

MOUNT LONDON

Edited by Tom Chivers & Martin Kratz

TOM CHIVERS was born in Herne Hill, south London in 1983. His publications include *How to Build a City* (Salt, 2009), *The Terrors* (Nine Arches, 2009), *Flood Drain* (Annexe, 2014) and, as editor, the anthologies *City State: New London Poetry* and *Adventures in Form* (Penned in the Margins, 2009 & 2012). He has made site-specific, perambulatory and audio work for Southbank Centre, Bishopsgate Institute, the Eden Project and LIFT. An award-winning independent arts producer, he is former co-Director of London Word Festival and currently runs Penned in the Margins from a small office in Aldgate. He lives in Rotherhithe.

MARTIN KRATZ is an associate lecturer in English at Manchester Metropolitan University. His poetry has been widely published in magazines including *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *The Interpreter's House* and *The Moth*. As a librettist, he collaborates regularly with the composer Leo Geyer, and their projects include the prizewinning song cycle *Sideshow*s. Their chamber opera *The Mermaid of Zennor* was described by *The Times* as 'imaginative and beautifully shaped.'

MOUNT LONDON

Ascents in the Vertical City

Penned in the Margins

LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS
22 Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB, United Kingdom
www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk

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First published 2014

Printed and bound in the UK by Berforts Information Press Ltd

ISBN
978-1-908058-18-8

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Cover design by Ben Anslow
Map illustration by Nicholas Murray

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INTRODUCTION

Tom Chivers & Martin Kratz

THE 'REAL' MOUNT LONDON is situated somewhere on the boundary between British-Columbia and Alaska at a height of over 7,000 feet. Its moniker 'London' has nothing to do with the capital city of the United Kingdom, but is in honour of the American author Jack London. The 'virtual' Mount London, on the other hand, is the anthology of urban explorations which you are holding in your hands right now. It can be situated anywhere you like, and while its highest point is currently The Shard at just over 1,000 feet, collectively the elevations in this book are much higher – and who knows what monoliths the future holds. If Jack London's most famous novel is *The Call of the Wild*, then perhaps this book can be thought of as a call of the urban. Although it is none the less wild for it, with writers variously dangling from Battersea Power Station, woken by nocturnal blood sports, and on the brink of passing out with physical exertion.

Mount London was conceived as a result of a conversation between the two of us, Martin and Tom; as an attempt to reimagine, and reconnect with, the physical topography of the city. Lest we forget, the earliest incarnation of London, as a Roman military settlement, was built across two small peaks – Cornhill and Ludgate Hill – and the freshwater stream that ran between them (the Walbrook). These gravel promontories would have provided strategic capabilities as they were easily defended and commanded a wide vista across the Thames, but they may also have assumed ritual significance. The seventeenth century antiquarian William

Camden believed that St Paul's Cathedral was built over the ruins of a temple to the Roman goddess Diana. In some cities, geography is felt as an imminent force – a haze in the peripheral vision, or a strain in the legs. Think Edinburgh or Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco, even Belfast. But it is almost inconceivable that the place we now call London – drained and levelled as it is, raised and filled out – was once an untamed environment of marshes and tidal creeks, forests, heathlands and hills.

It is *almost* inconceivable. Yet a recurring theme which the writers of *Mount London* touch on in their ascents is the way the bedrock of the city repeatedly bursts through its concrete crust, disturbing their experience of the built environment with its own underlying geology and history. Unlike Rome, a city famously built on seven hills, raising it from the marshes, London is thought more often in terms of its river. Capitoline, Palatine, Aventine, Caelian, Esquiline, Viminal and Quirinal seem to bear the full mythological weight of their city. Who in the same way would think of Stamford, Spring, Horsenden, Windmill, Snow, Forest or Lavender? At the same time, the explorations of urban elevations seem to be ghosted by their brothers and sisters from far-flung cities and terrains: The Shard mirroring the Burj Khalifa and advertised as a Shangri La; the Golgothan evocation of gibbets, gallows and bones; Babel in London's abundance of languages; Ararat in the recently flood-soaked landscape; and again and again in the building towards a shinier, taller, better city, the old idea of the New Jerusalem. And then, there are the mountains the writers themselves bring with them – from the Lakes and the Peaks, and from South Armagh.

As gridlocked as Everest (with Trafalgar Square its Hilary step?), London is neither *tabula rasa* nor virgin peak. There are many

climbers currently dug in on its slopes, and many more who have come before. Wordsworth, the exemplary mountain poet, surveying the city from Westminster Bridge. The Sydenham Hill giant deep in foliage. Margaret Finch, Queen of the Gypsies, smoking her long pipe. Bunyan on his death bed in a Snow Hill pub. And who can forget: Doctor Who and the Cheetah People at the summit of Horsenden Hill. London's is a landscape dense with myths and the novice climber must be aware of their traces; free-climbing where possible, using the fixed ropes where they must.

Mount London, as we call it, is made up of seventeen hills, three towers, two heaths, one field, one mount, one very long staircase and one palace (which is, strictly speaking, a ridge with three peaks). Not one of them is high enough, by any official standards, to be deemed a mountain. But considered together, their accumulated altitude outstrips Ben Nevis by a good five hundred metres.

But what is a mountain without a mountaintop? What is an ascent without the crowning glory of reaching the summit, of planting your nation's flag? For every writer here who, on reaching the highest point, looks back across the city, discovers new, surprising vistas, there is another unsure they've even reached the top, confounded by its geography, who finds not peak but plateau, no hill but just a bump in the pavement.

The mountaineer is a kind of noble fool, always hanging from the precipice between bravery and recklessness. And like any true fool he not only play tricks on others, running the reader on fool's errands, but in turn is tricked himself:

"What's that tiny thing that looks like St Paul's?" I said.

It was St Paul's.

The figure of the hanged man is everywhere, swinging from the gibbet, but also the master of ropework, going where no one else can. The mountaineer, like the trickster, finds himself having it out repeatedly with his own body as he steels himself against the terrain. Many of the expeditions in this book reveal mountainous follies, their rubble strewn across the city from Northala Fields to Stave Hill to the ruins of the Crystal Palace. These buried, vestigial structures offer a counterpoint to the housing crisis that threatens to alter the dynamics of London forever, carving the landscape into *de facto* segregated zones for the rich.

One of the most striking results of the simple commission we gave to our contributors is the level of autobiography the idea of the mountain seemed to invite. Perhaps this impulse to measure ourselves, physically and mentally, against nature, is a hang-on from the Romantic poets. We might think of Wordsworth playing off the individual against the landscape in his poem 'Lines':

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. — Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

However, the deep sense of integration with nature which Wordsworth associates with his youth ('when like a roe / I bounded o'er the mountains by the sides / Of the deep rivers, and the lonely

streams, / Wherever nature led') is replaced in much of the writing in *Mount London* by a palpable sense of tension. In some cases this tension carries an almost hostile sense of determination, which results in the idea of the mountain as something to be conquered. In other cases, we return to that sense of the mountain having its own agency, to be feared and respected. What is unique to the combination of mountain and city, however, is that image of the mountain forming the bedrock of the urban landscape, but also as an empty shape waiting to be filled by a rising skyline. In this sense, autobiographical reflections on the writer's past and present often find themselves negotiating with the future. While Wordsworth's poem also negotiates with the future, it is in a bid for posterity. The future in *Mount London* is something much more tenuous.

The twenty-five essays range from Stamford Hill in the north-east to Richmond Hill in the south-west, with clusters around Hampstead in the north and the corresponding south London ridge around Crystal Palace. Some will be familiar to all Londoners, others (such as Stave Hill and Horsenden Hill) tucked away in unfashionable suburbs. London is highest at its north-western edge, and if our selection appears to avoid this upland corner it is perhaps only in deference to Nick Papadimitriou, who has written so compellingly of the North Middlesex-South Hertfordshire Escarpment in his book *Scarp* (Sceptre, 2013).

This is not a guidebook. Nor is it a comprehensive index of the hills of London. Many of the city's most famous promontories — for instance, Primrose, Tower and Shooter's Hills — are absent. A larger project may even have included explorations of such vanished lumps and bumps as Tothill (Westminster) and the Whitechapel Mount. Our intention as editors is not encyclopedic but impressionistic: a

partial selection of competing voices. We hope, above all, that by way of its gaps *Mount London* might inspire you to seek out summits of your own, to launch new ascents in a vertical city that just keeps on growing.

Tom Chivers & Martin Kratz
– April, 2014

MOUNT LONDON

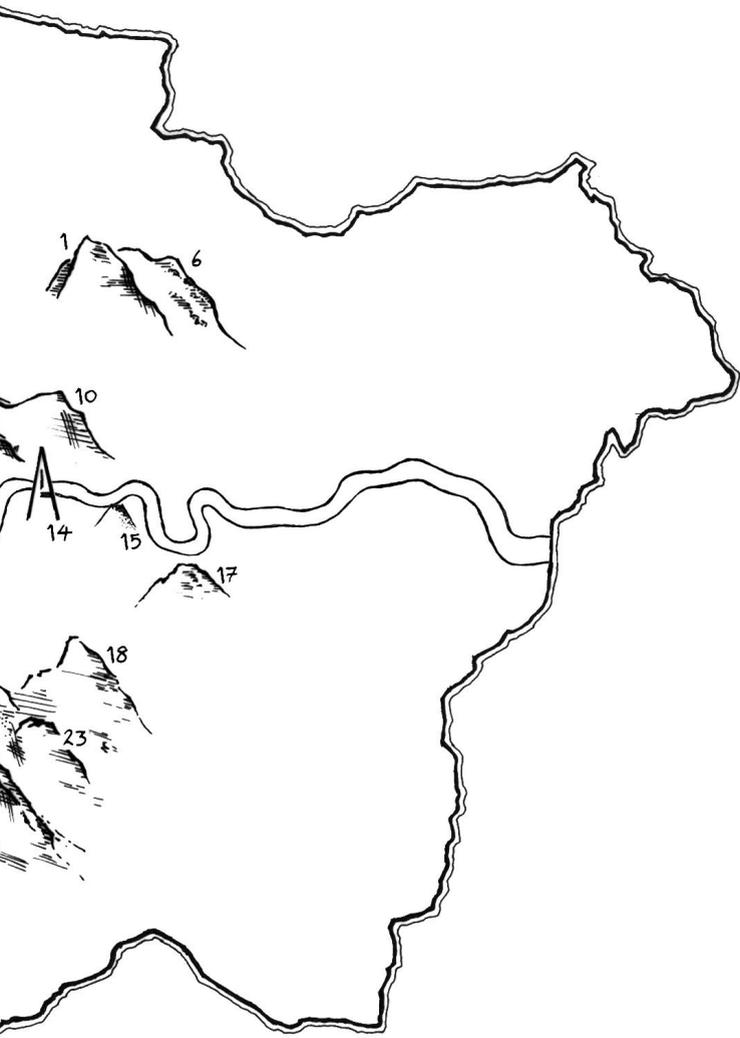
*The secret of the mountain is that the mountains simply exist, as
I do myself; the mountains exist simply, which I do not.*

Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard*



Mount London
1,800m

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. Stamford Hill | 6. Spring Hill | 11. Snow Hill |
| 2. Parliament Hill | 7. Horsenden Hill | 12. Ludgate Hill |
| 3. Hampstead Heath | 8. Northala Fields | 13. Notting Hill |
| 4. Dartmouth Park Hill | 9. Mount Pleasant | 14. The Shard |
| 5. Hampstead Underground | 10. Windmill Hill | 15. Stave Hill |



16. Battersea Power Station

17. Blackheath

18. Telegraph Hill

19. Lavender Hill

20. Denmark Hill

21. Richmond Hill

22. Brixton Hill

23. Forest Hill

24. Gipsy Hill

25. Crystal Palace

STAMFORD HILL

Katy Evans-Bush

The Hill has always been there, of course. Rising above the surrounding everydayness, it raises its head and speaks to the other hills around it: Highgate, misty blue to the west in the evenings; Muswell Hill to the north; and Alexandra Park, where the Palace, with its glorious almost-modern transmitter, catches the sun's fire like a mirror and scatters it everywhere.

The Hill sees more with its all-seeing eye than the flat places below it, and its people pick up signals unavailable in the narrow Victorian canyons of Finsbury Park — whose name, *town of the fens*, tells you of its damp, low-lying nature — or Stoke Newington. Stamford Hill is the local apex: here the roads, the traffic, the human movement, have converged for two millennia and maybe more. The sky is huge. The light seems bigger than down below. It is said that when King James I was received here by the Mayor and aldermen on his first approach to London after ascending to the throne, he could see the whole of the city spread out before him.

One afternoon a tiny while ago, a ten-year-old girl was walking with her mum down an alleyway, a sort of narrow way, leading into Stoke Newington High Street. It was a nothing sort of early evening, and we were going from the friend's house where I had picked her up after work to, I imagine, the Turkish shop, and then home on the bus. Old houses (or cottages) alongside gave nothing away; there was a plant in a pot by a front door, there was a Victorian street lamp

— and ahead of them the main road teemed with the usual nonstop traffic: vans, cars, cyclists, and people from all over the globe.

We walked along, each with our bags and thoughts.

I said something: 'What do you want for supper?'

Or: 'So how was school?'

D said nothing, then shook her head and said:

'Oh! That was so *weird*.'

'What was?'

'Everything just disappeared', D said. 'Didn't you see it? It was all gone and it was olden days. The High Street was there, and it wasn't cars, it was ladies in long dresses and horses and carts.'

And then, just as fast as it went, it had all come tumbling back again, the buses and cyclists, the yummy mummies pushing over-designed buggies, the 20p guy, the off-duty journalists, the crazy Spanish kid with the guitar. The buildings, built in about the 1860s, had remained more or less the same. I asked a few more questions, and then we came out into the High Street itself.

Stoke Newington High Street, which momentarily disappeared on that day in around 2006, makes up a part of the Old North Road — what used to be called, in the very old days, Ermine Street, after the *Earningas*, a Saxon tribe in the fens — leaving the City at Bishopsgate and running in a straight-ish line all the way to Cambridge. It was a Roman Road, but the Roman name for it is forgotten. It crosses other Roman roads along its way — for instance, Old Street, which connects it to the far more ancient Watling Street (at one end, the scene of Boudicca's defeat; at the other, the route Chaucer's pilgrims and others followed from Southwark to Canterbury; and somewhere in the middle, the Old Kent Road, home of evangelical warehouse

churches). About half a mile north of our disappearing act, when the road reaches the top of Stamford Hill — or Saundford or Sanford Hill, as it used to be known — it crosses another one, which led at one time down to the larger Saxon settlements by the River Lea, where King Alfred and the locals routed the Danes in a great battle. It now leads to Clapton Pond, where house prices are currently increasing out of all proportion to how *nice* the place actually is. (And after Clapton Pond you get to Sutton House, home of one of Thomas Cromwell's brightest henchmen. It still has its beautiful linenfold paneling, and its top floor is haunted by the ghost of a little dog.)

This road, we're saying, has seen a lot, over a lot of years. Even the Coach and Horses, which stands next to our mysterious narrow way and serves delicious Thai food in an old-fashioned-pub ambience, would have been there in whatever time my daughter tesseracted back to, because it was licensed in 1723. The village of Stoke Newington was spreading out from Church Street, filling out the landscape. There was so much traffic along this road that around 1715 several local parishes had petitioned Parliament for permission to erect toll gates, to raise the money to maintain it. There was a toll gate, or turnpike, in Kingsland to the south, and another on top of Stamford Hill, at the intersection of the two Roman roads.

Everyone passed along here: it was the north-south axis, a hive of enterprise, and also a portal to the green fields and farms beyond in rural Tottenham. You had farmers going to and from market, travellers to the north, and to the south, merchants and gentlemen and cobblers. Parties on their way to the pleasure gardens of the famous Mermaid Tavern in Mare Street. Students, kings and diplomats, highwaymen on their way to lie low in the provinces, brickmakers' carts, theatrical troupes, preachers.

In the 18th century Hackney was full of brickworks. The epicentre of industry was Hackney Wick, but at the top of Stamford Hill in 1694, one Francis Tyssen leased a property to a brickmaker called Ralph Harwood, and in 1721, 'One of several strips at Stamford Hill included a cottage, beside a length of nearly 150 feet, which was 'subleased to a Hoxton brickmaker''.¹

This summit of Stamford Hill, where it crosses the old road to Clapton, forms – nowadays – a very large intersection with a tremendous sense of open space. It's this space you're invited to fill as you imagine the expanse of farms and fields stretching north to leafy Tottenham. Or as you think of the carts and carriages rumbling through the toll gate, or as you see in your mind's eye a gibbet, swinging in the gentle spring breezes of the 1740s with its Tyburn cargo, warning those travelling south to mind their manners while in the vicinity. (By the 1760s this gibbet had been moved to Upper Clapton, perhaps because by this stage there were some rather fine houses going up along the Hill itself, and it probably spoiled the view.)

It was suburban sprawl. It had been creeping up Church Street from Newington Green, and it had been creeping up from Hackney Wick, where the work and money and noise and mess were. And now it had reached to where (touch wood) even the hipsters of 2014 have not yet managed to penetrate: to the top of Stamford Hill. Hills are sacred and fortifying features: associated with mystical properties and faery doings, the sites of ancient rites and burials and sacrifices, stone circles and earthworks, towers and lookouts

¹ TFT Baker, *A History of the County of Middlesex, Vol 10: Newington and Stamford Hill*, 1995.

and hauntings. This one can be no different. It seems integral to its surroundings. Even the name 'Hackney', first mentioned in the 11th century, means 'raised place'.

So, standing on this highest point, let's pause and take in the fresh air. We're at a junction on whose corners stand, going clockwise from the northwest corner: an off-license and corner shop stuffed so full that the aisles are barely big enough to get through; Boots the Chemist, next to a bookies and Grodzinski's bakery; Barclay's bank in an Edwardian building, next to which the fine, three-storeyed, porticoed Cedar house once stood, leased to a brickmaker; and a Sainsbury's, catty-corner to the intersection the same way as the neighbourhood cinema was that stood there in the 1950s. In front of us flows the downward northern slope. We are with a Victorian gentleman, a classic of the type: an antiquarian and genealogist, contributor to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, compiler of *Men and Women of the Age*, and the man who wrote, in six volumes, a magnificent, anecdotal, exhaustive history of London's many parts: *Old and New London* (1878). His name is Edward Walford, and he had the advantage in life of having been educated (before matriculating at Oxford, of course) at the Church of England School in Hackney.

On reaching the summit of the hill, where the two roads meet ... an entirely different scene presents itself, and we begin to feel that we have reached almost the limits of our journey in this direction. Green fields, trees, and hedge-rows now burst upon the view; and winding away to the north-east the road leads on towards the village of Tottenham, whither we will presently direct our steps.

Before proceeding thither, however, we will give a glance back over

the ground we have wandered; and conjure up to our imagination the sweeping change which must have taken place within the last three or four centuries, when London was walled in on every side, and all away to the north was fields – “Moor Felde,” “Smeeth Felde,” and the like – and forest land, through which passed the lonely road, called “Hermen [or Ermine] Strete” ... after emerging from “Creple Gate,” on its way by Stoke Newington, to St. Albans and the north. The swampy nature of the ground, too, in some parts is still indicated by the name of Finsbury (*Fensbury*); but all this, as we have seen, has long been built upon, and “Moorfields are fields no more.”²

Our companion considers his short walk up from Stoke Newington itself:

Both sides of the road, as we pass up the hill, are occupied by rows of houses and detached villas, many of them of an elegant character, that almost force upon the recollection the lines of Cowper –

“Suburban villas, highway side retreats,
That dread th’ encroachment of our growing streets.
Tight boxes, neatly sashed, and in a blaze
With all a July’s sun’s collected rays,
Delight the citizen, who, gasping there,
Breathes clouds of dust and calls it country air.”³

The elegance and the villas took a while to materialise. In the 1760s there were a few merchants’ houses beyond the turnpike, and some grander houses towards what is now upper Clapton – the Cedar House, for example. But most of the building was happening further

² Walford, Edward, *Old and New London*, Vol. 5, Chap. XLIV, 1878.

³ *Ibid.*

to the south, in Stoke Newington Church Street on the one side, and around what was then known as Cockhanger Green (including a bowling green at its edges) on the other – beyond the Coach and Horses and Henry Sanford’s brewery, and the little lane named after him, where my daughter saw the world disappear.

Aside from the brewers and brickmakers and merchants outside the gates, by the 1760s Stamford Hill was home to more than one distinguished Jewish family, including that of the Sephardic dynasty-founder Moses Vita Montefiore, who had come from Italy to take advantage of the relative liberalism of English laws. His grandson Abraham (who started life apprenticed to a Watling Street silk merchant called Mr Flower) married Henrietta Rothschild. Her brother, Nathan Mayer Rothschild, also built a house in Stamford Hill, just south of where we’re standing. Nathan was one of five sons of another dynasty-founder, Amschel Rothschild. A colourful character, he started a textile company at twenty-one, before going into bullion. By 1818 he had amassed so much wealth that he was able to lend five million pounds to the Prussian government and enough gold to the Bank of England to ward off a liquidation crisis in the 1820s. He was a prominent figure in the movement to abolish slavery, and when Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, Nathan knew about it a day before the official messengers arrived.

Stamford Hill started getting built up around 1800, following the expansion of the 18th century in both Stoke Newington and Clapton. By the 1840s the wealthy families had begun to move further out – Nathan Mayer Rothschild went to Gunnersbury Park – and by the 1870s, as Edward Walford tells us, ‘So much may the neighbourhood now be considered part of London, that the road

itself is traversed by tram-cars, which run between the City and the top of Stamford Hill'. Indeed, we are standing with Mr Walford in front of two reasonable-sized tram shelters, which will definitely be present by 1882, and we may about to be run down by a double-decker steam conveyance.

But our genial guide Mr Walford vanishes; his day is over. The first synagogue opened in Stamford Hill in 1910. From 1926 the Haredim, or ultra-orthodox Jews, started to arrive. Now there are fifty synagogues, and if you look up Stamford Hill on Wikipedia the entire entry is about the Haredim. It is the third largest Haredi community in the world, and remains for the most part opaque.

I'm typing this on a Friday evening. The sun has just set and the light is soft, gold and purple, and the street is filled with amplified music to signal the beginning of Shabbat.

There is a sort of secret air, a secret time, another atmosphere, in this place which has been so heavily used for over two thousand years. In a house south-east of the summit of Stamford Hill, due south, perhaps, of the old Clapton gibbet; in a street that stems off the common where the Newingtonites of the late 18th century played bowls, where Henry Sanford had his brewery and built a row of Georgian townhouses that still stands; where the buses look almost the same as the trams did in 1889, where Marc Bolan grew up, where they stored all the uncollected rubbish during the great binmen's strike of 1979; in this house, full of an out-of-control energy, I would often wake in the night to swirling, or hovering, green shapes in the darkness of the bedroom. In this house, where my daughter was born, she used to wake up in the middle of the night all through her first eight years and see a box at the end of her bed. Sometimes she would sit up and try to reach this box, and when she reached out,

it would disappear. She used to complain about it (and about her recurring nightmares about witches, so terrifying I never heard what happened in them). Later, when she was about eleven, I asked her what the box looked like. 'It was different every time', she said.

That was the house, built in 1865, where I woke up one night myself, and saw standing beside my bed a benign presence: a clear, green man, in sort of gelid outline; in middle age, not very tall, but portly; wearing what looked like 18th century Middle European clothing, including – as I realised later – a sort of fur-trimmed hat. He stood there. I opened and shut my eyes a few times, but he was still there. I couldn't tell if he knew I was there or not. So I settled down, shut my eyes, curled into the duvet and went back to sleep.