping cultural, social, historical, political and economic paths’ (p. 5). It does this through its eclectic contents rather than in any systematic way. The editors of this volume have put together a diverse mix of essays that present a certain view of London that can arguably only be experienced on foot. Richard Wentworth’s images from his photographic series *Making Do and Getting By* – of improvised urban sculptures of sorts – which appear on the inside covers, nicely capture the spirit of the book as one of slightly makeshift exploration.

Walking Cities is refreshingly devoid of the names one might expect in a volume of this sort, such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self, whose books on walking in and around London proliferated from the late 1990s. Neither do its contributors rely heavily on the standard critical theory that often surrounds walking practices: Walter Benjamin’s writings on the Baudelairean *flâneur*, Guy Debord’s texts on the *dérive* and Michel de Certeau’s essay on ‘Walking in the City’ (in *The Practice of Everyday Life*). However, these figures inevitably receive a brief mention once or twice, as do several Situationist-like tactics (such as walking slowly or dancing as a way to progress through the streets). In fact, the shedding of this Franco-centric literature makes this book distinctly of its place: the historical figures, the theory and, of course, the sites it delves into belong to London. Kaasa’s essay on the Barbican is a case in point. In order to theorise the unique urban experience of the Barbican, Kaasa builds his argument on a range of approaches, from Richard Sennett’s work on borders

and boundaries to Ash Amin's writing on the human and non-human in public space (pp. 57-59). To take another example, as Sheppard Skaerved contemplates his home turf at Wapping, he conjures its layered histories through a list of names, recalled without recourse to chronology, from Samuel Pepys and Henry VIII to Helen Mirren, Dickens, Whistler, Graham Norton and Jack the Ripper (p. 289). These are London names, embedded in London streets. As well as feeling rooted in the historical city, the book feels of its time, with its authors referencing the rapid urban change taking place in parts of London, the 'Occupy' movement, the political forces at play in Westminster, and so on.

However, the book is not completely Anglocentric: its authors call upon an international crowd of theorists and historical figures. As Sharon Kivland and Steve Pile recall Freud's first forays into London (pp. 191-221), we wonder what the city looked like to foreign eyes, new and unfamiliar (or perhaps *unheimlich*?). In many ways, this is just the mood that the book's contributors hope to invoke in their walks: to stride out with the curiosity and attention of a first-time traveller into the unknown, even as they step out of their own front doors. In her essay on 'The Travelling Mindset', Amy Blier-Carruthers quotes an eighteenth-century text written by Xavier de Maistre ('an aristocrat and army officer', we are told, p. 268), in which the author writes about his own room as if it is a foreign country. He notes that, while one is often inured to the environment of one's everyday life, when one travels abroad 'you never fail to describe the smallest details precisely [...] – everything [...] is painstakingly recorded in your diary, for the instruction of the sedentary world' (pp. 269-70). He suggests that the same attention should be paid at home. While this is precisely the outlook many of the contributors wish to capture in their travels and writing, it also gets to the heart of the ambiguity of this book. The writers of *Walking Cities* do indeed painstakingly record the details of their journeys, sometimes for the reader in motion, yet often for the sedentary reader (when the writing is more narrative or diaristic).

The book thus sits on the cusp between alternative guidebook – to be used by the walking reader on the street – and reading for an armchair traveller, whose psychogeography is less about the psychological resonances of place, and more about using the mind, through reading, to conjure those places from a sedentary position. The ambiguity comes in part from the design of the volume: it is 'pocket sized', with matt pages, like a field guide prepped for note-taking, and each essay is preceded by a map of the appropriate part of London. Each map is overlaid, on the following page, by a black line that traces the route of the author's walk, taking advantage of the semi-transparency of the paper stock. These maps have the appearance of offering help to a potential walker, but, being historical, and not fully visible when the route is overlaid, they serve more of a conceptual and aesthetic purpose. The truth is, I think, that this ambiguity is not intentional: the book takes on the aesthetic of a field guide without *aiming* to be a guidebook, but rather a collection of essays on walking and London, variously theoretical, diaristic, narrative, historical, political. However, for me, the essays that are most successful are those which actively invite their readers to get up, go out there, try the routes for themselves and test out the methodologies proposed. This is when *Walking Cities* is most engaging.

Some of the essays deliberately use the second person to speak directly to the reader. Kaasa's walk around the Barbican is described in this manner, and he reminds us that we too can use a spare half an hour to wander round this complex urban space (p. 61). Many of the contributions draw our attention to the 'furniture' of the streets, from the haphazard arrangements of *Making Do and Getting By* to the apparent permanence of historical sculpture and architecture. The essays in the *Monuments* section explore this explicitly,

pushing at the very definition of the term. Jo Stockham, for example, opens her essay by asking ‘Can a smell be a monument?’ while Kivland and Pile see certain parts of London as somehow monumentalised through the attention Freud paid them in letters and postcards. In this same section, Kahane walks us round Trafalgar Square, looking up at Nelson’s column from every angle, both physically, and conceptually, in terms of a history of such structures. The essay is an invitation not only to look at the column again, but also at all the monumental sculpture that populates London’s streets, and so often fades into the background.

Ruth Burgon