TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

**Number 106**

**Cos’t say wha’ arm gerrin ‘at?**



I have spent a good many years of my life learning a smattering of various foreign languages for one purpose or another….. starting with my father teaching me to count up to twelve in Hindi in 1945 after he got back safe but not sound from the war in Burma – through years of learning French, German and Latin at school (because I was expected to) - through ‘having a go’ at Russian and Chinese (because I rather fancied trying) – through picking up a smattering of Spanish, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Serbian etc. etc. (so that I could deliver at least a sentence in the home language at conferences I attended as President of the European School Heads Association.)

*Cartoon at the Confederation of British*

*Industry Conference 1990*

It is high time, therefore, to challenge you…. those of you who are left, anyway .…. to an exercise in translation that few ‘*furriners’* have attempted, let alone succeeded at ……. a basic understanding of ‘*North Staffordshire Dialect’.*

It is difficult enough understanding the spoken dialect and its particular accent…… it is doubly difficult finding written forms of words to express the peculiarities of sound and rhythm that are the essence of any dialect’s tonal colour.

My North Staffordshire grammar school in Newcastle-under-Lyme concentrated on knocking our home-grown accent out of us native speakers, but at the same time encouraged the use of the dialect. Both, in the view of our very southern, public-school-educated Headmaster, were absolutely necessary…… for our own good, and the good of the community. He once told the Sixth Form Society that everyone had an accent……. and that the Queen had the most notable accent of all! ‘But you must always remember that it is the Queen’s accent that has been chosen as the norm…. not North Staffordshire’s’….. and that is why we aspiring pupils must aim to rid ourselves of ours and emulate hers….. for our own future good. It was a popular middle class point of view at that time, and ‘bang’ went many authentic accents, and at the same time, many age-old dialects.

Attitudes and expectations have changed radically now….. and Lord Reith, the first Director |General of the BBC, has stopped turning in his grave at the gamut of accents now announcing BBC programmes and reporting on world events.

So, in the spirit of communal learning that has overtaken us all in this Covid lockdown age, I am offering you below two poems that were written in 1955 for my school’s biennial ‘Eisteddfodd’…… though why our festival of arts and music was given its Welsh title is a mystery to me, but we loved it, so that was justification enough.

These poems came first and second in the ‘North Staffordshire Written Dialect’ competition…. They were, in fact, the only entrants in the written competition!

The winner was the first poem….. by my old pal, B. Wiggins, as he is called in the school magazine, because no first names were ever used either at school or when we met as staff and pupils later in life….. it simply ‘was not done’. But I can tell you he was ‘Barry’.

The second poem was written by me. It came second because it was the only one left…. and it did not win because Barry’s poem dealt with a ‘Potteries’, a ‘Five Towns’ i.e. North Staffordshire topic, while mine was…. well, a bit of an attempt at pseudo-academic wit, and ‘not quite right’ for a dialect poem.

In my own view, Barry was a clear winner anyway…. He caught in print the essence of the dialect…. He got it right…. mine does not sound authentic enough…. though it is *‘a good try’.*

They were also entered in the spoken dialect competition…. and came nowhere.

My own vocal attempt was clearly a simulated version…. not in the least ‘real’. I sounded like a BBC news presenter trying to be ‘authentic’. It is a bit like my attempts at all foreign languages….. ‘Grade A’ for effort.

The fact was that many of our contemporaries from the Stoke-on-Trent area and the North Staffordshire mining villages had been entered by their Housemasters, willy nilly. They had no desire to write their dialect down, and flatly refused….. but they spoke the ‘lingo’ fluently and could see no reason to refuse to read out a poem in their daily dialect!

So, what is it? …. ‘*Cost kick a bow agin a wow and bost eet?’* is the phrase usually offered to strangers as an introduction to North Staffordshire dialect….. ‘*A’t gayin wom, our yowk?’* – (which is asking a member of your family or very good friend if they are going home) *–* might give you pause to wonder…. while *‘a kind tea kind cell’* and ‘*lane mate’* are phrases which might stretch your understanding to breaking point! The first is ‘a county council; the second phrase refers to a piece *of ‘*fat-free stewing steak’*.* My mother would often admonish my sisters and me with, ‘Yer *munna say wunna, it inner polite.’* So, now you have the basics.

But North Staffordshire dialect is more than a sum of comic phrases…. It is a whole manner of communication going right back to Anglo-Saxon roots, The modern ‘*Thar cosna*….’ comes from the Germanic ‘Du kannst nicht….’….. well, so someone told me. Seems quite likely to me.

Anyway, do have a go… and don’t despair….. you will get the gist….. which is what my sons and I get when conversing with the locals at every Stoke City home match…. ‘*Garn Stowk!’*

**FAYVE PLUS WON** *OR* **THE UNLUVLY CITY** by B. J. Wiggins

*(You need to know that the city of Stoke-on-Trent is made up of six separate towns. In his novels the novelist, Arnold Bennet, missed out Fenton and called his fictional city the ‘Five Towns’.)*

Am a pottry mon born an’ bred,

But a dunna let it go ter me yed.

A’ve lived ‘ere fer fifty yeea o’ mower,

Aye, an’ ahl lve fer fifty mower.

Ah know sum peyple think weyn an ignorant lot –

But ah bet thee dunna know ‘ow mak a pot!

It meks mey laugh when ah think weer ‘ighups ‘d bey

If they ‘adna ra cup fer drink th’ tey,

A’l grant thee sum things neyd puttin’ reight,

But tha casna do it ower neit.

Stoke n’ th’ Vale onna dewin gud –

Thar knows wha’ tis – they neyd new blud.

The citee inna very narce ta th’ee,

But that conna reaylly bey ‘elped. Dust see?

Coz weer ter bizy mekin a cup or plate

‘Ter bother if th’ citee lewks owreight.

Weyn got tyne ‘alls, in ow six tynes,

Ter see citee’s run on rait lynes –

Desyned on ‘Talian style bee sum greet mynd –

‘S ‘pity aif are sinkin’ in th’ grynd.

What’s up nar? Ownly fayve, dost say!

They better caynt ‘m reight away.

Arna Bennet? Ey knew nowt.

Ey went ‘n’ left owd Fenta owt.

Tunsta, Bosley, Angley, Stowke,

Ow fower covered in grime ‘n’smowk.

Next cums Fenta, then Neck End,

Both as mucky as t’other end.

Aye, they live in werld a dirt ‘n grime.

Tinnera place t’ave a good time.

Th’airs sa thick tha cos cut tit with a knarf,

But ar wuddna change me pottry larf.

Ah know, that from o this grime

Cums ayt things rayt rare ‘n fine.

An’ a bet thee tinna evry mon con say –

Ah ‘elped mek cup Queyn uses fer tay.

*(‘Neck End’, by the way, is Longton)*

**‘ENERY THE EIGHTH** by C.J.Lowe

There wuz an owd codger mee faither knowed,

Who ‘ad a thighsand things ay wanted sewed.

Ees treisers, ees shert, stockins, ‘nd shoes,

‘Nd ees cowt wuz no berrer, that ar knows.

Bu’ whenever ‘ee thowt ‘ee oughta begin,

Ay couldns cos ‘o the state ‘ee was in.

Yer say, owd Bill were a wun for the bayer.

‘Nd truth is, it made ‘im fayl quayer.

It made ‘im think ‘e wuz Raleigh or Drake,

Os sum other knayght ‘z made ‘em quake.

Wun day ‘ay wuz passin a pub darn at Mayer,

When he thowt ‘eed drop in to see who was there.

Thar wuz none ‘ay knowed so ‘ee started to drink,

‘Nd ‘ay drank and drank till ay couldna think.

The ‘is maynd cleared, and ay knew who ay wuz.

‘Enery the Eighth on a double-decker buz!

There ay wuz in ‘ees ‘igh bouts and spurs,

Serreinded bay ‘ees waives orl dun up in fers.

Ay sat bay ‘ees sen, ‘nd ees waives in pears,

When oop cum t’conducter, ‘nd sheits fer the fares.

But ‘Enery cunna pea, no’r on yer laif,

Fer ‘ay adna to pay fer wun owd waif,

Ay ‘ad six to c’ntend wi’; ‘nd that’s no jowk;

Ay might bay king bu’ ay was fair near browke.

So, ay sheited tt’ Annie, ‘nd towd ‘er ter pea;

Ay know’d ees unions tha’ wuz plain ter say.

Bu’, ay’d picked the wrong waif,, fer dayer owd Annie

Sheited back that SHAY wonner avin’ any.

If ay couldna pea, then ayd ave to woke.

Shay’s a rum un tha’ Annie, ‘nd couldna aif towk.

Er rattled on fer a mineet or soo,

Till ‘Enery stopped ‘er bay stompin’ on ‘er too.

‘If thar dusna shurrup, I’ll cut off yer’ ead,

Or doo summat werse ter yer…’ or so ay said.

Ay’d kape t’ot water bottle at nayght in bed.

Bu’ Ann didna care, shay wuz used to ‘is moud,

‘Nd shay knowed if shay answered shayed only be roud.

Soo shay sed to t’conducter, ‘Certainly not !’

Bu’ ‘Enery refused te pea fer the lot.

Soo, ay pressed ees lips togayther and tayter,

‘Nd thowt very quick – fer a wily owd blaighter.

The ay thowt of a law that ‘d mak it a sin,

Fer waives to pay fer their sen…. and not ‘im !

Soo, there ay sat soo smug… and then ay beamed.

Ay’d got ‘em nar… or so it saimed.

Bu’ ees waives were ‘avin none of this.

Togither they rose wi’ one gentle ‘iss.

‘Tharst ‘ad eet nar!’ said wun waif, Kate.

‘Nd befower power ‘Enery could move ees fate,

Shay blipped ‘im on ees yed threy tames or mower.

‘Nd all six just kick’d eem lying on the flower.

And then… they orl just vanish’d…. the owd blinkin’ lo’.

‘Nd Bill were back in the pub wi’ ees po’.

Ay smiled to ees sen, ‘nd thowt eet were grand,

Te see wha’ thay did in owd Engerland.

Thar cosna tell ‘im owt of what ‘appened then,

….Cos ay’d been there…. ‘nd sayn it fer ees sen.

Good luck !

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