

England on Fire, Stephen Ellcock and Mat Osman (Watkins Press)

Which writer is not at some level engaged with place, landscape, mythology, folklore and stories? It may be overt, it may be in opposition to established histories or geographies, it may be about colonisation, rebellion or immigration, it may be about revisiting the past and present through the lens of gender, sexuality or identity, it might simply creep in to our writing because we all live somewhere and hear and see things others don't.

England on Fire is subtitled *A Visual Journey Through Albion's Psychic Landscape*, the kind of phrase that smacks of vague New Age mysticism and woolly religious philosophies. It doesn't do itself many favours by this kind of labelling, because the book – an anthology of carefully curated images accompanied by Mat Osman's poetic prose – is much harder-edged and interesting than that subtitle and dour cover with a deer-headed figure against a circle of light suggests.

Stephen Ellcock talks about research, intuition, pattern making and collage in the brief authors' biographies at the start of the book, all creative processes I can relate to. The book is in 12 themed chapters or sections, each evocatively titled ('Out of Darkness', 'Weeds & Wildness', 'Rebellious Nature', 'Acardia'), each a cluster of beautifully reproduced painting, photos, prints, sculptures or drawings, each opening with a few hundred words from Osman, who responds to Ellcock's themes through tangent, metaphor and storytelling.

Osman also supplies a more straightforward, if slightly polemical, 'Introduction', where he explains how 'Stephen juxtaposes and weaves imagery around itself, teasing out narratives and finding wild connections in a kind of visual language', suggesting that the project is politicised, 'a very English rebellion of the nameless many against the privileged few', and uses 'a language that speaks to England's subconscious'. Heady stuff! But fair enough, although Osman seems to find the images in here more unknown and obscure than I do.

Anyway, what do we get? To start with there is George Frederick Watts' swirl of creation, swiftly followed by John Martin's apocryphal 'The Deluge', William Blake, Arthur Rackham, Ken Kiff, Samuel Palmer, an Anglo-Saxon brooch, a photographic stereograph of 'The Devil's Chimney', Norman Palmer and one of Madge Gill's channeled spirit works on paper. This wonderful visual cornucopia is repeated throughout the book, with still from Derek Jarman's *Avebury* film, fairy photographs, Notting Hill carnival images, Richard Dadd's asylum paintings, landscape photography, mazes, the changing face of 'Settlements', until we get to the final section 'Visions'. Here, Osman becomes ecstatic:

ENGLAND IS A FIREWORKS DISPLAY
THAT SETS THE NIGHT ABLAZE

[...]

And us? We are flame-lit and bonfire
-warmed. We walk in beauty like the night,
secure in the knowledge that everything
grows better after a wildfire [...]

England is a firework that burns forever.

Shooting stars, 'thought forms' erupting from a cathedral tower, abstract psychedelic inkjet prints, John Martin again, sunsets by George Shaw and Francis Danby... and then Blake's 'Jerusalem, The Emanation Of The Giant Albion' and Dan Hillier's 'Older Light', a heavenly figure radiating light into the darkness.

Elsewhere, scarecrows, the green man, corn figures, bonfires, dragons, druids, the Padstow Obby Oss, witches, mummers, along with Punch & Judy appear; as do ruined buildings, masks, stained glass and documentary photos from Rock Against Racism. This is Albion, an imaginary and hyper-real version of England, in all its glory. A land where races mingle and co-habit, magic and religion co-exist, as do ritual and science, poetry and song, humans, ghosts and imaginary creatures. I wish it said Britain, not England (maybe that's just me being PC – England seems so non-inclusive) but this new book is inspirational and thought provoking, part documentary, part challenge, part of the ongoing change we are living through: 'England is an immigrant song that changes us with every singing.'

Rupert Loydell