

Ithaca: Home**Author**

Krauth, Nigel

Published

2006

Journal Title

Griffith Review

Rights statement

© The Author(s) 2006 Griffith University. This full text file is posted here with permission of the copyright owners for your personal use only. No further distributions permitted. For information about this journal please use the hypertext link.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/12503>

Link to published version

<https://griffithreview.com/articles/ithaca-home/>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Essay:
Ithaca: Home

Author:
Nigel Krauth

At a young age I knew of Ithaca. Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia, the Classic Comics Mythology series and Kirk Douglas's Ulysses film (an early special-effects extravaganza) retold the story of Odysseus, blown from island to island around the Mediterranean, set upon and tempted, but always heading home.

When I decided to visit the island, I read Homer's original (in translation) and other accounts, including the poem Ithaca by modern Greek poet C.P. Cavafy. And I picked up a spin that I hadn't been aware of in my childhood reading. Ithaca may be the archetypal home in Western literature, but that "home" is not an unalloyed refuge, not necessarily the safest of havens. Clearly, my 1950s reading was of censored texts.

This time, throughout the story, I found the women seductive, the lotus lands alluring, the partying along the way enticing. And Ithaca itself - its strife-torn domesticity - somewhat repellent.

Cavafy pulls no punches about it:

*As you set out for Ithaka ...
... don't hurry the journey at all ...
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

Cavafy's poetry always turns your world upside down, but this poem, erecting its unambiguous "Don't go!" warning, made me want to go all the more.

The only way there is by boat. As I approach the island, I have a sense that nothing is going on: scrub-covered humped mountains, wild deserted coastline, no pleasure craft, no villages, no cars or people in view. I'm headed for Vathy, the capital, but there's no sign of it. The big ferry goes full tilt into the narrow Molos Gulf, like entering a fjord with the mountains reared up close beside and ahead. This is scary! Then it does a broadside left, swerving into an even narrower gap between two hills. The drumming

engines reverberate off the rocks on either side. This is scarier still! Is the throttle stuck on full-steam-ahead? I could reach out and touch the land on both sides. Then, suddenly, Vathy Bay opens out and it's a wide generous harbour with the cream and orange houses of the town nestled around it. The big ferry pirouettes, backs up to the vehicular landing. And I imagine the bay teeming with Troy-destined galleys. Trust Homer to give Odysseus the best home harbour in all of Greece. And, of course, it's perfectly womb-shaped.

I drag my suitcase from the wharf and find accommodation at the first Rooms to Let across the road. Then I walk the placid, residential waterfront to explore Vathy. There are no traffic lights or centre lines on the road. Barely any traffic; vehicles come one by one. Where you can't cross harbourside main roads on other Greek islands for all the activity associated with docks, restaurants, bus terminuses, supermarkets and government offices, you can walk unscathed down the middle of the road on Ithaca. There are a few trucks and taxis, the occasional motorbike.

The most primitive place I've been to - the New Guinea highlands - is a string of thriving metropolises compared with the capital of Ithaca.

The island reminds me of my Sydney childhood when I lived near the bush and the harbour and could stop and look at trees, watch fish off the pier and examine how the world was working. On the hot days while I'm here, Ithaca transports me to an Australian summer - drenching light, heat in the nostrils. Further around the harbour, as far as the road goes that way, there is a stand of 50 gum trees lining the bay. There's a little beach where they careen fishing boats. Seven or eight are lined up, leaning on their sides or propped up with stumps and branches, their hulls being caulked and painted. With the eucalypts beside them it looks like a scene from Sydney Harbour in the 19th century. And under those gums there's that smell of Australian summer, not the smell of eucalyptus oil, but the more memorable and distinctive smell that comes from the hot heart of the tree, through its bark. That brittle, brown, vast smell of heatwaves and mirages.

And in the rain, Ithaca reminds me of my northern New South Wales home with all those primitive smells rising from the soil and grasses, and the clouds hovering around or clinging to the mountains, and that sense you feel that you could live on the air alone.

Ithaca is known the world over, but it's not "developed" (as real estate and tourist agencies use the term). The island is 96 square kilometres in area - less than the extent of the northern beachside suburbs of Sydney where I grew up. There are only five hotels on Ithaca; the tallest is two storeys high. There are no neon signs, no large billboards. The waters are brilliant to play in and the mountains are magnificent to walk on. Madonna

and Nicolas Cage slip in to holiday in a rented mansion with its own secluded bay out of Vathy, but hardly anyone else comes to our cultural and mythological home.

Ithaca has one road going from end to end. For this the island has one bus. I catch it from Vathy and listen to the driver's enthusiastic singing as I stare down at the sea, down sheer cliffs with no safety barriers. I also note the arguments the driver has with old villagers who want to pay for their trip. Put your money away, he tells them.

These old people are the ones who stayed. They've lived through the island's economic decline, and the several earthquakes. The population is now 3500; but in the 1920s it was 18,000. Vathy had an earthquake in 1953 that almost flattened the town. Many left for Australia then.

After visiting Frikes at the far end of the island, I need a taxi. It's 6.30pm and the bus has done its last run. I get to the Stavros town square and enter the taverna. There's a table of men playing cards. One of them speaks English. He's the taxi driver, Kostas.

Kostas spent 20 years in Australia, in Sydney and Melbourne. He picked tobacco at Goondiwindi and Texas in Queensland. His offspring still live there but he has retired to Ithaca, where he was born. He has a grey Mercedes taxi. The best car on the island. He lives at Kioni, has his little fishing boat at that picturesque harbour. He has come home to an idyllic lifestyle.

As we drive back to Vathy on the twisting cliff-side road, Kostas points out the monastery on the mountain: "You can see the world from there," he says. Further on he says: "It's a paradise here," but later, "It's very boring in winter." Then he stops at a bend above the gulf to point out the place where Madonna holidayed at Skinos Bay. "In a mansion. It would cost a fortune to stay there," he says. It's important that Madonna was here, and that she paid so much. I get the feeling that he misses his children in Australia.

I don't get the feeling from Kostas that Ithaca is the perfect place to return or retire to, even if you were born here. In spite of the fishing boat and the Mercedes, bought with Australian dollars, Kostas suggests that home is not easily found.

Preparing for my passage out of Ithaca, I visit the travel agency in the town square. The young man at the desk is called Michael. He was born in Sydney. He still has a house in a street off Military Road, in Neutral Bay. That's the suburb where I was born - and in a street off Military Road too! He bought the house "when he was very young", and he can't remember the name of the street. He left Sydney 16 years ago - "a long time", he calls it. He came back to Ithaca because that's where his parents migrated from. The rent from the Sydney house allows him to stay.

I'm shocked. On Ithaca I'm looking at an Ithacan who owns a property possibly metres from my birthplace in Australia. I don't own property near there, though wish I did. Michael is working out his family-home life-roots in Ithaca while I'm buggerising about with my symbolic notion of home in a place 12,000 kilometres from where I was born.

Ithaca isn't perfect. On the square in front of me an old woman waves her umbrella fiercely and yells at a young man driving by in his ute. In a side street I see an old fellow with a walking frame caught short and taking a piss by a wall - through his walking frame, and wetting it. By the harbour I hear mewling coming from a roadside dump bin - I remove the stone weighing the lid down and find a litter of pups tied in a plastic supermarket bag.

Ithaca is home, all right. Coming back from the now-neglected Arethusa fountain - the spring where Odysseus re-met his honest swineherd and Byron visited in homage - I walk the overgrown track, look down on the deserted beach and up at the empty mountains, and consider buying real estate. But I drop the idea. Home is somewhere good to visit, but I don't want to be tied to it. ■