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## 'wi' nowt but dialeck for democracy': Bill Griffiths' Cultural Activism in Seaham

In 'Our Mongrel Selves' (1992), Stuart Hall highlights how 'strengthening of 'local' allegiances and identities' might erode "centred' nationalisms of the west European nation state'; this development could enable greater co-operation across national boundaries, but risks 're-valorisation of smaller, subordinate nationalisms' based on these local allegiances.<sup>1</sup> Hall warns against temptations 'to produce a purified 'folk' and to play the highly dangerous game of 'ethnic cleansing'.<sup>2</sup> His fears are informed by genocide and forced migrations that, while he wrote, were accompanying the break-up of Yugoslavia; however, his caution might also apply more widely:

Here, the real dislocated histories and hybridised ethnicities of Europe, which have been made and remade across the tortured and violent history of Europe's march to modernity, are subsumed by some essentialist conception of national identity, by a surreptitious return to 'tradition' [...] that recasts cultural identity as an unfolding essence, moving, apparently without change, from past to future.<sup>3</sup>

The dilemma is how to cultivate the positive potential of folk cultures while resisting an essentialised, purist approach that could develop into fascism. One figure who grappled successfully with Hall's problem is Bill Griffiths, a poet, Old English scholar, archivist, prisoners' rights activist, classical pianist and sometime Hell's Angel who stands out among

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, ed. by Sally Davison et al. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2017), p.276.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, p.278.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, p.278.

the British avant-garde of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries for his folkic methods, developing friendships with peripheral communities and letting their voices inform his writing. Even his earliest poems, written in the 1970s, incorporate idioms from prisoners, biker gangs and Roma. In 1990, Griffiths' folk interests gained new focus when he moved from London to Seaham, a fishing and mining town in County Durham. He remained based there until he passed away in 2007.

Griffiths shares Hall's appreciation of 'real dislocated histories and hybridised ethnicities' in any culture's genealogy. This understanding of 'folk' is international, interracial and transcultural, remaining open to ongoing change. For Griffiths, 'folk' offers not a conservative force, but potential for radical resistance. This essay considers how these values impacted the folk-oriented research that Griffiths initiated in Seaham, including extensive work alongside long-term residents to celebrate North East dialect in the face of hegemonic, centralised Englishness. This all fed into his poetry, which periodically deployed dialect throughout his time in the region. The linguistic texture and poetic stakes show in the opening of the poem 'On Vane Tempest Provisionally Shut, 23 October, in the Afternoon, 1992':

While the bishop that tawks to the pollis that bray'd the miners  
woz marchin',  
wiv a thrang, weel-hair-comb'd mob,  
tiv address a petishun  
til their Lord  
whe lives mony a sunny mile frev here,  
Satan, wiv a singular bat  
o' his gristly neeve  
tew'd Vane Tempest sarely,  
aal but drav it  
clean belaw ti the sea.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Griffiths, *Collected Poems Volume 3 (1992-96)*, ed. by Alan Halsey (Hastings: Reality Street, 2016), p.144.

Vane Tempest was the last of three collieries around Seaham to shut. 'Thrang' means 'busy' or 'crowded'; to 'bray' and 'bat' mean to 'hit' or 'beat up'; to 'tew' is to 'trouble'; while a 'neeve' is a fist.<sup>5</sup>

The poem demonstrates how dialect enables closely worked sound patterns. A series of subtle, often unstressed rhymes and pararhymes runs through the passage – 'wiv', 'tiv', 'frev', 'wiv', 'neeve', 'drav' – that disappear with the standard English 'with', 'to', 'from', 'with', 'fist', 'drove'. Likewise, dialect pronunciation and vocabulary introduce puns that accentuate meaning. With 'pollis', pronunciation of 'police' approaches the word's Greek root, πόλις ('polis') or 'city', aligning law enforcement with the poem's city, either Durham (home of the local bishop, with 'Lord' suggesting God) or London (seat of the government whose policies led to the mine's closure). Either way, the city represents power distanced from local concerns.

Griffiths' engagement with North East dialect originates at his moment of arrival in Seaham. Shortly afterwards, Griffiths wrote to poet Eric Mottram: 'I have only been here a week or so, but the difference to the tensions of the London Borough of Hillingdon is already striking, and I look forwards to making many good friends here (when I have learned the language).'<sup>6</sup> From most people, the parenthetical remark would seem a throwaway quip, but Griffiths meant it. He began researching local dialect, self-publishing books on the subject, as he had long done for his poetry; initially there was an anthology of

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<sup>5</sup> Griffiths, *A Dictionary of North East Dialect (Second Edition)* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2005), p.173, p.19, p.9, p.170–171, p.122.

<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, Letter to Eric Mottram, 9 June 1990; London, King's College, MOTTRAM 5/100/1–36.

dialect texts, *Durham and Around: A Dialect Reader* (1993), and a lexicon, *Durham & Around: Dialect Word List* (1994).

It is worth noting that, for Griffiths, issues of language (dialect or otherwise) are intensely political. As early as 1974, he distributed to friends the mimeographed pamphlet *Notes on Democracy*, where he ruminates on the coercive power of language and outlines a programme for abolishing government itself:

Present govts seem scared to minimize change. Paradox: instability precipitates govt, but govt is limited by its own ambitions and creation from dealing with total reality. Events, populations, resources, are non-stable. So we have no continuous govts but a series of attempts. Each time a govt's failure or corruption is exposed, and the concept of authority comes under scrutiny, we are told the only solution is an intensification of authority. Consider this in relation to English prison policy in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Griffiths' politics feel like anarchism, though he prefers the term 'democracy', holding that no British government has yet implemented democracy in its true sense. His principles extend to this text's circulation, with a conversation or negotiation envisaged between writer and reader. He provides a wide margin on each page, as medieval scribes and early modern printers often did so that readers could add marginalia and initiate their own conversations with a text. The pamphlet concludes: '*You are invited to use the space at the right of each page or any extra paper, to make your own comments and further points upon. You might like to return the annotated copy to Bill Griffiths, 107 Valley Drive, London NW9 9NT.*'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, throughout his career, Griffiths leaves his texts open to continuing transformation; his editor, Alan Halsey, describes how 'in some cases this involves revision in the commonly accepted sense, in others it is more a case of re-vision – the text reproduced verbatim but in a different page space and/or variant

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<sup>7</sup> Griffiths, *A Note on Democracy* (London: Pirate Press, 1974), n.p. Typographical errors corrected.

<sup>8</sup> Griffiths, *A Note on Democracy*, n.p. Griffiths' italics.

setting'.<sup>9</sup> What would this democratic, anarchistic poetics of constant renegotiation mean when actually enacted in a community, though? A few months after arriving in Seaham, Griffiths wrote *A Pocket History of the Soul* (1991). This essay describes how political hierarchies derive from a pernicious theology in which the human soul, with authority over the body, is in turn policed by God. Griffiths proposes that hierarchies of religion, nationhood, landlordship, colonialism and capital should all be dismantled, replaced by systems more accountable and responsive to the people they serve. This requires cultivation of skills and heightened participation in local culture by the residents:

Without participation there can be no meaningful 'democracy'. [...] Participation is thus something quite different from token consultation at a General Election, or token opportunity to put objections to some local scheme devised elsewhere by planners at county or country level. It is the opposite of social engineering since no grand theory is involved but only local conditions are taken into account.<sup>10</sup>

Griffiths actually came close to a position where he might have implemented his localism on a larger scale, and though he did not quite succeed, he nevertheless leveraged benefits for his neighbourhood. The inciting incident was an announcement of 'grandiose plans for dockland redevelopment and new executive housing', as his friend, historian Bill Lancaster, recalls:

This 'wash and brush-up' of Seaham was seen by Bill as the gentrification of his coastal village and a personal threat as the demolition of his home was part of the scheme. Although new to Seaham he organized and led the protests against the plan, which culminated in him standing as candidate for the council. Labour's hold on Seaham was traditionally watertight

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Halsey, 'Pirate Press: A Bibliographical Excursion', in *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, ed. by Will Rowe (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp.55–71: p.55.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Griffiths, *A Pocket History of the Soul*, n.p.; section 40.

and their candidates were usually elected unopposed. He came within a few votes of winning the seat, a shock to Labour who wisely revised the plan and left Bill's area as it was.<sup>11</sup>

Griffiths saw even the Labour Party, traditional ally of North Eastern mining communities, as too distant from Seaham's local concerns. Campaigns for regional devolution have long been active in the North East: in the 1970s, poets Colin Simms and Basil Bunting were on the committee of the Campaign for the North; a successor organisation, the Campaign for a Northern Assembly, was active but unsuccessful in 2004's referendum on devolution for the North East; and recently, Newcastle-based scholar Alex Niven has persuasively argued for regional devolution across England.<sup>12</sup> None of this would satisfy Griffiths, for whom even the Durham County Council's fiefdom is unwieldy and dehumanising. For him, the town is the level at which local democracy and culture should operate.

Griffiths' election bid was in May 1995; the following November, Durham County Council published *Turning the Tide*, a report proposing removal of mining spoil from beaches between Seaham and nearby Easington. In a journal article the following year, Griffiths explained that the plan would accelerate coastal erosion, and questioned whether some spoil should be 'tipped into Hawthorn Quarry [...] making one site (the coast) pretty and another site (the abandoned, renascent quarry) ugly'.<sup>13</sup> He argued that the County Council's participation in a 'cult of the restoration of the past is necessarily delusory, unavoidably a fantasy', betokening a 'myth of a return to former Aryan glory'.<sup>14</sup> Evoking

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<sup>11</sup> Lancaster, 'Bill Griffiths Northern Days', Lancaster, Bill, 'Bill Griffiths Northern Days', *Journal of British and Irish Poetry*, 6.1 (March 2014), 13–26: 16.

<sup>12</sup> Colin Simms, 'A Glimpse of the "Inly-Working North": A Meeting of the Campaign for the North', in *Northern Review*, 6, Spring 1998, 69–70; Alex Niven, *New Model England: How to Build a Radical Culture beyond the Idea of England* (London: Repeater Books, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Griffiths, 'Coastal Strategy in Co. Durham: Turning the Tide or Losing the Beaches?', in *Northern Review*, 4, Winter 1996, 100–104: 103.

<sup>14</sup> Griffiths, 'Coastal Strategy in Co. Durham', p.103, p.101.

white supremacist ideology, Griffiths parallels Hall's wariness of seeing folk culture as 'an unfolding essence, moving, apparently without change, from past to future', as well as the link between this and 'ethnic cleansing'. Griffiths, unlike the Council, shows willingness to celebrate the unexpected, notionally 'impure' materials that history may present.

These conflicts all manifest in the poem about Vane Tempest. The piece was published posthumously; in his computer files, Griffiths grouped it with dialect poems published in 1992–93, but it must postdate these, as it portrays later events.<sup>15</sup> After the description of the mine closure, the narrator receives mail:

[...] a letter cam hoy'd thru me door  
axin' if we'd mebbe like  
the toon-coouncil abolisht, like?  
Kas oor views might metter.  
An' wad we like the toon-centre  
jis pulled doon too,  
while thor at it.<sup>16</sup>

This refers to the gentrification scheme, and to a referendum that preceded Griffiths' election bid, concerning the possible abolition of Easington District Council so that its functions could be centralised at County Council level.<sup>17</sup> Despite reservations about the District Council's track record, Griffiths abhorred this attempt to appropriate power, as did many of his neighbours, to judge by referendum results which saw the District Council retained.

The poem continues; Satan reappears. An arch-Thatcherite, he urges Seaham's miners to use their redundancy payments to buy shares in a newly privatised Hell – a post-

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Halsey, notes to Griffiths, *Collected Poems Volume 3*, pp.512–513.

<sup>16</sup> Griffiths, *Collected Poems Volume 3*, p.145.

<sup>17</sup> Griffiths, *A Century of Self-Service?: Aspects of Local Government in the North East with Special Reference to Seaham* (Seaham: Amra Imprint, 1995), n.p. (section 1).

regeneration vision of Seaham where the Devil will 'landskip ye aal in kak'.<sup>18</sup> This alludes to the County Council's scheme to infill nearby Hawthorn Quarry with spoil from the beach – a near-literal landscaping of the area with excrement. Griffiths reflects:

An' Aa stud in a stiumor.  
For whe knaws, i' true,  
What's plann'd?  
It's sittled  
An' leave us wi' nowt  
But dialeck for democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Buying shares in privatised industries, like the parliamentary phantom of democracy, bestows merely illusory control over the world – Seaham's future is already 'plann'd' and 'sittled' between the Council and its corporate allies. 'Dialeck' remains the one area where some measure of personal choice can persist in defiance of such forces. Though it, too, is under siege by a hegemonic culture industry enforcing standard English, its potential remains far from trivial. It is in the aftermath of his political and environmental campaigns of 1995 and 1996 that Griffiths' dialect activities truly took wing. While they may seem indirect actions compared to, say, running for office, in fact it was in dialect research that he was able to bring his political poetics most completely into practice.

Through the mid-1990s, Griffiths continued his dialect research in partnership with his friends Gordon Patrickson and Trevor Charlton.<sup>20</sup> By 1998, there was enough local interest to establish the Durham & Tyneside Dialect Group, a larger-scale project to catalogue the region's distinctive vocabulary. This ran along collectivist lines, with Griffiths

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<sup>18</sup> Griffiths, *Collected Poems Volume 3*, p.146.

<sup>19</sup> Griffiths, *Collected Poems Volume 3*, p.147.

<sup>20</sup> *Durham & Tyneside Dialect Group: 2005-03-22T12:00:00* (archived website): London, British Library.



taking the title 'Co-ordinator' rather than becoming leader *per se*.<sup>21</sup> In a 2006 interview, recorded during wider research into North Eastern dialects by B.B.C. Radio Newcastle, Griffiths is interviewed alongside the Group's Secretary Tom Richardson and colleague Nichol Hopper. The conversation gives a valuable insight into their decentred methodology and organisational structure.

The interviewer asks about the trio's experience of using or hearing local dialect terms. What's noticeable about Griffiths' contribution is his diffidence. He happily supplies findings from the group's research, or etymology from his medieval studies, but lets his friends handle all the questions about personal use of dialect. It is refreshing that, despite his accomplishments, he does not impose himself as spokesman; instead, he behaves as a specialist within a collective whose other members may have expertise more pertinent to certain questions. Even when the interviewer requests an account of the Dialect Group's methods, Griffiths asks 'Shall I do that?' and waits for agreement from the others before proceeding.<sup>22</sup> He then describes opening project to even wider participation by soliciting dialect words from the region's wider population.

**Griffiths:** [...] in 2001 we put out a questionnaire, quite a simple one, and that got a lot of responses, about 500 came in, and we built on that to build up a dictionary, which is published now. And that's a mix of words from previous publications and all the words that were sent in. And, ah, people was very keen on it. We get words coming in every week, certainly, if not every day. There's a lot to collect still. [...] One I hadn't heard before was 'pagged' for 'tired out'.

**Richardson:** That one's been in common use for as long as I remember, yeah. But you've just added it to the list, haven't you?

**Griffiths:** That's the first I heard it.

**Richardson:** Yeah, maybe you should get out more, Bill?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Durham & Tyneside Dialect Group*.

<sup>22</sup> "Conversation in Seaham about Accent, Dialect and Attitudes to Language", B.B.C. 'Voices' Recordings, 2005: London, British Library, 00:01:07.

<sup>23</sup> 'Conversation in Seaham...', 00:01:09.

Griffiths also built a website with a feature that allowed contributions to be submitted internationally. Dozens of co-authors were thereby welcomed into what eventually became *A Dictionary of North East Dialect* (2004; second edition 2005).

By collecting input from living speakers in this way, the Dialect Group documented speech that is no mere 'essence, moving, apparently without change', but that constantly adjusts to its environment. For example, numerous 'dialect terms seem to have survived by a process of doubling-up, whereby the unfamiliar term is linked into a self-explanatory compound' – for example 'guissy-pig', where 'guissy' itself means 'pig'.<sup>24</sup> Also, established dialect words have taken on new meanings:

canch (stony ridge) now used for 'kerb'  
charver (young person) now used for 'club-goer'  
duds (clothes) now used for 'boxer shorts'  
dut (bowler hat or cap) now used for 'small woolly hat'  
midden (rubbish tip) now used for 'dustbin'  
skeets (boots) now used for 'football boots'  
sneck (latch) now used for 'catch on a yale lock'  
and from earlier sources: settle (bench) used (1938) for 'couch'.<sup>25</sup>

Both the Durham & Tyneside Dialect Group, and North East dialect itself, hence epitomise Griffiths' anarchistic, democratic poetics. Like one of his 're-visioned' poems, or the provisional text of *A Note on Democracy*, dialect words' meanings can change when introduced to new contexts, and are subject to renegotiation through conversation. The Group exemplifies democratic participation of the kind imagined in *A Pocket History of the Soul*, where success depends on locally specific knowledge, and on willingness to concede

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<sup>24</sup> Griffiths, 'Words with Edges', *Northern Review*, 11, 2002, 41– 51: 49.

<sup>25</sup> Griffiths, 'Words with Edges', p.49. Griffiths' underlining.

the floor when one's own knowledge is less pertinent to particular circumstances than someone else's (as does Griffiths in the B.B.C. interview). Most notably, just as Griffiths rejects the idea that the Durham coast ever had a supposedly 'pure' past, the Group celebrates (in Hall's words) the 'dislocated histories and hybridised ethnicities' of their region. This manifests not only in the modern dialect's constant flux, but in the fact that the dialect has never not been in flux. The *Dictionary of North East Dialect* is painstaking in cataloguing etymologies; not only are there abundant legacies of the Anglian and Norse languages (which Griffiths suspects of having creolised together to a degree during the early medieval period), but loan-words are borrowed from throughout nearby regions and nations, as well as from peripatetic communities like the Roma (the abovementioned 'charver' has Romani origins).<sup>26</sup> Griffiths also rejects the racist trope that 'dialect signals ethnic descent.'<sup>27</sup> It is impossible to read the Dialect Group's research and come away, as Hall puts it, 'subsumed by some essentialist conception of national identity' for the North East. A good dictionary may be the best antidote to fascism.

Griffiths' cultural activism in Seaham, particularly around dialect research, remains a testament to the possibility of local resistance against the totalising influence of the nation – either the existing nation-state, or the 'new nationalisms' of locality. Likewise, in Griffiths' poetry, dialect is how a marginalised community voices opposition to the individuals in power, highlighting the latter's actual helplessness to grant freedom from the structures that bestow this power. In contrast, proposing one's own structures, as Griffiths and his allies attempted through political, environmental activism, and via linguistic research, may well distribute power more equitably. The poem on Vane Tempest concludes:

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<sup>26</sup> Griffiths, *A Dictionary of North East Dialect*, p.xiii; p.30.

<sup>27</sup> Griffiths, 'Words with Edges', p.44.

Onyway,  
Aa had me environmentalist badge alang wi' me,  
and howk'd it oot, and confronted him wi'it,  
an' Satan bowked oot an awefu' pump,  
and lowped inti the hole  
the pit wiz yance,  
an' the sun cam spanglin' oot,  
an' someone somewhere  
gov the bishop a thanks  
as tho' any wun man can de owt  
thru power  
ti release ye.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Griffiths, *Collected Poems Volume 3*, p.147. A 'pump' is a fart – Griffiths, *A Dictionary of North East Dialect*, p.136.

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