

**North-East Childhoods:  
Regional Identity in  
Children's Novels of the  
North East of England**

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**Abstract.**

This thesis explores how children's writers have participated in the process of representing and constructing the identity of the North East of England. It argues that there exists a dominant North-East aesthetic which has become deeply embedded within British children's fiction, and that several of its key motifs (labour, industry and decline; traditional gender roles and landscape) recur frequently within portrayals of the region in writing for the young. This aesthetic contributes to a perception of the region as both marginal and marginalised, and masks realities about the North East. Following an overview of children's literature set in the region, from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries, the focus moves to the work of Robert Westall, a major children's writer who was born in Tyneside and set much of his fiction within the region. The Westall chapters draw on the Robert Westall Collection at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books. The more recent work of North-East writer David Almond is considered in the closing chapters which also draw on unpublished material and interviews for this thesis.

Key works discussed: **Robert Westall**, *Falling into Glory*, *Fathom Five*, *The Kingdom by the Sea*, *The Machine Gunners*, *A Time of Fire*, *The Wind Eye*, *The Watch House*; **David Almond**, *Clay*, *The Fire-Eaters*, *Heaven Eyes*, *Kit's Wilderness*, *My Dad's a Birdman*, *The Savage*, *Secret Heart*, *Skellig*.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction – Regional Identity and the Dominant North-East Aesthetic**

The Great North Road lolled endlessly, and the warmth had gone out of the late August sun.

“I’m cold,” said Sally. “Someone’s walking over my grave.” [...]

“I know what Sally means,” said Michael. “The sky’s so lonely and big in Northumberland.”

“The sky’s the normal size,” said Bertrand. “It’s just lack of tall buildings and trees.”

“There are trees, but they’re losing their leaves already. And they’re so little, and all their branches bend to the left.”

“Prevailing wind,” said Bertrand. “North-east gales. The wind comes straight from Norway; you need two sweaters here, even in summer.”

“You feel the soil’s so thin,” said Beth. “The rocks are like bones sticking through skin.”

“Cambridge has made you lot soft,” said Bertrand firmly. “This place will harden you up.”<sup>1</sup>

This thesis explores the ways in which works of children’s literature have both initiated and underpinned enduring ways of viewing the North East, and how some children’s writers have challenged dominant notions of the place.

Literature forms part of the discourse within which individual subjectivities are interpellated and positioned; as post-colonial critic Ania Loomba notes, literary texts are ‘complex clusters of languages and signs’ and therefore ‘fecund sites’ for the interplays of ideological forces.<sup>2</sup> Literary texts themselves serve to mediate between the particular and the more general, being a site for the ‘complex articulation between a single individual, social contexts and the play of language’, and this includes the relationship between the individual reader and

the wider identity of the region.<sup>3</sup> The kinds of pre-existing images of the region laid down in children's books can be particularly powerful in shaping readers' interpretations of place, and the fact that such images are encountered in fiction for young readers makes their influence particularly likely to endure.

### **Dominant North-East Aesthetic**

There is, I contend, a sustained, internally consistent, composite set of images, associations and narrative strategies comprising a dominant North-East aesthetic – a kind of literary blueprint of the region commonly employed by children's writers over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> The constituent elements of such an aesthetic comprise a set of what imagologist Joep Leerssen defines as 'stereotyped markers [...] invoked as shorthand ciphers for collective literary characterization', and their composite effect is to evoke what Emer O'Sullivan describes as 'a kind of 'literary shorthand' [...] which triggers an [...] actualization of associations, thus investing them with a special aesthetic potential.'<sup>5</sup> The enduring nature of such literary images, what Leerssen refers to as their 'long currency and topicality', is all the more potent given the widely examined asymmetric nature of address which operates within books written for children by adults.<sup>6</sup> As O'Sullivan notes, '[a]s cultural artefacts consumed at an early stage in the socialization process, children's books are a particularly valuable source for studying the various schemata, conventional national attributes and their counter-stereotypes which may be acquired at that stage.'<sup>7</sup> The same can be said of regional attributes, and in the course of the following three chapters I illustrate the operation of this aesthetic within a selected, representative range of children's books which feature the North East.<sup>8</sup>

The term ‘aesthetic’ is used to indicate the way that such literary representations of the region involve more than simply recurrent images; rather, it describes a way of writing about childhood in the region, for young readers, which encompasses dominant narrative forms and structures as well as repeated images and motifs. The term is intended to convey a similar meaning to the phenomenon described by Rob Shields.

A set of core images forms a widely disseminated and commonly held set of images of a place or space. These form a relatively stable set of ideas in currency, reinforced by their communication value as conventions circulating in a discursive economy. [...] Collectively a set of place-images forms a place-myth.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, as the following chapters demonstrate, within children’s literature there is a distinctive tradition of writing about the North East, which favours certain kinds of stories of childhood in the region, and further underpins dominant ideas about North-East childhood. For the most part, this has perpetuated a version of the North East which is, in the words Jeffrey Richards, ‘deeply rooted in the popular consciousness’ and ‘essentially urban, industrial, working-class and in many respects nineteenth-century.’<sup>10</sup> In Chapters 5 to 11 I explore the works of two influential and high profile children’s authors, Robert Westall and David Almond, both of whose work has been instrumental in reshaping the tradition in late twentieth-century British children’s fiction.

### **Regional identity**

Regional identity can be seen as articulated simultaneously from both above and below. It arises out of both a collective imagining of belonging, which affiliates the individual constituent to the greater collective whole, and an imposition of collectiveness before individuation, which seeks to dictate adherence. For the

child reader this situation is further complicated by inhabiting a reading position skewed towards the imposition of ideology from above. A sense of belonging/not belonging is central to the act of identity construction, and nowhere more so than in childhood. If subjectivity exists within a social sphere, then an individual's relation to the wider 'regional' group must contribute to this.

Region historically, therefore, is not a fixed concept, but a feeling, a sentimental attachment to territory shared by like-minded people [...] It is an imagined community no less than the nation is, though frequently it lacks the confirmation of a government and boundaries defended necessarily by force, characteristic of the nation-state.<sup>11</sup>

The region is one strata of a series of groupings, ranging from individual friendships/family relationships to an affiliation with the whole of humankind on the one hand, and from a person's immediate locale (perhaps one specific room or location) to the whole world (even beyond?) on the other. Regional identity is multifaceted and includes elements such as the physical and social landscape, history, weather, and the natural world, along with such less tangible elements as prevailing attitudes and beliefs, manners of social behaviour, even spirit. A range of such elements are fused together within the term 'regional identity'. As I will show, the idea of the North East, particularly over the last two centuries, has drawn upon a number of features, with their origins in social, economic, and geographical spheres, to forge a distinctive whole.

Though centred on ideas of natural, intrinsic and essential qualities, the region is in fact a constructed place, linked closely to a sense of being rooted in the past. Regional identity is related to ways in which ideas of time and history are conceptualised; in particular, ideas of simultaneous, common experience. This fascination with the beginnings, or roots, of experience links regional identity



with concepts of childhood; to be a person is to be one individual among many, and works of children's literature often engage with the act of negotiating such questions of belonging and affiliation. To see oneself as a North-East child is to imagine oneself as such; children's literature is one of the spheres in which such imaginings are brought into being.

### **Imagined communities**

For regions, no less than nations, are imagined communities. Who the Geordies are depends upon who they imagine themselves to be. The 'North East' is essentially a state of mind to do with histories and feelings about itself.<sup>12</sup>

The term 'imagined community' often occurs in writings on regional identity (see, for instance, Williamson 2005, Colls & Lancaster 2005). It originates in the seminal work of historian Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983; 2005). Anderson is concerned with the circumstances behind the rise of the nation state in popular consciousness, a phenomenon that he charts in various forms and locations from the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries. Although Anderson explores the quite specific instances that gave rise to the idea of 'nation-ness' rather than 'region-ness', the two concepts are linked, and in order to understand some of the ways in which 'the region' comes into being, it is helpful to look to Anderson's work.

The term 'imagined community' is deceptively simple and apt, though Anderson himself concedes that, in the decades since he coined it, it has fallen victim to overuse which runs the risk of transforming the phrase into a 'pair of words from which the vampires of banality have by now sucked almost all the blood.'<sup>13</sup> The sense in which he uses the term 'imagined' is in fact complex, and

incorporates a range of mechanisms which includes, but is not limited to, the literary act of imagining. Although the nation state is constructed and ‘imagined’ into being by its adherents, Anderson does not claim that it is written into existence in the same way as the world found within a work of fiction. Rather, literature is one of the spheres of imagination which the nation inhabits, or through which it is articulated. Despite there being significant differences between regions and nations, many of the same processes are at work in their construction. Anderson begins by suggesting that the idea of the nation arises constantly, and continues to mutate and develop, primarily through the way in which ‘‘sub’-nationalisms’ strive to assert a sense of collective identity and ‘dream of shedding their sub-ness one happy day.’<sup>14</sup> Such ‘sub’-nationalisms originate within the wider context of the over-arching nation, and in this sense the region can be considered as analogous to the ‘sub’-nation; it is above all else a region *of* a larger whole, after all. However, the tension between national and ‘sub’-national identities culminates in a different relationship than between the region and nation. Although the identity of the North East is rooted, to some degree, in a sense of rebellion against a perceived hegemonic national centre, which is always located elsewhere, rebellion does not constitute an attempt to break free from the nation, but rather to subvert and reposition the relationship between centre and periphery. As I explore later in this chapter, the North East, as a constituent of the larger region of ‘The North’, has in some ways and at times played an important role in shaping broader images of the English nation.

For Anderson, the term ‘nationalism’ is to be understood as generic and so written with a small ‘n’, rather than as a proper noun denoting a specific entity. He suggests that rather than viewing nationalism as ‘*an* ideology’ it should be

seen as a characteristic or feature of one's identity, alongside terms such as 'kinship' or 'religion'.<sup>15</sup> I contend that regionalism is similarly experienced as such an intrinsic element of identity within North-East culture, and its influence is all the more deep-rooted as a result.

Anderson is concerned with the way in which individuals and groups come to conceive of themselves as allied to a larger communal whole. To explain the process he identifies three paradoxes which have continued to trouble scholars of nationalism. These seeming dichotomies (modernity/antiquity, universality/particularity, political power/philosophical poverty) are shown to be essential characteristics of the concept of the nation, due in part to its construction as a result of power struggles and conflicts; in the construction of the 'nation state' there is always a degree of difference between conflicting interests.<sup>16</sup> The nation is a group to which individuals belong, as opposed to other nations to which they do not; similarly, to align oneself with a particular nationality is to embrace a communal identity shared by individuals of the same nationality, and therefore not shared by 'others'. All three of the paradoxes above are linked by the way in which the nation serves to mediate between the particular and the general. Firstly, though emerging at a particular moment in time, the nation is imagined as eternal and timeless, transcendently universal; secondly, though particular in its 'manifestations', nationality is a universal badge that all can, indeed must, wear; thirdly, though difficult to ground in particular concrete 'philosophy', the power of the nation over the individual is universal, able to transcend individual needs and desires (even to the point of demanding the ultimate self-sacrifice). Perhaps to an even greater extent, the region can be seen

to amplify further this fusion of the particular and the general, mediating as it does between the individual and the nation.

Anderson identifies three key occurrences which precipitated the emergence of the nation as an idea, before which the nation was not only unnecessary it was largely unimaginable. In contrast to previous modes of thought which had characterised time as simultaneous *vertically* through time (linked to religious world views which espoused views such as prophecy, divine progeniture, in other words ‘Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present’), modern thought characterises time as ‘‘homogeneous [...]’’ and ‘‘empty’’, and ‘in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence’.<sup>17</sup> Such a *horizontal* view of time much more readily lends weight to concepts of community and shared experience. This radical shift in consciousness finds analogous expression in shifts in narrative form, particularly in relation to the novel. The structure of the novel, which positions the reader as able to experience multiple, simultaneous, disparate lives and events, takes its place as a mode through which communal identity may be imagined.

Only they [the readers], like God, watch A telephoning C, B shopping, and D playing pool all *at once*. That all these acts are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time, but by actors who may be largely unaware of one another, shows the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his readers’ minds.

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.<sup>18</sup>

Anderson here is illustrating the influence of wider changes in consciousness upon eighteenth-century literary developments, a view shared by David Lodge

who suggests that one of the impacts of Enlightenment ideas upon the literary consciousness, emerging through works of the Romantic movement, was an increased interest in the relationship of the individual to a wider geographical sphere. One result of this approach which ‘pondered the effect of *milieu* on man’ was to turn the novel’s gaze towards a view which ‘opened people’s eyes to the sublime beauty of landscape and, in due course, to the grim symbolism of cityscapes in the Industrial Age.’ In other words, the relationship between individual identity and location begins to emerge as a literary motif.<sup>19</sup>

Two questions present themselves here: firstly, what factors are key in shaping the identity of a region *in general*? And secondly, what are the *particular* factors that have contributed to the shaping of the North East as an imagined regional community?

According to Edward Royle

[t]he historical concept of the ‘region’ is frequently used but difficult to define. [...] Regions can transcend these [other groups], larger perhaps than the borough, smaller perhaps than the county or nation, though sometimes cutting across county or national boundaries and even embracing large parts of a continent or group of continents. [...] The region, therefore, is for the historian a term of convenience, located specifically in time as well as space, with no promise of more than temporary existence.<sup>20</sup>

This explanation serves to underline the transient and shifting nature of the concept: the region exists between smaller and larger groups, existing temporarily in time and space. Royle goes on to consider geographical and physical dimensions of ‘the region’.

The geographical region then, might appear to have more permanence than the administrative unit, but this does not mean it is immutably fixed in the ‘reality’ of the physical landscape. It is how human beings have reacted to, and in

some cases modified or evaded, the physical environment that has shaped the changing concept of the physical region. [...] The county boundaries of Britain [...] are not natural [...]<sup>21</sup>

So, although the physical landscape itself will almost certainly have more permanence than the 'historical landscape', its identification as part of a particular region is not set in stone (or earth) as strongly as might be thought. What both of these attempts to define the region make clear is the importance of interpretation; human interaction with the physical environment gives it meaning and identity. Simon Schama similarly emphasises such an interpretative relationship between man and landscape when he asserts that '[b]efore it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind [...] built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'<sup>22</sup> As he goes on to illustrate, 'it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.'<sup>23</sup> Notably, Schama arrives at these statements by firstly considering the way in which 'a child's vision of nature can already be loaded with complicating memories, myths, and meanings', which leads him to explore the ways in which adult perceptions of place are even more heavily laden with suggestions and associations.<sup>24</sup> Schama's central argument is that an unmediated appreciation of the landscape is impossible; all conceptions of place are freighted with the shaping influence of the interpretative act.

Royle's conclusion is that regions are shaped by the 'attachment' and 'acceptance' of those who inhabit them; people's belief in the validity of the definition of a particular region is integral in bringing it into existence.

Boundaries may be drawn from above, by appeal to physical or statistical characteristics, but their validity will depend upon their acceptance from below. [...] The historian and historical geographer is – or should be –

concerned primarily with the view from the bottom, what a region means (if anything) to the person who lives there and how this is expressed in human activities.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, surely the lack of such enforced boundaries makes a strong case for the argument that the region is even more 'imagined' than the nation; it may exist within, across, and between legally and politically enshrined and officially mapped territories, and depends almost entirely for its existence on the belief of those who participate in its imagining. If the nation is imagined in the sense that its existence is rooted in the cultural participation of its adherents, then this is even more acutely felt in relation to the region, partly due to its increased accessibility to its members. 'The region' is, in a sense, more manageable and therefore more conducive to generating the 'sentimental attachment to territory shared by like-minded people'.<sup>26</sup> It is to this characteristic that Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster attribute the power of North-East regional identity; the region is 'a knowable imagined community'.<sup>27</sup>

When it comes to thinking about the region, then, this interpretative dimension comes into even sharper focus; as Rebecca Anne Smith comments, 'the physical territory acknowledged by the terms, 'North', 'Northumberland' and 'North East' is frequently a matter of individual interpretation'.<sup>28</sup> This applies equally to the role of physical landscape in the conception of region; Royle suggests that it is in the manner of the interplay between people and the landscape, in other words 'what human beings make of that environment', that its meaning is constructed.<sup>29</sup> It is not the details of where a region resides that are important, so much as what such a location means for its adherents, and these limits of meaning need not be analogous with tangible cartographical boundaries. Royle goes on to suggest that any abiding essentialist notions of a particular

region should look for their basis not to the tangible, physical world, but rather to the world of the imagination, and the way that regions ‘exist first in the minds of the people, and if they do not live in the imaginations of the people they are unlikely to inspire loyalty and gain a living identity.’ Furthermore, ‘those who would discover ‘natural’ regions must be prepared to invent them in the literature, religion, music, leisure, values and outlook of the people.’<sup>30</sup>

That the region, however resistant to definition, performs an important function in shaping people’s identity is underlined by Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard, who stress both the ‘slippery [...] kaleidoscopic quality’ of regions, and also their significance as ‘a necessary part of people’s conception of the world around them’, which renders them ‘a means to differentiate geographical areas and social associations at a level between the immediate locality and the nation’ and therefore ‘an important part of contemporary consciousness’.<sup>31</sup>

### **Images of ‘the North’**

Images of the North East exist within a broader conception of ‘the North’ as a distinct region of Britain. Ideas of ‘the North’ have come under renewed scrutiny recently, perhaps partly in response to the prominence of political moves towards devolution, and also in reaction to what are perceived as the homogenising effects of globalisation; certainly, these factors and others have led to increased interest in ideas of regional identity more generally, and ‘the North’ as a region specifically, within both mainstream culture and more academic discourse.<sup>32</sup>

Jeffrey Richards sums up the kind of image which has come to typify representations of ‘the North’ in his preface to Dave Russell’s 2004 book, *Looking North*.



There is a popular composite image of the North of England. [...] It has grown up over two centuries and is deeply rooted in the popular consciousness. It is essentially urban, industrial, working-class and in many respects nineteenth-century. [...] What seems to have ensured the deep rooting and long-lasting nature of the image is that it has been promoted by northerners as a robust and unashamed celebration of the North constructed in specific opposition to the idea of an effete, decadent and corrupt South. But at the same time it has been propounded by metropolitan Southern sophisticates as a way of dismissing the North as blighted, benighted and backward.<sup>33</sup>

At the forefront of Richards' comments is the idea of binary opposition between images of North and South, with 'the North' characterised as peripheral in relation to a Southern centre. Such a dichotomy is seen as being generated both from within and outside the region, by northerners as a means of countering perceived southern domination, and by southerners in order to relegate 'the North' to a position of subservience. Clearly, both images depend upon each other for their meanings. Such views of the interdependent, binary nature of images of collective identity finds strong support in the field of imagology, or image studies, the academic discipline concerned with the 'theory of cultural or national stereotypes'.<sup>34</sup> Joep Leerssen<sup>35</sup> identifies 'the field of imaginary and poetical literature' as the arena in which 'national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated'; he directs critical attention to 'the field of literature, which of all art forms is most explicit in reflecting and shaping the awareness of entire societies and which often counts as the very formulation of that society's cultural identity.'<sup>36</sup> The power of such images is rooted in their collective nature, in that stereotypical images of collective cultural identity derive their impact for the reader from their link with a deeply embedded network of intertexts that work together to reaffirm their central images.<sup>37</sup> Maria

Nikolajeva asserts that intertextuality in children's books need not necessarily assume a conscious awareness existing between different intertexts, but rather that such enshrined images can surface and reflect each other across a range of texts.<sup>38</sup> It is in this sense that I explore in this thesis the ways in which deeply embedded images and ways of thinking about the North East can be seen operating within a range of children's texts.

In relation to wider notions of 'the North' as constructed of and by different discourses, Dave Russell underlines the centrality of cultural representations in shaping attitudes towards the region as he asserts that 'most people outside the North and many within it have come to know the region not through personal experience but via the versions they encounter in the field of culture', citing evidence of the small proportion of northern residents who have moved into the region from outside, and the essentially short term and transient nature of much of the inward migration experienced by the region.<sup>39</sup> Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard similarly note, specifically in relation to the North East, how the region's identification as having 'the strongest regional identity in England' at the end of the twentieth century was in part rooted in the region's 'lowest levels nationally of geographical mobility', which they interpret as 'a product of the strength of cultural and family ties'.<sup>40</sup> Such observations lend weight to Russell's suggestion that to 'explore the constructed 'North' then, is to engage not with some peripheral academic plaything but with a major factor in the definition of popular mentalities.'<sup>41</sup>

### **The North East in children's literature**

Children's literature is one of the mechanisms by which such long-lasting and instrumental images of the region are laid down in popular consciousness. As Russell notes, this is particularly powerful in relation to those outside the region, few of whom 'have ever gained much personal experience of it', even to the extent of being 'frightened of the region, and desperately reluctant to go there.'<sup>42</sup>

Although Russell is concerned with a wider definition of 'the North', his observations are nevertheless relevant to the North East; indeed, it could be argued that, by virtue of its geographical location as a border zone, coupled with its heavy industrial heritage and close affinity with the natural, physical landscape, the North East can be seen as a paradigmatic embodiment of images of 'the North.' As Natasha Vall explains, twentieth-century usage of the term 'North East' by regional broadcasters can be seen as driven to no small extent by 'the status of North-Eastern England, as a periphery both within 'the North' and in the nation', a factor which contributes strongly to 'an enduring image of cultural cohesion in North-Eastern England.'<sup>43</sup> Referring to Robert Westall's *The Wind Eye* (1977), Pamela Knights points to the presence of an underlying 'repertoire of North/South binaries locked deep in English culture'.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, there is little doubt that images of the North East share with those of the wider 'North' many of the same processes employed in their construction and promulgation, especially Russell's key argument that "'national culture', in terms of both the mentalities and the institutions that form them, has always been largely constructed from within London and its immediate environs and that the 'North' has therefore been defined in that culture as 'other' and ultimately, as inferior.'<sup>45</sup>

Jeffrey Richards comments on the way that images of the North of England have been brought into service by both outsiders and insiders to the region; Rob Shields goes even further in his observation that

the mythology of the British North has been appropriated and re-worked in indigenous narratives, which have made this mythical 'North' into their own regional identity, and have cherished the images first propounded in the literature of (southern-based) writers in the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

Though both writers acknowledge the influence of both 'auto-image' and 'hetero-image' (i.e. constructions of self and other) in shaping images of 'the North', both also acknowledge that such a seeming polarity has, over time, become subsumed within enduring images of the region which have been embraced by both insider and outsider alike, though to different ends. Essentially, the development of popular images of 'the North' is seen as originating in the work of outsiders (by which is usually meant southerners), often in an act of dismissing the region or employing it as a kind of foil against which to construct images of the centre (by which is meant the South of England). Such images have also been adopted and appropriated by insiders (in a variety of guises) in an attempt to disarm such dismissals and reassert the validity of 'the North'. Though simplified, this summary points towards the general pattern of such constructions which result in

'the persistence of a space-myth of the British North over time which emerges in a consistent form across different debates and in different narratives [which] subsumes in one set of myths the contradictory images of the pastoral myth of the land of tradition, the myth of the nineteenth-century industrial blight, and the myth of the 'Land of the Working Class' [...] to form a foil for the myths and images built up around London and the South as the cultural, spiritual and political heartland of the nation.'<sup>47</sup>

The important point here is that images of the region are both constructed and constructive, serving what Shields describes as both 'referential [...] and

*anticipatory* functions'.<sup>48</sup> In the same way, the dominant aesthetic found in children's fiction of the region is employed in the service of constructing both the way the North East has been (seemingly for eternity, or certainly since antiquity), and in shaping expectations for readers about what future encounters with the region are likely to comprise, functions which impact upon both readers who are insiders and those from outside the region. Such functions are brought into even sharper focus when considering texts aimed at children.

I noted above the impact of the asymmetric nature of address found in children's fiction, which adds freight to the shaping power of images found therein. Critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Karin Lesnik-Oberstein have repeatedly asserted the unbalancing effect of such skewed narrative address, to the point of impossibility.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps more helpfully, David Rudd suggests that the 'problematic of children's literature lies in the gap between the 'constructed' and the 'constructive' child.'<sup>50</sup> Whilst acknowledging the unavoidable fact that children's texts 'consciously or unconsciously address particular constructions of the child' and 'display an awareness of children's disempowered status', Rudd draws attention to the fact that children 'also have subject positions available to them that can resist [being construed as powerless objects]'.<sup>51</sup> This all further underlines the potential impact of the dominant aesthetic operating within children's fiction, which can be seen as both sculpting readers' expectations about the region, and/or constituting the material out of which future engagements with North-East identity might be forged. In short, just as images of the North East are both constructed and constructive, so they impact upon both the constructed and constructive child, intrinsically linked in Rudd's analysis.<sup>52</sup>

For ‘the North’ more generally, but particularly for the North East, nineteenth-century economic developments have been key in shaping present-day images of the region, as this period heralded a transformation for northern Britain which found itself, in the wake of the industrial revolution, newly alive with the frenzy of industrial expansion.<sup>53</sup> That the twentieth century has seen a gradual process of de-industrialization for the North East, building in intensity in the latter decades, has served to further underline the centrality of such images for the region. Graeme Milne draws attention to the way the North East has been defined by its industrial profile as a ‘great stereotype of a coal, shipping and heavy-engineering industrial district’, and that such ‘staple industries dominate contemporary and historiographical perceptions of the North East, and of its place within wider processes of trade and industrialisation, whether in the sudden growth of the economy from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, or in its equally dramatic collapse into ‘special area’ rustbelt subsequently.’<sup>54</sup> North-East children’s literature testifies to the endurance of such a legacy, and can be seen to re-affirm such images. In particular, my two major case studies (see Chapters 4 to 11) demonstrate the continued presence of such images in the works of two prominent North-East writers, Robert Westall and David Almond, both of whose writing can be seen to re-engage with and attempt to re-negotiate the place of such a dominant aesthetic in the identity of the region. Of course, the predominance of industry as a defining image for the region is a historically limited phenomenon, and at other times competing dominant narratives have enjoyed higher profiles.<sup>55</sup> One such narrative, which situates seventh-century St Cuthbert at the heart of North-East identity, can be seen as having attained a mythic resonance within the dominant aesthetic, alongside such industrial images.

Interestingly, both Westall and Almond pay homage to St Cuthbert's centrality within the region, and both writers seek to integrate this spiritual figure within a reshaped aesthetic.

Despite the presence of competing narratives, twentieth-century images of the North East have been dominated by a focus on the region's industrial roots, the vestigial presence of which endures. Green and Pollard point to the presence of 'the collective memory and experience of the recent industrial past' as 'a vital element in the modern creation of a regional identity'.<sup>56</sup> Such a presence permeates twentieth-century North-East children's fiction, too.

### **Characteristics of the North East region; physical, geographical and economic**

The outlook and values of those who invest their identity in a particular region form part of the discourse which maps it into popular consciousness. This is certainly true of the North East as a region, which stretches across a range of administrative and geographical boundaries. Of course, the region's characteristics and extent have shifted and changed throughout history. Norman McCord explores the nature of the North East as a distinctive region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He notes that, before the nineteenth century, there is little evidence that the region was viewed with the same degree of coherence it would later come to assume. Economic developments of the 1800s, along with the physical landscape of the area, conspired to generate a unified sense of the region which was bounded by the topography of the landscape.

At a time when industrial and commercial developments were of crucial importance, there was a basic

topographical unity to this region. Wide gaps intervened between the industrialising centres on the rivers Tyne, Wear and Tees and the nearest similar districts. The Cheviot Hills to the north, and a wide stretch of essentially farming country, separated the north-east from Scottish centres of development. To the south, the Cleveland Hills and the agricultural North Riding intervened between the region and the main Yorkshire industrial centres. To the west, substantial stretches of poor quality land, such as the Bewcastle Fells, always bearing a small population, lay between the north-east centres of economic development and Cumbria. The leadmining dales of the northern Pennines present a minor exception here, but the general geographical point is valid enough.<sup>57</sup>

There are echoes here of Anderson's mercantile functionaries and their pilgrimages, and the ways in which the political and economic spheres in which they moved helped to shape the imagined landscape of their emerging national communities. In the modern age, work and industry have been forces central to the carving out of the North East land/mindscape.

Although McCord identifies some of the physical elements which have helped delineate the region, he is keen to emphasise that these did not result in a sense of isolation for the North East. Quite the opposite was in fact the case, as the very economic factors which helped to bind formerly separate areas together in the popular consciousness also served to connect the region with the rest of the nation. McCord talks of the impossibility of studying regional history without taking account of 'both smaller and larger units.'<sup>58</sup> In industrial and therefore financial terms it was the vital role played by the region in fuelling the industrial revolution that helped to forge its existence as an imagined community. Again foregrounded here is the role of the North East region as a space which mediates between the particular world of the individual and the wider, more universal social sphere. As Edward Royle observes above, the axis of this mediation is



meaning; what does a particular region mean to those who imagine themselves a part of it? What have been the compelling features of the North East, which have been employed in articulating its meaning?

Robert Colls explores the birth of the modern concept of the North East as a region, which he sees as emerging during the late nineteenth century, partly as a result of the desire to re-articulate the relationship between region and nation, or at least perceived zones of centrality. He identifies the 1860s as the starting point for the North East's 'modern regional identity', following on from earlier images 'dominated by metropolitan perceptions of a 'Great Northern Coalfield' which kept London warm.'<sup>59</sup> In response to this, images of "'Northern-ness'" emerged which construed the area as '*a peripheral place*, complementary to but not the same as the essentially English heartlands to the south.' (emphasis in original)<sup>60</sup>

Colls sees the concept of rebirth as becoming central to the North East's identity from this point onwards. There is a relationship between the perceived peripheral nature of the region, as opposed to the 'heartlands to the south', and this in part drives an imagining of the region as central to its own world; in a sense, it became centred on itself. Numerous factors conspired to create the conditions out of which such imaginings could arise (again, there are clear parallels with Anderson's discussion of the circumstances behind the birth of 'nation-ness'), not least of which was the economic contribution being made by the North East. Central to Colls's argument is the idea that images of the North East, 'dominated by metropolitan perceptions' which cast it as peripheral, seem to have shaped a popular desire to re-think the region.

A useful comparison can be made with perceptions of identity in the postcolonial situation, as Ania Loomba explores, particularly regarding the

relationship between the ‘‘metropole’ from which power flows’ and ‘the place which it penetrates or controls.’<sup>61</sup> Of course, Loomba is considering instances which are markedly different from those which have influenced the North East, at the very least in terms of the extent of colonial domination exerted. While the North East was not subjected to colonial rule by any perceived dominant English ‘heartland’, there are nonetheless parallels with the ways in which imperialism may operate, without formal colonies, as a ‘phenomenon that originates in the metropolis’ and comes to penetrate those territories which are perceived to be peripheral. Dave Russell comments on how, even though ‘[t]he South obviously never had or required the level of apparatus or control over the ‘production’ of the North that typified European relationships with the Orient’, nevertheless the region has always enjoyed its agency only ‘on terms dictated by the centre and its positional superiority’.<sup>62</sup> To some extent, the origins of North-East regional ‘imaginings’ lie in attempts to resist the perceived cultural hegemony of an English heartland located in the south. In *Devolving English Literature* (1992), Robert Crawford sees such centrist bias as insidiously permeating much of the academic apparatus dedicated to the study of ‘English Literature’, which he asserts ‘has constantly involved and reinforced an oppressive homage to centralism.’<sup>63</sup>

If [...] we ignore matters of local origin, then we perform an act of naïve cultural imperialism, acting as if books grew not out of particular conditions [...] but out of the bland uniformity of airport departure lounges. The act of inscription is not a simple entry into the delocalized, pure medium of language; it is constantly, often deliberately, an act which speaks of its local origins, of points of departure never fully left behind.<sup>64</sup>

Crawford traces such ‘cultural imperialism’ to ‘the London-Oxford nexus’, rooted in London’s historical position of cultural dominance as ‘the seat of the Court’.<sup>65</sup> In response to such disempowerment at the hands of a southern-centric cultural hegemony, he suggests that what is needed on behalf of ‘vulnerable cultural groups’ is ‘not simply a deconstruction of rhetorics of authority, but a construction or reconstruction of a ‘usable past’, an awareness of a cultural tradition that will allow them to preserve or develop a sense of their own distinctive identity, their constituting difference.’<sup>66</sup> In many examples of North-East children’s literature, auto-images of the North East have embraced similar key motifs as hetero-images of the region, with the cumulative result of augmenting existing limiting views of the region for young readers. However, in the work of writers such as Aidan Chambers, Jane Gardam, and particularly Robert Westall and David Almond, can be seen writing which redresses such imbalance and challenges the entrenched aesthetic.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Westall, *The Wind Eye* (London: Macmillan, 1976; Catnip, 2007), pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (2005) (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Loomba, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Leerssen suggests ‘*imageme*, a “blueprint” underlying the various concrete, specific actualizations that can be textually encountered’; see Leerssen, ‘The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey’, *Poetics Today*, 21:2 (Summer 2000), 297-292, (279).

<sup>5</sup> Leerssen, ‘The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey’, p. 270; Emer O’Sullivan, *Comparative Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), pp. 39-40; O’Sullivan is Professor for Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Lüneburg, Germany.

<sup>6</sup> Joep Leerssen, ‘Imagology: History and method’ in *Imagology: the cultural construction and literary representation of national characters; a critical survey*, ed. by Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007); pp. 17-32 (p. 26).

<sup>7</sup> O’Sullivan, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> The range of books I consider is not intended to suggest a canon of North-East children’s books, and is certainly not exhaustive; for a fuller bibliography of children’s books which feature the region, see Jim Mackenzie, *Journey to the Hidden Kingdoms: a guide to the children’s books of Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Powdene Publicity, 2003). It is, however, drawn from much

wider reading in the field. I have attempted to cover a range of texts, in terms of chronology, style, genre and thematic focus.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative geographies of modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Richards, 'General editor's foreword', in Russell, Dave, *Looking North: Northern England and the national imagination* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. ix.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Royle, 'Introduction: regions and identities', in *Issues of Regional Identity*, ed. by Edward Royle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Colls and B. Lancaster, eds, *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2005 [1992]), Preface p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (London & New York: Verso, 2005 [1983]), p.207 [in a footnote].

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, pp. 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, p. 24; Anderson is drawing upon the work of Walter Benjamin here, in particular Benjamin's *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*, (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1992; Penguin, 1992), p. 58 (first published in *The Independent on Sunday* 1991-92).

<sup>20</sup> Royle, *Issues of Regional Identity*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Royle, pp. 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995; Vintage, 1996), pp. 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Schama, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Schama, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Royle, pp. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Royle, pp. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Colls and Lancaster, Preface, p. xiv.

<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Anne Smith, 'Barry MacSweeney's North East: A Study of the Rural and Urban in his Published and Unpublished Poetry' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Newcastle, 2007), p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Royle, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Royle, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard, 'Introduction: Identifying Regions', in *Regional Identities in North-East England, 1300-2000*, ed. by Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 1-26 (p. 4).

<sup>32</sup> Mainstream examples include Charles Jennings, *Up North* (London: Abacus, 1995), Stuart Maconie, *Pies and Prejudice: in search of the North* (London: Ebury Press, 2007); academic treatments include Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative geographies of modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), Dave Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the national imagination* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004); recent television programmes on the subject include Jonathan Meades, 'Magnetic North' (first episode broadcast 21 February 2008, BBC4), and the opening episode of Melvyn Bragg's, 'Travels in Written Britain' (first broadcast 6 April 2008, ITV1).

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Richards, 'General editor's foreword', in Russell, p. ix.

<sup>34</sup> Joep Leerssen, 'Imagology: History and method', p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Leerssen is Professor of Modern European Literature at the University of Amsterdam.

<sup>36</sup> Leerssen, 'Imagology: History and method', p. 26; Leerssen, 'The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey', p. 268.

- <sup>37</sup> Leerssen's work is usually concerned with national identities, but his observations are applicable to other forms of collective identity, as he acknowledges: see 'The Rhetoric of National Character' (p. 269; footnote 1).
- <sup>38</sup> See Maria Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic* (New York & London: Garland, 1996), p. 156.
- <sup>39</sup> Russell, p. 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard, 'Conclusion: Finding North-East England', in Green and Pollard, pp. 209-25 (p. 215).
- <sup>41</sup> Russell, p. 4.
- <sup>42</sup> Russell, p. 31.
- <sup>43</sup> Natasha Vall, 'Regionalism and Cultural History: The Case of North-Eastern England, 1918-1976', in Green and Pollard, pp. 182-207 (p. 207).
- <sup>44</sup> Pamela Knights, 'England's Dark Ages? The North-East in Robert Westall's *The Wind Eye* and Andrew Taylor's *The Coal House*' in *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*, ed. by Ann Lawson Lucas (Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003), pp. 167-175 (p. 168).
- <sup>45</sup> Russell, p. 8; Vall similarly identifies an enduring 'characterisation of North-Eastern England as distanced from the national heartland.' (Vall, p. 182).
- <sup>46</sup> Shields, p. 245.
- <sup>47</sup> Shields, p. 245.
- <sup>48</sup> Shields, p. 14.
- <sup>49</sup> See for instance Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984; Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994; 2001).
- <sup>50</sup> David Rudd, 'Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children's literature', in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. by P. Hunt, 2nd edn, vol. 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 29-43 (p. 30).
- <sup>51</sup> Rudd, p. 39; p. 31.
- <sup>52</sup> There are parallels here with John Stephens' notions of 'top-down and bottom-up reading processes', both of which can collude in affirming and/or resisting ideological positions inscribed within texts. See John Stephens, *Language and Ideology* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1992; 2003), p. 43.
- <sup>53</sup> See Russell, p. 22.
- <sup>54</sup> Graeme J. Milne, 'Business Regionalism: Defining and Owning the Industrial North East, 1850-1914', in Green and Pollard, pp. 113-132 (p. 113).
- <sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Green and Pollard, 'Conclusion', pp. 220-222.
- <sup>56</sup> Green and Pollard, 'Conclusion', p. 222.
- <sup>57</sup> Norman McCord, 'The regional identity of North-East England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in Royle, pp. 102-117 (p. 102).
- <sup>58</sup> McCord, p. 108.
- <sup>59</sup> Robert Colls, 'Born-again Geordies', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 1-34 (p. 3).
- <sup>60</sup> Colls, p. 3.
- <sup>61</sup> Loomba, p. 11.
- <sup>62</sup> Russell, p. 9.
- <sup>63</sup> Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992; 2000), p. 7.
- <sup>64</sup> Crawford, p. 7.
- <sup>65</sup> Crawford, p. 13.
- <sup>66</sup> Crawford, p. 5.

## Chapter 2: Representations of North-East Landscape and History within the Dominant Aesthetic

### *The Literary North East*

In his online bibliographical/biographical guide to the North East's literary history, Alan Myers seeks to establish the region's rightful claim to literary prestige.

It is a matter for pride that the North East of England should be able to claim the first known English prose writer, Bede; the first known English Christian poets; the first English biblical text; the oldest poem in the language, *Widsith* and even perhaps *Beowulf*, the greatest of all Old English poems – indeed the first major vernacular poem in any European language. Domesday Book too may well have been, in large part, the work of a scribe attached to the monastery at Durham.<sup>1</sup>

Myers's self-avowed purpose in making such claims is in part an attempt 'to adjust a cultural imbalance.'<sup>2</sup> He also outlines other notable facts about the region's literary heritage, demonstrating among other things that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the North East could be considered 'the country's most important printing centre after London', boasting numerous home-grown periodicals and, by 1790, 'twenty printers, twelve booksellers and stationers, thirteen bookbinders and three engravers, among them the internationally celebrated Thomas Bewick.'<sup>3</sup> That dominant images of the region rarely make reference to such a prestigious literary heritage, emphasising instead the region's purported innate wildness and savagery, serves as further evidence of the ways in which such representations function to construct versions of the North

East which significantly misrepresent the region's cultural profile, and contribute to what Dave Russell terms 'certain limited and limiting images of the region'.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not Myers's attempts to reassert the region's literary capital need be considered as a 'resistance movement' which 'is overdue', they and similar works do point to the often overlooked depths of the region's contributions to national, and in some cases wider Western culture.<sup>5</sup> In Chapters 8 to 11, I situate David Almond's work as similarly excavating and re-instating aspects of the region's cultural and literary past.<sup>6</sup>

Both Shields and Russell identify nineteenth-century literary works as fundamental in shaping northern (and by extension, North-Eastern) images, in response to socio-economic change.

The contemporary dichotomous North and South came into focus with nineteenth-century literary works which responded to the rapid industrialisation of the North (and the emergence of an urbanised industrial elite which challenged the social status of the landed aristocracy largely centred in the Home Counties around London).<sup>7</sup>

Shields points to the 'consolidation of a literary tradition which foregrounded both industrial conditions of the North and its 'wild hills'', its legacy being that such a 'Northern space-myth may be found in the work of other major novelists down to the present day.'<sup>8</sup> This tradition is 'internally consistent', and comprises an extensive canon of works which 'all ascribe to a vision of the North as an industrial 'Land of the Working Class' with wild hinterlands such as the moors.'<sup>9</sup> In Chapters 4 and 5, I explore the residue of such images within Robert Westall's fiction, and in Chapters 8 and 9 I consider how tensions between seemingly conflicting versions of the North East are reconciled within David Almond's work. I detail below the ways in which images of the North East within broader

culture are rooted in the region's nineteenth-century 'heyday' as an industrial centre; that these literary images have their beginnings in nineteenth-century fiction further supports my claims.

Dave Russell cites the impact of influential literary works such as Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) and Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) as examples of how 'a small number of highly influential texts established a distinct version of the North and then kept that view alive as a result of their continued popularity.'<sup>10</sup> Certainly, Gaskell's novel reflects/constructs a dichotomous relationship between the polarities of North and South, encapsulated in the comments of protagonist Margaret who begins the novel with 'almost a detestation for all she had ever heard of the North of England – the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country'.<sup>11</sup> Although Margaret is forced to challenge such prejudices through her experiences in the industrial northern town of Milton, what she discovers still affirms the essential difference between North and South, rooted in images of work and social class which permeate the entire landscape and society of the town. Her initial impressions of the town are never fully effaced.

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was all the darker from contrast with the pale gray-blue of the wintry sky [...] Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. [...] People thronged the footpaths, most of them well dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London.<sup>12</sup>

Although the town of Milton-Northern, in the suitably named region known as Darkshire, is more closely modelled on the city of Manchester in the North West



of England, nevertheless texts such as this lay down enduring images of the so-called North-South divide.

Although Russell purports to engage ‘with the widest possible range of literature’ in response to the observation that ‘academic discussion of literature and northern identity has tended to focus on a small number of titles or specific genres’, perhaps tellingly he does not examine a single children’s book.<sup>13</sup> Though this omission is probably a question of available space, particularly given that Russell is interested in literature of the ‘North’ in the broadest sense, nevertheless the blanket omission of children’s literature is disappointing. The existence of a dominant aesthetic can be traced through a range of twentieth-century children’s novels, and its roots can be seen in nineteenth-century children’s books.

### *North-East children’s novels: landscape*

In G. Christopher Davies’s *Wildcat Tower* (1877), a boys’ adventure novel subtitled *The Adventures of four Boys in pursuit of Sport and Natural Historie in the North Countrie*, the physical landscape of the North East embodies two contrasting qualities whose contiguity tends to typify images of the region: industrial grimness, set against rugged natural beauty. The novel tells the story of a group of teenage boys holidaying at the titular Wildcat Tower in rural Northumberland. The novel uses the frame of a typical boys’ adventure story largely as a vehicle for the author’s suggestions regarding outdoors activities for boys, and long didactic sections are devoted to historical information, outdoor skills, and notes on wildlife that might be encountered in Northumberland. *Wildcat Tower* opens with the boys’ arrivals by train into Newcastle’s ‘smoky

dusty station' which is 'not a pleasant place to be in' on a day which is unusually 'hotter than early summer days are wont to be so far north', images which hint at the town's dirtiness and its setting at the limits of English geography.<sup>14</sup> From here, the boys travel down the River Tyne for a brief sojourn at the coast. As the following citation shows, Tyneside's industrial heritage, which would have been vibrantly active at the time of the novel's writing, is already figured in images of grimness and pollution.

When trade is brisk, the Tyne is a remarkable river. All the way down, even as far as the sea, eight miles away, its banks are crowded with foundries, ship-yards, alkali works, and other noisome and noisy manufactories. [...] The river runs in a deep ravine, and the evil smokes and smells which arise from its banks and from the vessels it bears, hang over it on quiet days in a very palpable cloud, and on windy days are dispersed over the neighbouring countryside until the vegetation suffers from the alkali, and the trees become stunted and bare, and present a most woeful appearance.

"I hope Wildcat Tower is a nicer place than this," said Allan, as the pungent alkali made him cough.<sup>15</sup>

Such bleakness is only briefly alleviated by the beauty of the 'quaint little haven of Tynemouth', before the natural landscape too seems to collude in presenting such a miserable scene when 'fierce rain' rains down upon the boys 'like drops of hot lead' during a powerful thunderstorm.<sup>16</sup> Even the 'oily-looking sea' evokes industrial pollution.<sup>17</sup> Within the first fifteen pages of this novel, the reader is presented with images of a harsh, damaged landscape, and such impressions strike home particularly forcefully with those characters from outside of the region such as Allan.

Such grimness is countered by the boys' experience of the natural landscape, which similarly taps into images of the region as wild but in this case, wildly beautiful. As they travel towards Wildcat Tower, they pass 'very wild and

pretty' scenery; during their stay, they travel into the natural landscape to visit an area known as 'the Linn [...] the loveliest scene in the whole county' which is situated amidst 'wild and picturesque masses' of boulders, where 'the waterfalls were wilder and deeper'.<sup>18</sup> Such images abound in the novel: later, they visit Crag Lough, described as 'a scene of wildness and beauty to be long remembered'; the North Sea (further up the coast and therefore suitably distanced from industrial Tyneside) is 'a seething cauldron of water churned and lashed into foam' by 'the wild north-easter'; Castle Chillingham 'looked wild and beautiful.'<sup>19</sup>

The novel also contains several short lyrical vignettes, which celebrate the beauty of the North-East natural landscape, further emphasising its contrast with the industrial scenes described above. Such images are examples of what Dave Russell terms 'the 'rural-scenic' North' which has 'undoubtedly earned the region some of its most potent cultural capital.'<sup>20</sup> Russell claims that the pure natural landscape functioned in the nineteenth century as an image of a "true North" which was seen as being 'exceptional and not really of it', by which he means that it was envisaged as underlying the present-day industrial landscape (which characterised the dominant image of the region) and therefore emerging surprisingly out of such grimness. It was a striking image because it was so unexpectedly found in the region, and an exception to the general character of the place.<sup>21</sup> Whilst the beauty of the rural landscape is certainly surprising to the boys in *Wildcat Tower*, it functions as much more than simply a 'pastoral foil'; in fact, the pastoral dimension of the region dominates in this text.<sup>22</sup> This is not unexpected, given the suggestion in the novel's subtitle that the boys are in search of natural history. The function of the rural/pastoral here is rather to suggest the primal, even primeval, essence of the region, and to foreground the natural North

East as a site of spiritual purity and truth. This can be seen clearly in episodes such as when the boys witness the Aurora Borealis, from the garden of Wildcat Tower, and note how ‘God seemed to be very near to the earth’; similarly, the narrator draws the reader’s attention to the region as the place where ‘Christianity first made its advent into England.’<sup>23</sup> Coupled with the novel’s structure, which opens with a location which acknowledges the impact of industry upon the region but quickly leaves such a place behind, such images function to disavow the industrial landscape as embodying the spirit of the region. Eventually both Allan and the reader come to see that there is much more to the North East than industry, grime and pollution.

Such a disavowal can be seen in the narrator’s description of the coal-mining industry.

Coal, collieries, and pitmen form an important section of thing and men in the North. The men are hard-working and independent, rough in exterior, and as much addicted to “sport” as our boys; but their love finds its vent in betting, keeping Bedlington terriers, rabbit coursing [and] foot-racing, when the competitors are not unfrequently stripped stark naked, in which state of nudity they often practise along the high-roads; quoits, pitch and toss, and bowling, the latter not the quiet game on a shaven lawn which elderly gentlemen are fond of, but a race with stone balls to travel a long course in the fewest throws.<sup>24</sup>

Industrial culture, which elsewhere occupies a central position in images of the region, here comprises merely ‘an important section of men and thing’. The telling phrase above is ‘our boys’, against which such pitmen are contrasted, which also works to distance the implied reader from the working-class inhabitants of the region. Though later the characters do visit a coalmine, and an abandoned mine works features in the resolution of a minor sub-plot, these are

experienced as objects of curiosity and danger by the boys, who always return to the safety and normality of Wildcat Tower's rural existence. The idea that real worth might lie in the region's industry, and be dug out of the ground, is gently mocked by the boys in a late scene where Hugh is pilloried for mistakenly believing he has discovered precious jet, only to realise it is "[...] *only pieces of coal*," [emphasis in text]<sup>25</sup>. In the twentieth century, writers such as Richard Armstrong, Frederick Grice, and both Robert Westall and David Almond, emphasised images of labour, especially mining imagery, much more forcefully and positively than had been done previously (see below, and following chapters).

Evocations of the natural wildness of the North East are extended to the point of savagery in Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). In one episode, the character of Parnesius, a Roman centurion, describes his experiences of travelling into the North towards Hadrian's Wall (the eastern limit of which terminates in Northumberland). Even in fifth-century Roman Britain, the savage natural landscape exhibits elements of an industrial impact, with the past evoking the present landscape of the region as it was widely represented at the time.

'Of course, the farther North you go the emptier are the roads. At last you fetch clear of the forests and climb bare hills, where wolves howl in the ruins of our cities that have been. No more pretty girls; no more jolly magistrates who knew your father when he was young and invite you to stay with them; no news at the temples and way-stations except bad news of wild beasts. [...] In the naked hills beyond the naked houses, where the shadows of the clouds play like cavalry charging, you see puffs of black smoke from the mines. The hard road goes on and on [...]'<sup>26</sup>

*Puck of Pook's Hill* is an example of a text which, by virtue of its established canonical status within the field of children's literature specifically but also

within early twentieth-century literature more widely, carries particular weight. Such images have endured, and continue to participate in constructions of the North as wild, dangerous, and generally grim.

A work for young readers in which the people of the North East are shown as attuned to such wildness is George S. Surrey's *A Northumbrian in Arms* (1910). Set at the start of the eleventh century, it relates the part played by the Northumbrian character Harald in numerous battles and other adventures. This Northumbrian is fiercely proud of his warrior roots; in one passage, the narrator describes Harald's attitude towards death, suggesting that bravery in the face of annihilation is a natural characteristic of Northumbrians, typical of their 'race'.

The spirit of his race, the men for whom death had no terrors providing it were a man's death, was in him, and could not allow him tamely to await dissolution. Death by the sword was [...] an honourable end from which no true Norseman or Dane would shrink, but rather welcome [...] And though Christianity came to displace their old worship of mythological deities, yet it did not take from them their inborn contempt of a "cow's death," or joyful acceptance of an end reached in battle. But for the retention of this spirit the English nation had never become the fighting nation that it is and ever has been; with the extinction of it the deeds that Englishmen have done would never have been performed, and their name for courage become a by-word throughout all the world.<sup>27</sup>

In images such as this, Northumbrians are figured as noble savages, and their refined, post-Christian bravery, which nevertheless retains its pagan, pre-Christian disregard for imminent death, is claimed on behalf of the English nation. In this way, northerners are constructed as racially distinct, consistently fearless, and their contribution to the spirit of the wider nation is predicated on their physical aggression and prowess. These very defining qualities are explicitly linked to such characters' North-Eastern origins, rooted as they are in the region's

proximity to the Scandinavian source-land. Indeed, Northumbrians remain ‘true Norsemen’, forever reflecting the violence of their invasive inception. The novel’s didactic tone contributes to its impact upon the young reader: for those from outside the region, it proudly asserts the contributions made by such Northumbrian men (and men alone) in shaping English spirit, while concurrently enabling the reader to understand Northern identity as limited to such contributions. This enables them to dismiss Northumbrians as helpfully, even quaintly, fierce and aggressive; for Northern readers, it encourages self-recognition as descendants of such an essentialised ‘race’, and works in this way to circumscribe the reader’s sense of auto-image within a limited frame which, though seemingly celebratory of such a ‘spirit’, in fact acts to limit the scope of Northumbrian identity.

The region’s landscape is also suitably rugged in Captain W. E. Johns’s *Biggles and the Black Peril* (1935). The novel sees the Squadron-Leader and his companion, Algy, travel from East Anglia up to the Northumbrian Coast, where they discover evidence of a Russian plot to mount air strikes against Britain. After arriving in the North East, the airmen encounter ‘high cliffs’, ‘open moor’, and a coastline which is ‘for the most part [...] rugged’.<sup>28</sup> Other features of the locale include some ‘disused buildings near an old mine-head, a pair of brand new red brick labourers’ cottages’ and, located behind ‘a clump of wind-twisted fir trees’, the headquarters of the enemy plot, described as “[a]n ugly place [...]’ where “anything could happen [...]”.<sup>29</sup> All of these features contribute towards an image of the area as bleak, desolate and wild. The only other significant location, an abandoned railway hut in which Biggles first meets Ginger, suggests dereliction by its proximity to a ‘narrow gauge railway, long disused by its

overgrown condition'.<sup>30</sup> All views of the region's landscape are perceived squarely from the perspective of a distinctly southern gaze.

The character of Ginger, a native of the North who ends up joining the airmen and whose presence persists in several other Biggles novels, effectively has his Northern identity effaced; he never betrays the slightest hint of dialect when speaking, and leaves behind his home without a moment's hesitation. All that the reader discovers of his background is revealed during a brief exchange with Biggles about the boy's home town of Smettleworth.<sup>31</sup>

'Smettleworth! Where's that?'

'I don't know except that it's the place where I come from. My father's a miner; he fetched me a clip on the ear when I told him I was going to be a pilot, so I hopped it.'<sup>32</sup>

In *Biggles and the Black Peril*, then, the North East is a place of harshness and danger best left behind as quickly as possible, especially by the one character native to the region.

#### **A 'timeless' past; history and the region.**

So many deaths. So many rebirths. But which was which? It is at times hard to tell. Old endings have so often been taken to signify new beginnings, old memories to transform new experiences, that the sense of time becomes skewed. In addition, as in the rhetoric of all 'little nations', it is said that the *essential* region – same land, same people – goes on just the same.<sup>33</sup>

There is a suggestion here that the essential nature of the region is able to transcend time, an idea which links to Anderson's paradox about objective modernity existing alongside subjective antiquity in relation to the nation state. Anderson addresses this issue by suggesting that there is a simultaneous



forgetting; although arising out of particular historical circumstances, the nation is imagined as having always been so, and something similar is at work in relation to the region, which is imagined as a continuous community which moves *together* through homogeneous, empty time. It begins to assume an almost mythic quality, reflected in the stories it tells about itself. For Bill Williamson, stories about the past are central to the region's understanding of itself as a community. The past, in such stories, is a communal one above all else, and the struggles it contains are shared.

The community is, of course, an imagined one. It is us; us Geordies [...] It is us as we see and are seen, with our hearts of gold, ready humour, our friendliness and flat northern vowels. The stories we know are from our past, not the past of those to the north or into Scotland or south beyond the Tees or west of the Pennines, but of those who belong to 'Geordieland'. The recalled elements of that past evoke a story of struggle and exploitation, a tale of victories, and defeats, of courage and of great human dignity in the face of hardship.<sup>34</sup>

There is a curious logic at work here then, in the way that the region must be both timeless yet bound to its past; it both transcends and emerges from a sense of communal history. This can be linked to Benedict Anderson's comments on 'profound changes of consciousness' and the consequent need to narrate a past which cannot be remembered, insofar as the past of a region must be told through stories, and that out of such stories grows communal identity.<sup>35</sup> Williamson underlines this very point when he goes on to state that the imagined nature of the region's past does not detract from its 'reality'; rather, stories of the past, though 'recalled', are also 'imagined' into existence, in part to satisfy a cultural need for communal anchorage.<sup>36</sup> Of course, history is a text written by and at the service of those who write it; the mediated nature of the past means it will always

be influenced by the way in which it is configured in the present, and this applies as much to the mediating influence of the reader as the writer. It is not a sense of objective reality to which Williamson refers, but rather the reality of such stories of the past within the lives of those alive today. The 'recalled elements' referred to by Williamson above are of course selectively recalled, and the outcome is that, through time, such images refine, coalesce and settle like sediment into the popular consciousness of the region. Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard highlight the same process at work in the construction of communal North-East identity.

Whether tethered or roaming free, an important element in the mental construction of the region is the history imagined for it. Memory of the past is deployed, selectively and creatively, as one means of imagining identity. The history we tell ourselves is thus one way in which we establish our shared membership. History, as a constructor of memory, is often used to construct and maintain memories of localities or regions; including deliberate elision and loss as a part of the reinvention of tradition, such as the way in which St Cuthbert has become associated with the Palatinate of Durham when originally he was celebrated across a wider north. We choose the history we want, to show the kind of region we want to be.<sup>37</sup>

The narrative of a region's past functions as part of the process by which affiliation to the region is understood. Williamson's reading of such narratives, which are 'shaped by the circumstances of the present', acknowledges that the resultant sense of tradition is not 'coherent or tidy or static', but that it does, nevertheless, 'provide people with common ways of remembering'.<sup>38</sup> It is this sense of collective belonging, of sharing common stories, that lies at the heart of literature's contribution to regional identity. The result is not a homogenised sense of tradition and history, but rather a shared narrative backdrop, a 'varied resource culled and used in different ways', against which one can frame one's

own, individual story.<sup>39</sup> Children's literature participates in this process of constructing a dominant aesthetic of the region. Benedict Anderson compares this to the way in which the past is articulated from an adult position from which '[a]fter experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to 'remember' the consciousness of childhood', with the important distinction that nations and regions, unlike people, 'have no clearly identifiable births' and therefore their narratives must be constructed "'up time"' from the present day back into the past.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the history invoked is timeless, and necessarily so; adherents can see themselves as inhabiting a place and culture, of which any articulated origins exist somewhere in a past which stretches imperceptibly back *beyond* known history. The articulation of such a past is refracted through the modern context in which it is interpreted, of course. The ways in which writers of North-East children's literature have selectively invoked putatively integral historical moments and events reveal more about the region's identity at the time of their writing than about its past; as Green and Pollard describe it, 'history, in this way, as a perception of the past in different presents, becomes an indicator of identity in the now, not of identity in the then.'<sup>41</sup>

The way in which readers relate 'particular' experiences to a 'general' and 'collective' narrative of a region's history will influence the degree and nature of affiliation which is felt. Stories of the North East's history become part of a resource which can be drawn upon to contextualise experience within the wider regional culture, a culture which is rooted in a continuous, common past; this is a region which has seemingly always been here, and to which one has always belonged. Bill Lancaster suggests that it is the relationship between the

perceived peripheral nature of the region and a centralised nation state which drives the need to define North East identity in relation to the past, a response to being ‘overlooked by national culture’ which, though glancing backward does not ‘necessarily involve a rejection of the modern.’<sup>42</sup>

For the North East, the past is evoked with a sense of pride. Of course, narratives about the region are many and varied, in common with the variety of lives lived here in a variety of distinct locations; the region is never simply a homogeneous whole, with a simple narrative of its past. Nevertheless, key elements can be seen to recur, and to form a shared narrative of the region’s past.

### ***Labour, industry, decline***

The idea of the North East as ‘a place of power and personality’ has been repeatedly shaken by economic decline, out of which arises a need to re-imagine the region, to institute a rebirth of its identity. This idea of birth/death/rebirth has, according to Colls, become a defining feature of the region, linked closely to three key ‘categories of response’ which, the following chapters will show, have in turn become enshrined as literary motifs associated with the North East; labour, industry and decline. This trinity has come to bear upon a number of key tenets at the heart of the region’s identity. For example, types and patterns of industry and employment have shaped the domestic world in various ways, including defining social roles within the household, dictating the nature and location of family homes, and shaping patterns of movement with an associated impact upon the region’s imagined shape and extent. Norman McCord writes of the region’s ‘high density terraces’ and ‘North-East colliery houses’ as a ‘distinctly regional form of vernacular building’ which shaped the North East’s

social landscape in the early twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> This consequently influenced the shape of the community to which people imagined themselves as belonging, and the types of narrative which arose as part of its imagining. This influence can be seen reflected in the way that typical imagery of the region is dominated by images of working-class, 'high density' social landscapes, typically suggestive of densely populated, close-knit communities. The number of North-East children's novels which take as their primary setting a terraced, former colliery house is striking, for example.

Just as Robert Colls regards the trinity of labour, industry and decline as key tenets of the North East experience, Bill Williamson suggests that economic and industrial images lie at the heart of the region's story.

What unites the various strands of the broader regional pattern is a richly textured sense of a hard-worked past, whose marks evoke not only bitterness and poverty, but the greatness, too, of industrial achievement and the pride that went with it. The stories, legends, myths and moral tales encoded in that past are a vast store of ideas and images, thoughts and feelings through which people in these parts acquire and restate their past. They are the ways and means by which the identities of Geordies are made. Sometimes, however, they are reflections of how others have seen the region and its people.<sup>44</sup>

Williamson makes a distinction between the past as explored by historians as a field of debate and theory, and the past of popular memory which is 'recovered [...] to make sense of the present, to legitimise a course of action, but above all to provide for coherence and continuity in the way people make sense of their interests and their lives.'<sup>45</sup> The roots of such a need for continuity and community are to be found in specific economic circumstances, namely the rise of the North East as an industrial powerhouse during the nineteenth century. Even though the economic and social profiles of the region have changed

considerably since this time, the legacy of this transformative period still exerts considerable influence on the way in which the identity of the region is articulated. Indeed, the idea that the characteristic identity of region is rooted in a time long gone only serves to underscore the way in which such profound economic and industrial achievements are founded on underlying, seemingly essential qualities.

Williamson identifies four key emotions of ‘pride, regret, nostalgia and solidarity’ which he sees as ‘part of a structure of feeling about the past which is widely shared in the North East.’<sup>46</sup> Their importance in structuring contemporary views of the region is sharpened by the fact that ‘the reality they evoke is passing by’, namely in terms of the economic and social structure of the region. The circumstances behind this reality, in particular the need for working men to construct a sense of community in response to the demands of heavy industrial labour, have been forgotten into memory, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson; once uprooted from the socio-economic locale of their inception, these ways of thinking about the region have become enshrined in popular consciousness, timeless and characteristic of a shared identity.

The recovery of the past from the 1870s onwards was a task shaped largely by the need felt among organised working men in heavy industries to articulate their political goals. That effort produced the image which still prevails in popular memory – the image of hardship overcome. But it is now, with the exception of those in the mining districts who lived through the 1984-85 strike, a politically sanitised image, free of the doubts and differences from which it was formed. And what it provides for people is a kind of caricature but one in which, nevertheless, people from the North East can recognise themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Although Robert Colls's tenets of labour and industry are no longer central to the economic life of the North East, and the solidarity of which Williamson writes is one originating in nineteenth-century industrial labour groups, these ideas about the region seem to remain as compelling motifs. Colls's ideas about the cyclic nature of the motif of decline/rebirth, along with Williamson's suggestion of a deep sense of proud regret and nostalgia as permeating the region's consciousness, all serve to underline the way in which present day images of the North East engage with and emerge from a mythic sense of the past.

*North-East children's novels: history and the past*

In North-East children's novels, two key historical periods have been repeatedly featured, namely the seventh century (and in particular events surrounding St Cuthbert) and the nineteenth century. Both temporal settings are evoked as touchstones for contemporary North-East identity, employed in a manner which both draws upon their historical particularity whilst simultaneously suggesting their significance as indicative of eternal, essential qualities of the region. In line with Benedict Anderson's comments regarding the process of 'forgetting of memory' which, in the words of Green and Pollard, 'is deployed, selectively and creatively', the effect of such representations is to add weight to the reader's sense of the region as both rooted in a past rich with significant events, yet also transcendent of such specifics and seemingly timeless.<sup>48</sup> That key events are recalled, or rather reconstructed, for the young reader, elevates their significance.

William Mayne's *Cuddy* (1994) constructs just such a mythic North East, as it tells the story of a group of children who discover themselves to be repeatedly re-enacting events from the seventh-century life of St Cuthbert. Their

lives are paralleled in an Anglo-Saxon palimpsest discovered by one of the children's fathers, who works at the University of Durham; just as the parchment itself is revealed to have been over-written with later text, but comes to reveal its original story, so too the children, the adults around them, and particularly the North-East landscape itself, all reveal deeper, hidden narratives which shape their existence. Cuthbert, known by the more intimate 'our *Cuddy*' of the novel's title, stands as a central figure in the lives of these North-East children, a precursor to the present-day events and concerns which confront them.<sup>49</sup>

Mayne's employment of the mythology of St Cuthbert foregrounds the North East's provenance as one of the earliest sites of Christian worship in Britain, and therefore reconnects the present-day region with its earlier manifestation as a spiritual centre; indeed, as Cuddy's world repeatedly intrudes into the children's experiences, they come to see the saint's existence as beyond time, or rather 'between-times', suggestive of the eternal spiritual essence of the North-East.

That Cuddy's story is bound up with the magical, anthropomorphic bear named Beowulf, in various reincarnations including the present form of a soft toy, further emphasises the primal nature of such spirituality, and can also be read as an intertextual allusion to the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, with its thematic focus on the conflux of pagan and Christian traditions. Cuddy represents a North-East spiritual tradition at the beginnings of Christianity, with roots in pagan mysticism, and at the margins of civilisation. The children's experiences see them transform into wild animals running free in the ancient North-East landscape, the site where timeless, mystical forces can erupt at any moment, from any time, into the lives of young people. Mayne restates existing images of St Cuthbert as a conduit for primal spirituality, and in doing so



reaffirms claims for the North East as a cradle of Christianity whilst also underpinning images of the region as always and forever primal and untamed.

Similar concerns inform Robert Westall's *The Wind Eye*, though Mayne's novel differs in its stylistic evocation of such primal mysticism, manifested in sophisticated allusion, stream-of-consciousness address, and lyrical symbolism; indeed, *Cuddy* at points reads more like a so-called prose-poem, and is certainly the more challenging of the two texts for young readers. Both employ the figure of Cuddy as symbolic of the region as timeless, untamed and wild.<sup>50</sup>

St Cuthbert's presence also manifests itself in numerous other North-East children's novels, such as Sylvia Sherry's *The Loss of the Night Wind* (1970), where the protagonist views the landscape of Holy Island as itself imbued with such timeless qualities, which render its 'bareness and bleakness' eternally 'just like [...] centuries ago [...] when the monks at last abandoned the island to the Danes, and crossed to the mainland with the precious Lindisfarne Gospels and remains of St Cuthbert in his coffin.'<sup>51</sup> As I explore in Chapter 9, the saint's recurrence continues in the work of David Almond, in both *Heaven Eyes* and unpublished writings, and indeed Almond cites Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* as an important influence on his own writing. Cuthbert's resonance as a motif throughout a range of North-East children's fiction is indicative of the enduring appeal of such a figure for writers seeking to restate the region's spiritual pedigree; though there are certainly differences between Mayne's, Westall's and Almond's versions of 'Cuddy', nevertheless these are outweighed by the similar function the saint fulfils in these varied works, at once as a point of anchorage to North-East Christianity's seventh-century origins, at the same time symbolic of a

seemingly timeless spirituality, underpinning images of the North East as eternal, wild and unknowable.

The centrality of images of work and social class to the dominant aesthetic is explored in the following section. Many of the texts considered there are also notable for their focus on North-East childhood in the nineteenth century, a setting which recurs repeatedly in children's novels of the region. The children's novels of Catherine Cookson provide an illustrative example. All feature a connection with the nineteenth century, either directly through the temporal setting employed in novels such as *The Nipper* (1970), *Our John Willie* (1974) and *Mrs Flannagan's Trumpet* (1976), or through the ways in which central characters engage with a way of life rooted in nineteenth-century industry, in novels such as *Joe and the Gladiator* (1968) and *Matty Doolin* (1965). All of these novels, in common with Cookson's adult fiction, seek to position the nineteenth century as a fundamental period in the region's history. Dave Russell comments on how Catherine Cookson and other writers of North-East sagas 'who have rooted a great deal of their work in the nineteenth century and the 1930s, have done much to maintain the 'mill town' version of the North'; for all that Cookson's fiction invariably features tales of poverty and hardship overcome, Russell argues that the success of such novels lies in the more optimistic function they serve, as 'the sense of community they convey may go some way in reacquainting readers with a world they have lost, or feel they have lost.'<sup>52</sup> So defining have Catherine Cookson's nineteenth-century images of the region been that, as Robert Colls notes, upon entering South Shields nowadays 'drivers are welcomed to 'Catherine Cookson Country'.<sup>53</sup> That such images are

replicated in Cookson's children's fiction can only contribute to their enduring and pervasive impact.

Nineteenth-century images of the region continue to persist in more recent children's fiction, including both Westall's and Almond's work as considered in the following chapters. Another example would be Terry Deary's 1992 novel, *Shadow Play*, which tells the story of a group of young actors employed to produce a piece of educational drama based upon North-East local history. As they research their chosen subject matter, the trial of Mary Ann Cotton, hanged in 1873 for a series of murders which for a long time earned her the title of Britain's most prolific serial killer, the young protagonists find themselves drawn into a nineteenth-century North East of poverty, hardship and danger. Through reconstructing Cotton's story for their audience of schoolchildren, the young actors come to see the parallels between the nineteenth-century murderer's life, and the circumstances of a murder which occurs in the guest house in which they are staying. The novel underscores the idea that the consequences of nineteenth-century 'lives hard lived' are still replicated in the twentieth-century North East.

It should be noted that other historical periods do feature in North-East children's fiction: Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954) and the short story collection *The Capricorn Bracelet* (1973) contain episodes in a Roman North East between the first and fifth centuries; Janni Howker's *Martin Farrell* (1994) is set in the sixteenth-century north Northumberland of the Border Reivers, and Winifred Cawley's *Down the Long Stairs* (1964) and *The Feast of the Serpent* (1969) are both set in seventeenth-century Northumberland. What these settings have in common is the way they reinforce images of the North East

as a dangerous, unsettled zone, and a site of conflict, along with its rugged beauty and harshness of life. Janni Howker comments, '[t]here is something about the rugged beauty of the northern uplands, and the often harsh lives that have been led there, that affects me deeply', and claims that the history of danger and brutality explored in *Martin Farrell* affected her while writing the novel, which 'felt exactly as if I were taking a dictation from a ghost.'<sup>54</sup> Green and Pollard comment on ways in which St Cuthbert's time and the period of history explored in *Martin Farrell* have both, at points, been revisited in order to assert different sub-regional traditions.

And while Durham continually reinvented its association with its saint, Northumberland re-enacted in ballad and verse the martial exploits of its late-medieval border heroes against the Scots. Memories of St Cuthbert and of border reivers – sustained and periodically revived throughout the centuries – emphasised two different and separate traditions and reinforced different identities.<sup>55</sup>

It is interesting how in North-East children's fiction, a tale of the Border Reivers can be read as affirming the entrenched, existing imagery of the region rather than suggesting an alternative, and also how the mythology surrounding St Cuthbert has become fully assimilated into such an aesthetic.

Though a variety of historical settings feature in North-East children's fiction, nevertheless the time of Cuthbert and the nineteenth-century region recur frequently enough to be considered key features of the dominant aesthetic, and the fact that such settings are typically employed in stressing such 'timeless' characteristics as outlined previously, characteristics which also surface in texts such as those listed above, further supports the claim that these two settings have been integral to twentieth-century and contemporary constructions of the region.

Other novels such as Jill Paton Walsh's *Grace* (1991), which is explored in greater detail in the section below on gender and the North East, also coalesce around the region's nineteenth-century past, and continue to affirm images of that period as epitomising life in the region. Both Robert Westall and David Almond make repeated use of this period in their fiction too. The nineteenth century is such a recurrent presence in North-East children's fiction because of the continued impact of this period's industrial legacy upon the region's identity. As the region's industrial expansion becomes more and more distant from the reality of the modern child reader, and therefore 'can not be 'remembered'', so the need to narrate the links between North-East identity, work and social class is intensified.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Myers, 'Myers Literary Guide: The North East; Introduction', <<http://seaham.i12.com/myers/m-intro.html>> [accessed 19 June 2008].

<sup>2</sup> Myers, 'Introduction'.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, 'Introduction'.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Myers, 'Introduction'; see also Colls and Lancaster, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Importantly, Almond's fiction re-awakens the region's latent cultural energies, and re-instates them, albeit with a slightly different tenor. Almond sees his writing as descending from much earlier writers such as Bede; see Almond, *Personal Interview with Nolan Dalrymple* (Humsaugh, Northumberland: recorded 31 January 2008; see Appendix).

<sup>7</sup> Shields, pp. 207-208.

<sup>8</sup> Shields, p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> Shields, p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, p. 21; p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin, 2003; first serialised in *Household Words*, 1854-1855), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Gaskell, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Russell, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> G. Christopher Davies, *Wildcat Tower; or, the Adventures of four Boys in pursuit of Sport and Natural History in the North Countrie* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1877), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Wildcat Tower* p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. 14; similar images can be seen persisting into Robert Westall's representations of the Tyne's 'oily bosom', though Westall's image is rather more positive than Davies's; see Robert Westall, *Fathom Five* (London: Macmillan, 1979/Puffin, 1988), p. 82. That such images endure today can be seen in a recent magazine feature which described the early twentieth-century Tyne waterfront as 'blackened by

the clanking, grinding industries [...] that had helped Tyneside prosper.’ See Richard T Kelly, ‘In search of lost Tyne’, in *Prospect*, May 2008, pp. 64-67.

<sup>18</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. pp. 16-17; pp. 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. 111; p. 170; p. 256.

<sup>20</sup> Russell, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Shields, p. 207.

<sup>23</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. 155; p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup> *Wildcat Tower*, p. 272.

<sup>26</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (London: Penguin, 1994 [originally published 1906]), pp. 123-124.

<sup>27</sup> George S. Surrey, *A Northumbrian in Arms* (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 94-95.

<sup>28</sup> Captain W. E. Johns, *Biggles and the Black Peril* (London: John Hamilton, 1935; Random House, 1995), p. 30; p. 35; p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Biggles and the Black Peril*, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Biggles and the Black Peril*, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Though not specified in this novel, it would appear that Smettleworth is located in Yorkshire. Nevertheless, so little is made of Ginger’s background that the point is largely moot; he could come from anywhere, just as long as it includes a mining tradition from which he can escape into the Air Force.

<sup>32</sup> *Biggles and the Black Peril*, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Colls, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Williamson, ‘Living the past differently: Historical memory in the North East’, in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 149-168 (p. 151).

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, pp. 224-225.

<sup>36</sup> Williamson, p. 151.

<sup>37</sup> Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard, ‘Introduction: Identifying Regions’, in Green and Pollard, pp. 1-26 (p. 18).

<sup>38</sup> Williamson, p. 151.

<sup>39</sup> Williamson, p. 152.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, pp. 204-205.

<sup>41</sup> Green and Pollard, ‘Introduction’, p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Bill Lancaster, ‘Newcastle – capital of what?’, in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 53-70, (pp. 58-59).

<sup>43</sup> McCord, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Williamson, pp. 156-157.

<sup>45</sup> Williamson, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> Williamson, p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> Williamson, p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> See Anderson, above; Green and Pollard, p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> William Mayne, *Cuddy* (London: Random House, 1994; Red Fox, 1998), p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Mythology of St Cuthbert frequently asserts his transcendence of time, in particular his body’s resistance to the process of decay; see, for instance, Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*, Chapter 42, in J. F. Webb and D. H. Falmer (translators and editor), *The Age of Bede* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>51</sup> Sherry, Sylvia, *The Loss of the Night Wind* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 45.

<sup>52</sup> Russell, p. 91.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Colls, ‘Born-again Geordies’, in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 1-34 (p. 26).

<sup>54</sup> Janni Howker, *Walker Books mini-autobiography*,

<http://www.walker.co.uk/contributors/Janni-Howker-2676.aspx> [accessed 27 July 2008]

<sup>55</sup> Green and Pollard, ‘Conclusion’, p. 220.

<sup>56</sup> See Anderson, p. 204.

### **Chapter 3: Representations of Work, Social Class, Gender and Language within the Dominant Aesthetic**

#### **Work and social class**

Present-day images of the North East are influenced by a legacy from the past, and nowhere is this more evident than in relation to work and social class. The identity of the region is bound up with a historical sense of its industrial roots, particularly in relation to nineteenth-century industrial expansion. The North East stood at the centre of England's economic development, arguably underpinning much of the industry which went on elsewhere in the country, and as a result the type of work characteristic of the region has both infused some of the key images with which it is associated, and shaped the physical, economic, and social landscapes of the area. Parallel to this, questions of social and economic class have also sculpted the cultural and literary 'mindscape' of the region. Elaine Knox notes how such factors stretch beyond the temporal boundaries of their direct influence, continuing to shape the region's identity.

The shaping of Tyneside's identity was impelled by the dominance of the five great staple industries that emerged in the nineteenth century and attained not only regional dominance but also national importance. Coalmining and export, shipping, shipbuilding, iron production and heavy engineering determined the region's economic health, its social condition and make-up until their final collapse in the 1970s and 1980s, but their legacy has continued long after their real economic dominance, in terms of employment, declined.

[...] The wage packet, and how and where that wage packet was earned, played a major part in the development of Tyneside's cultural and social ethos.<sup>1</sup>

One of the ways in which such factors impacted upon the development of the region's ethos was through the shaping of the domestic landscape. The major

industrial employers at the heart of the region's economy drove the expansion of housing provision, affecting the physical location and layout of the community, something which of course can still be seen today in the region's characteristic brick built terraces as the staple of housing stock here. This was a feature of other industrial centres, most of which were located in the North, serving as a reminder of the need to avoid characterising the area as a homogenised whole; also, there are notable differences between communities characteristic of the owners and managers of heavy industry as compared to those built for the workers. Nevertheless, the fact that the greatest employers in the North East during the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries were all types of heavy industry exerts a strong influence on the identity of the region. The culture of the North East, in popular perception (both from outside and within, constructed as both hetero- and auto-images) is practically synonymous with working-class culture. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, indeed, so central was labour to the life of this region that it was working-class culture which took centre stage in conceptions of the region's culture. Put simply, such a high proportion of people living in the North East either worked within the major heavy industries, were related closely to someone who did, or at least knew well someone who did, that what happened to the workers had a major impact upon the life of the whole community. This is not to deny the existence of diversity in the social make-up of the region, which does of course span across all class divisions, but rather to posit that the working-class experience and outlook has become culturally central to the region's identity. As Knox explains, the predominance of the working-class in Tyneside's population 'encouraged a social and community structure strongly centred around work, the family and



local community' which 'combined with a strong sense of regional history and fierce pride in the region's economic achievements, produced a highly distinctive regional outlook.'<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, a difference between Tyneside specifically and the North East as a region more generally, but in terms of the cultural images associated with the region as a whole, the impact of social class is paramount also in relation to more rural areas. Although referring specifically to the city of Newcastle, Bill Lancaster's comments could arguably apply in relation to the wider region when he talks of a 'value system, politics, myths and symbols' which 'are essentially working-class'. Lancaster does not refute the class diversity to be found here, but rather points to the cultural affiliation shared across class boundaries, and rooted in working-class culture. He comments that, when encountering the 'well-heeled middle class' of the region, what is most striking is 'the degree of cultural identity that it shares with the working class', and suggests that 'the cultural convergence of class has resulted in other social groups being more sympathetic to working-class needs and interests'.<sup>3</sup> This, he suggests, is because the economic profile of the North East has been so skewed towards an industrial base that most people living in the region remain related, if not by blood then by friendship, to the poor working-class. Lancaster's aim is undoubtedly political, seeking as he does to emphasise such 'older solidarities', but nevertheless the centrality of such images, though perhaps no longer borne out in economic reality, is convincing.<sup>4</sup>

### *North-East children's novels: work and social class*

The preponderance of such images is present in North-East children's fiction, and can be illustrated with reference to a range of texts. Indeed, images of the

region as intrinsically industrial are almost ubiquitous within such texts, to the point where it is unusual to find examples which refute such ideas.

Richard Armstrong's *Sabotage at the Forge* (1946), described on its cover as 'a story for boys set in a Tyneside steelworks', asserts the influence of industrial labour in shaping young male identity, through the story of fifteen year-old Thias's entrance to the world of work. The novel is essentially a bildungsroman, charting Thias's growing fascination with the new way of life he experiences through work. At the novel's opening, Thias has already been captivated by 'the feeling of awe and wonder that had come over him when he first saw this monster of a machine bite into the steel', and, equally, by the presence of the forgers, skilled heavy labourers who are 'more important [...] than the foreman or any of the mysterious people who juggled with figures in the office building on the river road.'<sup>5</sup> His initiation into the masculine realm which will shape his adult life involves his deepening sense of affiliation with skilled craftsman such as 'Old Jackie'; Thias notes the 'fierce gleam of his blue eyes' which reveals 'the power in him.'<sup>6</sup> For Thias, adolescence as a route into manhood entails coming to terms with his connection to the industrial world, and learning how to appreciate the living presence of heavy labour within the life of the forge; in effect, acquiring the same relationship to his work as the older labourers such as Jackie.

'Queer stuff. To you it's just steel. It's hard and heavy; it's blue and rough, or maybe shiny and smooth; but just steel. To me it's more. It sort of lives, Thias, and I feel it like that. Maybe it's the sweat that's in it, and the power of the men that mined the ore and those who made it. Their strength and the skill of their hands. [...]'<sup>7</sup>

Physical labour, which underlies the culture of Thias's home town, is shown to be ennobling and nourishing. Armstrong's novel does acknowledge the more damaging aspects of such industry, mainly through the impact of pollution such as 'the fumes and smoke and dust' upon the surrounding rural landscape, where vegetation has been 'gnarled and twisted into fantastic shapes' by the forge's effluent, 'leaving great scars – white wounds streaked rust-red and sulphur-yellow' upon the land.<sup>8</sup> Such references are largely understated, however, and certainly overshadowed by the enriching effect of industry upon Thias's world. The work of the forge connects it with the wider world, drawing in materials that 'had once been purple rock in the heart of the Spanish sierras, and grey manganese in the wild Caucasian mountains' and transforming them through the craftsmanship of the labouring men.<sup>9</sup> His entry into the world of work also transforms his perspective on the world around him, which becomes rejuvenated as it re-centres upon the forge.

Thias loved this view, but until he had started work at the Valley Forge it had all been strange country to him. Now as his eyes picked out the course of the river from the point where it came in sight of the dark mass of the woods in the west, to where it disappeared behind the great steel works in the east, his mind revolved the great changes that had taken place in his life in the last twelve months.<sup>10</sup>

Thias's entry into manhood is marked by a new relationship with his work. Firstly, he must internalise the connection with labour shared by the other men, described as 'magicians', in order to become 'one of them', and through doing so he becomes almost physically transformed himself: Thias feels that in the forge 'men were giants, and because he was among them he felt himself grow.'<sup>11</sup> At the same time, work becomes a symbiotic extension of himself, imbued with his living presence, as the crane he works on becomes 'an extension of his own

hands', attuning him to the nature of molten steel as 'something that was alive with the sweat and strength and skill of the men who had made it', and that therefore 'if he worked well he would be adding something of himself to it.'<sup>12</sup>

This is more than simple pride in work; in Armstrong's fictional North East, growing up (for boys at least) entails a kind of rebirth into a life utterly at one with the act of physical labour.

The industrial dimension of the region is similarly central to Frederick Grice's *The Bonny Pit Laddie* (1960), although there can be seen the beginnings of an important shift in the representation of the relationship between labour and maturity. In Grice's novel, eleven year-old protagonist Dick Ullathorne faces the prospect of following his father and brother into the local pit, yet yearns for a different future. The novel's treatment of the industrial backdrop of Branton Colliery in County Durham is carefully balanced between celebration of the nobility and decency inherent in such mining communities, and acknowledgement of the stifling effect of limited opportunities upon the life of a young, academically inclined boy. Early in the novel, Dick realises the divide between himself and his father when, on a trip to Durham, he feels 'a desire to venture into the alleys or vennels' between the city's 'noble and ancient houses', feelings 'that his father did not share.'<sup>13</sup> As Dick grows up, he comes to realise that 'in some important way he was not like his father and mother', and to appreciate the limiting impact of his life in Branton, which almost denies him the 'different destiny [which] seemed to be calling him'.<sup>14</sup> Such differences are shown to be based on Dick's proclivity for work, and what is suggested as a latent presence of middle-class values and qualities. It is through the intervention of Dick's paternal grandmother, who had 'never meant to be a miner's wife, and

refused to consider herself as one', that Dick accesses the kind of book-learning that he craves; she not only argues his case against his parents allowing him to become a miner, but is revealed at the novel's close as having 'smoothed the way for her beloved grandson to escape from the pit' by arranging a position for him as a chemist's apprentice.<sup>15</sup> Dick's escape from the confines of his working-class beginnings does not take him beyond the North East, though it does expand his horizons more widely than the limits of Branton Colliery. Nevertheless, it does present a picture of childhood in the region as circumscribed by industry; Dick succeeds in his attempts not 'to let the pit close over him' in part because he discovers himself to be the inheritor of an alternative, southern family line which, as his grandmother points out emphatically, does not contain pitmen.<sup>16</sup> It is because old Mrs Ullathorne has resisted the influence of North-East culture, particularly the fact that 'she never spoke like a colliery woman, and never used a dialect word', that Dick is able to avoid being swallowed into a life of work below ground as the 'Bonny Pit Laddie' ironised in the novel's title.<sup>17</sup>

The pit is a similarly menacing presence in Grice's later novel *The Courage of Andy Robson* (1969), in which the eponymous central character also yearns for a life beyond the confines of his family's mining community. Again here, the young boy's escape takes him elsewhere within the North East, rather than beyond the region, and on one level the effect is to suggest the variety of life which exists within the wider North-East locale. Such images of the central tension between tranquil rural purity and clamorous urban industry as featured in this novel are common to many North-East children's books, and form a distinctive element that engages both Robert Westall and David Almond. An industrial accident, which gravely injures Andy's father, instigates the boy's

move to his uncle's house in rural Northumberland, where he must learn how to assimilate to a very different way of life than he has been used to in his evocatively named home town of Sleetburn. Though at first he wishes 'he could see the lights and hear the sounds of the colliery [...] and the sluther of men going to and from work in their heavy boots', Andy soon develops an affinity with his new life, which he finds 'much more interesting than pit-talk' to the extent of 'wishing that he had been his uncle's son, so that he could have grown up to be the next Park Warden'.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, Andy gains the confidence to declare his reluctance to go "[...] into the pit [...]", and fulfils his ambition of following in his uncle's footsteps, and although his story is again a disavowal of the putative centrality of heavy industry in the lives of all young North-East boys and men, the alternative route he chooses still situates work as the primary defining force shaping Andy's adolescence.<sup>19</sup>

What these two novels, along with others such as *Nine Days' Wonder* (1976), illustrate is a tendency for North-East children's books to repeatedly reaffirm the place of work as central to childhood in the region, whilst also pointing up the decreasing relevance of the region's staple, heavy industries in the lives of North-East children. This tension increases as the twentieth century progresses, and can be seen reflected as a concern in both Westall's treatment of the stifling effects of North-East industrial images (see Chapters 4 and 5), and in Almond's attempts to render images of the region's industrial and bucolic dimensions as complementary rather than contradictory (see Chapters 8 and 9). The decline of heavy industry within the North East is reflected so clearly in children's novels because of the growing awareness that the region into which such young readers were growing would be one shaped by different forces. One

effect of this is that images of work and industry are recast with a focus on decline and dereliction, in part a response to what Graeme Milne describes as the region's 'dramatic collapse into 'special area' rustbelt'; in this way, the region's industrial character remains central in articulating images of the North East for young readers, but through its absence rather than presence.<sup>20</sup> Two novels which reflect this shift in imagery are Peter Dickinson's *Annerton Pit* (1977), and Melvin Burgess's *Billy Elliot* (2001).

*Annerton Pit* tells the story of young brothers Jake and Martin, who travel north from Southampton in search of their missing grandfather. Their journey takes them firstly to Newcastle, then further north to Annerton Pit (identified by the author as 'a disused mining area on the Northumberland coast – not precisely located but as it were somewhere near Seaton Sluice'<sup>21</sup>). The landscape they encounter here is suffused with traces of its industrial heritage, from its description as 'mining country' in their grandfather's postcard, to the remnants of the mine at Annerton itself.<sup>22</sup> It is also an inherently dangerous place, reflected in its history of 'full bloody border murders', and the presence of the 'wild, ship-founding, man-drowning, gale-breeding North Sea [...] the most dangerous water in the world.'<sup>23</sup> Against such a dangerous background and history, the two boys uncover the machinations of an eco-terrorist group, which involve the kidnapping of their grandfather and the boys themselves.

The presence of industrial dereliction (and therefore absence of working industry) is central to the novel in a number of ways. Firstly, the plotting and kidnapping which occurs at Annerton Pit is only able to go undiscovered because of the area's state of neglect and decay, and in particular the abandoned mine workings provide a place to store the hostages without fear of detection. More

important than these examples, however, is the relationship that develops between central character Jake and the mine itself. Jake's experience of living with blindness affords him the ability to acclimatise to the utter darkness of the pit. The events of the novel are focalised through Jake, which makes for a narrative voice which foregrounds his other senses and borders on synaesthesia; at the novel's denouement, this effect heightens the reader's experience of a terrifying supernatural force which Jake discovers to be inhabiting the mine. The young boy becomes attuned to this supernatural and eternal presence, and comes to understand its origins in the area's industrial past which saw the creature emerge in response to man's destructive act of wrenching open the landscape in search of coal. This central image of an eternal, living presence comprised of the essence of the North-East landscape, reinforces two key facets of dominant views of the region: firstly, Jake comes to understand that 'the life that was fulfilling its nature in this way was somehow a frontier life', which reiterates the seemingly essential quality of the region as embodying such frontier spirit; secondly, this eternal presence is certainly pre-industrial, and its re-emergence from the mine simultaneously evokes an image of the North-East landscape as purely primal, whilst underscoring images of the coalmining and industry in general as destructive, dangerous and damaging for the region. Such destructive force is epitomised in the story of the 'Annerton Dyke disaster' of 1837, in which the act of mining apparently "[...] loosed [...] from the rock [...]" a mysterious supernatural creature, claiming the lives of forty seven miners. The suggestion seems to be that the creature, whatever it may be, contains an essence of a true North East, wounded by the advent of industry but ultimately recoverable and capable of retaliation against such violation.



The pain was over but the wound was still there. The wound was Annerton Pit – these tunnels that led to the world of light, where the wind moaned through, scouring the maze with faint wafts of the living sea. The thing in the pit was powerless to heal the wound – it couldn't make one splinter of rock fall from roof or wall. That was not its nature. But it would grow its own protection, like a shell – a shell of fear, a barrier to drive back any creatures from beyond the frontier that might probe along the galleries of the wound and reach the central web of nerves where the thing crouched, aching for the old inviolable dark of its waiting.<sup>24</sup>

Though industry remains at the centre of Dickinson's North East, such imagery of mining as inflicting 'wounds', and of the violent impact of nineteenth-century industry, contrasts sharply with the reverence accorded work in earlier novels such as Grice's *Sabotage at the Forge*.

Images of the seemingly inescapable contiguity between North-East industry and decline reach a kind of apotheosis in Melvin Burgess's novelisation of Lee Hall's film and screenplay, *Billy Elliot* (2001).<sup>25</sup> The novel tells the story of twelve year-old Billy, growing up in Everington in County Durham at the height of the 1983 to 1985 miners' strike. At the novel's centre is the tension between Billy's flair for ballet dancing, and his background as the son of a striking coal-miner. Again essentially a bildungsroman, the novel charts the emergence of Billy's considerable and unexpected talent, and his family's struggle to reconcile his skill with the culture of industrial decline which surrounds them. In exploring the impact of decline upon the region's culture, *Billy Elliot* constructs for the young reader a historical moment of profound change for North-East identity. Billy's father's struggles are emblematic of the disruption and disturbance of identity acutely felt by North-East men of his generation, in response to the collapse of the heavy industry which had shaped

their way of life and that of generations of men before them; Billy's struggle is emblematic of both the desire to escape and, as he puts it, "[...] get away from this shite [...]", and also an assertion that other factors needed to be embraced by the younger generation, for whom such industry would be little more than a historical fact.<sup>26</sup>

Published in 2001, *Billy Elliot* (as with the film upon which it is based) recasts the events of 1983-1985 in the retrospective light of contemporary politics, and situates the miners' strike as a fulcrum of wider, fundamental shifts in British politics; as Billy's father Jackie sees it, 'by the time the Labour Party got back in, they were all Thatcherites too, so it's just never stopped since, really, has it?'<sup>27</sup> However, although the novel does to some extent claim a broader socio-political remit, it nevertheless speaks most clearly of the impact of industrial decline upon the North East, and in particular its effect in reshaping the lives of young people from the region. At its heart is a bitterly-felt North-South dichotomy, epitomised by the perceived destruction of North-Eastern industry by a southern élite, headed by the Thatcher government.

And then, London and their big houses and their posh kids and rich schools. All we ever had in the northeast was our mines and our jobs and a hard life, and now they were even taking those from us. It'd be nice to think they were going to give us something back in return for all those years of hard work, all those lives lost, but when it came to it – no chance.<sup>28</sup>

Although these comments are clearly marked for the reader as the politically charged voice of Jackie Elliot, there is little doubt about the position towards which the implied reader's sympathies are directed, given the novel's almost exclusive focus on the perspective of Billy's family and North-East community. Billy's struggle to achieve his goal of dancing professionally is exacerbated by

both his gender and his social class, but it is the latter of these that proves the greater obstacle; when he finally does reach audition at the Royal Ballet School in London, Billy competes alongside other boys but finds himself alienated from them by virtue of his social background in the North East.

They couldn't make out a word I was saying. I might as well have come from another country. And I was thinking, maybe I did.<sup>29</sup>

This other country of Billy's origin in a sense no longer exists, following the collapse of the industry which underpins its identity, and therefore must be left behind; this is the novel's overriding message for young readers. The abrupt and profound recalibration being experienced by the North East is figured powerfully in *Billy Elliot* through the novel's treatment of coalmining as a defining activity for the region's workers. Although Billy's quest to become a ballet dancer threatens to set him apart from his background and family, it is also a response to his father's demand to know, '[...] what's a miner without a mine?'<sup>30</sup> Billy represents 'another future' for a young North-East man, hard won in part by the efforts of his father and the other miners who ultimately support his desire for a different life.<sup>31</sup> He sees his alternative career in terms which stress that he is building a new tradition, one which 'once I've done it, it is what we do, because I'm one of us too' and which 'doesn't mean I'm turning into someone else.'<sup>32</sup> Alongside Billy's growth towards adulthood and a new future, the novel portrays the growth of empathy experienced by Billy's father and brother, who come to understand the parallels between Billy's struggle and the wider battle of the strike. Billy's brother speaks rousingly on his behalf to the gathered striking miners, explicitly linking the two causes.

‘First of all, this strike is about the future. We all know that. My future, your future, your children’s future. And that includes Billy’s future. Not everyone’s going to end up down the pit but they still have a right to their own future, no matter what it is. You can’t pick and choose what someone’s future’s going to be. [...] So. Dig deep. We need your help.’<sup>33</sup>

Novels such as this set up powerful and enduring images of the place of work in shaping North-East identity, and in *Billy Elliot* the young reader is presented with a story of how working-class industrial culture, though shaken and fractured by decline, nevertheless maintains its core qualities of resilience in the face of hardship, and solidarity in the name of common good. Billy’s struggle revives images of the North East as an indomitable community, and is at once the story of a young boy’s desire to escape and discover whether ‘[...] being a ballet dancer would be better than being a miner [...]’, and the tale of how his flight from the limiting scope of his North-East background actually returns to that very community, for a time, the sense of hope being stripped away alongside its industrial infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> Although later North-East novels, such as Richard Milward’s *Apples* (2007), have often focused on the de-centred, uprooted nature of post-industrial adolescence in the region, there can also be seen in *Billy Elliot* an attempt to overcome negative images of the North East as a site of decay and dereliction, geographical and social, and to recast such industrial decline as a source of renewed community spirit and solidarity. Such reconciliation resonates, in particular, in the work of David Almond.

### **Gender and the North East.**

North-East cultural identity has been repeatedly aligned with working-class culture, and this affects the way gender is depicted. This has been primarily a two-fold process, firstly insofar as work conditions shape masculine and feminine roles, and secondly regarding the ways by which the predominance of working-class culture, with its inherent gender biases, has consequently shaped the way in which differently gendered viewpoints are represented. In short, not only has the North East's working-class culture tended to dictate the domestic and social roles of women within the region, it has also limited the opportunities for female experiences to be voiced. In fact, the working-class culture with which the North East is commonly associated can be seen to be fundamentally androcentric; it is not simply work which underpins many of the region's values, but, almost exclusively, *male* work. The centrality of such economic systems served to circumscribe women's activities, and indeed their world. Elaine Knox writes of how the dependence of the regional economy on a male labour force 'went hand-in-hand with an enthusiastic consensus adoption and approval of the Victorian domestic model – the man as breadwinner, and the woman as wife and mother, working in the clearly defined and separate spheres of home and workplace.' A necessary outcome of such an ingrained social structure was the distancing of women from any sense of economic independence outside of the home. Though rooted in the industrial expansions of the late nineteenth century, this model for the attribution of differing social roles according to gender became entrenched in North-East culture. Knox points to the ways that the 'economic marginalisation of women led to their social marginalisation', but also the way in which the view of the region based in 'a history perceived through male work'

resulted in there being ‘more words written on the geological formation of the Northern coalfield, than on women’s part in regional life.’<sup>35</sup>

The resultant invisibility of women also became entrenched within the structure of central motifs attached to the region’s identity, especially regarding ideas of decline and rebirth. The cycle of recurrent depression and subsequent recovery, from the 1920s/30s, through the inter-war years, and finally into the 1980s, also served to foreground what Robert Colls describes as ‘the male response’.<sup>36</sup> Although such a view of the region remains important, in reality the economic circumstances of the North East have shifted irrevocably in recent years, with one result being the undermining and erosion of male labour as a dominant force. The future of the North East will be shaped by different influences; nevertheless, the North East’s industrial legacy, predominantly masculine in outlook and values, continues to shape how the region and its people are perceived, and traditions from the region’s past continue to shape its identity. Some of the more enduring images associated with the North East can be traced to this past world of male work, or lack of it, a place where ‘[i]mages of men standing visibly idle in the streets, or queues seeking work outside factory gates, or pinched, half-starved faces waiting outside the labour exchanges [...] became a standard currency of description.’<sup>37</sup>

Similar images were felt to typify the region at different points in the later twentieth century, albeit with varying emphases; one common factor was the sex of those represented. Women are virtually excluded from such images; where they are shown, they are invariably presented as suffering as a result of their dependence on male work, and therefore as victims of male unemployment’s impact upon the domestic sphere. In tandem with being forced to inhabit a

negative cultural space, often women's physical worlds in the North East were circumscribed too. Whereas the region's men inhabited a world with 'clearly defined' boundaries 'within distinctive locations – the factory, the shipyard, the pit and the pub', women's daily lives did not correspond with this topography, but rather existed within a 'domain' of 'streets and backlanes'.<sup>38</sup> Women's activities were seen as existing *in response* to the world and actions of the region's men. While 'entry into manhood' was inextricably linked to hard, physical labour and its 'highly physical, even sexual overtones', the respectability of North East women was seen as rooted in qualities of 'self-sacrifice, forbearance and self-denial', typified in the 'dinner on the table' ethic'.<sup>39</sup>

Dave Russell suggests that one of the reasons why such gender stereotypes have persisted in northern culture is to do with the transference of such a masculine/feminine dichotomy onto representations of north/south binary oppositions, insofar as 'the North has generally been coded as masculine (albeit in a more complex way than might be assumed) and set against a more effeminate South', rooted in the fact that '[t]he region is often perceived as, and in reality has been, a site of much hard, demanding physical labour with one of its emblematic occupations, coal-mining, exclusively male from the 1840s.' This is not to deny the reality that women at points participated in such work, but rather to acknowledge the way that the idea of 'the male bread-winner norm has been assumed from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century'.<sup>40</sup>

Russell identifies the impact of such entrenched views upon representations of northern women, which have 'tended to be closely associated with particular northern attributes such as the generic 'homeliness' and the

phlegmatic quality and lack of ‘fuss’.’ Although he acknowledges that there exist examples of ‘a far more radical representation’ which positions the North as ‘the key site for England’s ‘strong’ women, again both real and fictional’, Russell notes how ‘[t]he north-east, with its very different occupational structure, has certainly produced fewer fictional characters of this type, at least until recently.’<sup>41</sup> The difference of which he writes is the way in which work in the North East has been particularly androcentric across all major industrial employers, in contrast with other northern urban areas where women did comprise significant parts of the workforce, for instance in the textile and pottery industries. In reality, of course, the contribution made to the economic life of the North East by women workers is much more substantial than generally acknowledged, particularly in industries such as fishing and the aforementioned factory work, and the second world war of course saw many jobs which had been previously exclusively male being performed by women. Nevertheless, such codification of the North East as a predominantly masculine realm has remained deeply rooted in images of the region, and for the most part is reflected in, and bolstered by, such representations in North-East children’s fiction.

### *North-East children’s novels: gender*

The vast majority of North-East children’s novels are focalised through central male characters, and feature their attempts to engage with male adulthood in the region. Many involve experiences which centre around physical prowess, including induction into the world of heavy industrial labour; even those novels which feature characters who reject such traditional male perspectives on the region, such as Frederick Grice’s *The Bonny Pit Laddie* (1960), Aidan



Chambers's *Marle* (1968), or Richard Milward's *Apples* (2007), for example, still underline the fact that such characters are reacting against the grain of what is considered typical of the region, and draw their narrative tension largely from the conflict between such characters and the mainstream, stereotypically masculine culture against which they rebel. Such tensions can be seen in Robert Westall's fiction, where patriarchal forces shape the lives of both North-Eastern boys and girls, both of whom are shown striving to negotiate their place within such an androcentric tradition; in Chapter 7, I explore Westall's presentation of gender in the region. David Almond's novels too are, for the most part, focalised through male protagonists, though they invariably feature strong female characters who are at least as integral to central events; Almond's treatment of gender is explored in Chapter 10.

In much of North-East children's fiction, women characters conform to those characteristics of homeliness and simplicity identified by Russell, alongside fulfilling maternal roles. For the most part, the women featured in such novels are mothers, grandmothers or other figures related to the domestic sphere, and their contributions are limited to providing meals (see Elaine Knox's comments on the 'dinner on the table' ethic', cited above), looking after the child characters in between adventures, and reinforcing the importance of the family unit as being at the heart of the North-East community; this is certainly true in Richard Armstrong's *Sabotage at the Forge* (1946), for example, where the sole female character, Thias's mother, only appears once, to rouse the boy from his bed and cook his breakfast.<sup>42</sup> Such representations draw upon established images of a North-East matriarchy underpinning social life in the region, and reinforce Knox's comments on images of forbearance and self-denial

as typifying the character of North-East women. Catherine Cookson's novels often feature the 'strong' women' that Russell claims appear so infrequently in North-East fiction, such as Miss Peamarsh in *Our John Willie* (1974) or Granny Flannagan in *Mrs Flannagan's Trumpet* (1976); nevertheless, Cookson's female characters always remain unambiguously domestic, and their contributions to the central characters' experiences are usually as a civilising, nurturing influence.

Some North-East children's novels do challenge dominant gender images, and attempt to construct alternative narratives of gender in the region. Jane Gardam's *A Long Way from Verona* (1971) and *Bilgewater* (1976) both feature unconventional adolescent girls as central characters, living in the North East. *A Long Way from Verona* is narrated by thirteen year-old Jessica Vye, a precocious young girl attending school in Cleveland Spa, Teesside where her father has been assigned to work as a curate. Jessica is informed by a visiting author that she is 'A WRITER BEYOND ALL POSSIBLE DOUBT' (emphasis in original), and the novel comprises her experiences as she comes to fulfil this proclamation.<sup>43</sup> *Bilgewater* recounts the experiences of adolescent Marigold Daisy Green, known by the nickname 'Bilgewater' (a corruption of the phrase 'Bill's Daughter', but also aptly descriptive of her own lack of self-esteem), between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, and in particular her preparations for interview at Cambridge University. Both novels explore adolescent girls' perspectives on growing up in the North East, and both feature girls who are, in a sense, caught between cultures: Jessica Vye's family have moved into the region, at 'the other side of England – "in the vilest part of it", according to mother', and although she attends the comprehensive school, her friends are all resolutely middle-class and mostly incomers also; *Bilgewater's* home life at her father's

boarding school ensures that her social circle is dominated by academic figures from her father's world, and a large part of her story concerns her attempts to live up to the memory of her late mother's middle-class credentials.<sup>44</sup> Gardam is concerned to portray sensitively the experience of growing up middle-class in Teesside, and the challenges faced by such girls, at once disdainful of the over-indulged nouveau riche such as the Fanshawe-Smithe and Rose families described as 'like something out of the Girl's Own P', at the same time distanced from the "men at the works" or shopping ladies' who 'made cracks among themselves in loud hard Teesside voices.'<sup>45</sup> In both novels, the narrators do to some extent offer different views of North-East femininity than is found in most children's novels of the region, particularly in the way that they foreground narrative voices that are female and middle-class, both perspectives that are mostly effaced within dominant versions of the region. Nevertheless, both lead characters either begin or end up as outsiders, and both are novels of escape, for Bilgewater into the Cambridge world of academia from which she does not return to the North East, and for Jessica Vye into a literary future perhaps. In *Bilgewater*, the narrator is at one point happy to adopt the maternal role left in the absence of the family matron, deriving great satisfaction from attending to the medical needs of the boys in her care, aligning her more closely with the traditional gender stereotyping common in North-East children's novels.

Though both *A Long Way from Verona* and *Bilgewater* do present a variety of perspectives on girlhood, and both are set in the North East, their subject matter is not really North-East girlhood, as both central characters do not affiliate with the region and neither do their families. Though certainly two of the most sophisticated and nuanced North-East novels, these novels do little to

expand representations of North-East gender. Indeed, the representations of local women they contain, though admittedly presented through focalizing voices which are clearly marked as unreliable, largely affirm existing entrenched images of North-East women. The fact that the narrative voices so overtly distance the implied narrator from the experience of such locals, is further evidence that these are not really stories of North-East girlhood.

Jill Paton Walsh's *Grace* (1991) conforms to many of the typical features of the dominant aesthetic, in terms of constructing the landscape of the region as concurrently wildly dangerous, yet ruggedly beautiful, and associated with the presence of St Cuthbert; focusing on the region's nineteenth-century heritage; and foregrounding work and social class. The novel is a fictionalisation of the life of Grace Darling, the nineteenth-century Northumbrian lighthouse-keeper's daughter who famously rowed out with her father to attend a shipwreck in 1838 and played a major part in the rescue operation. Paton Walsh's novel focuses on the way that Darling's new-found fame and notoriety might have been received by the community around her, in particular by those men whose job it was to attend such maritime disasters, and who in this case arrived too late and therefore missed out on the financial reward that was earned for each rescue. In *Grace*, the resentment exhibited towards Darling is particularly acute because she is a woman, whose actions therefore undermine ideas of masculine, physical labour as prevailing over all. *Grace* can be read as an attempt to redress the centrality of such biased images, by narrating a nineteenth-century tale of hardship overcome as a result of hard physical labour by a North-East woman rather than a man. The novel certainly has polemical intent, seeking to expose the unwritten story behind Grace Darling's achievements; the novel is narrated by Darling herself,

and voices her reaction to the events which befall her. Ultimately, the novel shores up long-standing images of Grace Darling, reified as an embodiment of both homely domesticity, and resilience in the face of dire challenge, and seemingly encompassing both Dave Russell's traditional and more radical representations of northern women. In *Grace*, as in other recountings of the Grace Darling myth, the physical act of bravery undertaken by this young North-East woman is set against her humility and domesticity, simultaneously further emphasising the feat she perform yet defusing its potentially more radical consequences. In this way the dominant aesthetic, with its focus on male resilience in the face of adversity, embraces the story of Grace Darling, celebrating her as an exceptional North-East woman, who nevertheless retained her 'dinner on the table' ethic'.<sup>46</sup> *Grace* inadvertently colludes in this process.

Traditional images of North-East masculinity are challenged in Paul Magrs's *Strange Boy* (2002). The narrator is a ten year-old boy, David, who lives in Newton Aycliffe, in County Durham. In the novel's opening chapter, David reveals details of a brief sexual encounter he has had with another local boy, and also the fact that he claims and believes himself to have super powers, both of which comprise the qualities that mark him out as the strange boy of the novel's title.

Much of the novel concerns David's attempts to understand and explore his developing masculinity, and possible homosexuality, in the context of the 1980s' urban North East. David's superhero fantasy can be read as a proxy assertion of his physical prowess, in the face of a culture which ascribes central importance to such characteristics in defining masculinity. Uninterested in football and girls, David finds himself drawn to the feminine, matriarchal world

of his mother, grandmothers and friends, where ‘[a]ll these women told me stories.’<sup>47</sup> Magrs’s novel does offer a different perspective on gender and North-East childhood, focalised through the voice of a boy whose emerging masculinity is at odds with dominant images of North-East maleness. However, even though the novel’s title ironically points up the actual normality of David’s experience, from his perspective, and the novel sensitively portrays the tension between dominant and alternative images of masculinity, it remains central that David differs from the mainstream North-East culture in which he grows up. *Strange Boy* explores how monolithic versions of masculinity, circulating as part of an entrenched aesthetic, belie the diversity of masculinities open to boys growing up in the North East. In its more nuanced treatment of gender in the region, this novel is more akin to the work of David Almond, and demonstrates a tendency in contemporary North-East children’s novels to challenge and expand the dominant aesthetic, albeit to a precise and limited extent.

### **Language**

Language is central to the cultural identity of any community, and particularly so where such a community perceives itself (or is perceived by others) as inhabiting a peripheral cultural space in relation to the centralised norm. Given that a sense of regional identity can be seen as arising, at least in part, as an assertion of an *alternative* centre for one’s sense of identity, it is no surprise that the language used in articulating such identities comes under close scrutiny. Both from without and within, the North East is perceived as a region closely linked to the language spoken here. One of the most distinctive aspects of the region for the

visiting outsider (or returning native) is the recognisable North East accent and dialect. Though, of course, both the accents and dialects spoken in the region are manifold and varied, with clear contrasts between those spoken in the northern border areas of the region compared to, say, rural south Northumberland, nevertheless there exists also unity in this division. While varieties may exist, they are generally accepted by their adherents as being related to each other as regional variations on the national tongue. Language is worn here as a badge of affiliation, an audible outward expression of belonging to a particular social and geographical group, with shared attitudes and beliefs. Westall makes this clear in *The Wind Eye*, where outsider Bertrand is alienated from the local fishermen linguistically as much as socially or geographically, as their marked dialect speech illustrates the close affinity felt between those men born in the local community.<sup>48</sup>

Benedict Anderson suggests that language is central to how the nation-state comes into being; indeed, it is the boundaries imposed by language that, in part, create the conditions within which the nation is imaginable. At work here is a balance between the *particular* form of language that serves to differentiate its user from other users, giving rise to a distinct identity, and the degree to which such a language variant can obtain a more *universal* currency within the emerging community. Anderson links the growth of communal identities to the spread of print-capitalism, which allowed readers to imagine themselves as members of a wider group which was defined, in part, by its shared language. Crucial here is the way that language both differentiates and affiliates its users from/with each other; it is both exclusive and inclusive. In relation to North-East regional identity, such mediation becomes even more important, as regional

dialect serves to differentiate from standardised forms of English. Again, of importance is the way in which a foundational aspect of regional identity mediates between the particular and the universal, the individual and the collective. A writer who reflects this is Kathleen Hersom, whose fiction is mainly set in County Durham and nearby Weardale. In a short semi-autobiographical piece, Hersom explores the way that language can be divisive, employed as a further means of designating the North-East child an outsider status. At one point, shortly after leaving the North East and moving to southern Croydon, the narrator is made to read aloud in class.

‘The old woman was hobbling up the (parth),’ and  
I whispered the funny word, because it sounded so silly.  
‘Speak up!’ said Miss Mitchell. So I did.  
‘Till she came to the castle...’ I went on, rather  
loudly.  
‘Carstle,’ corrected Miss Mitchell, and she sighed  
as though she was being very brave about something.<sup>49</sup>

The language of a community is seen here as central to its conception of itself as a unified whole. The community simultaneously owns and belongs to its language. Benedict Anderson traces the eighteenth-century ‘lexicographic revolution in Europe’ with its attendant ‘conviction that languages [...] were, so to speak, the personal property of quite specific groups [...] and moreover that these groups, imagined as communities, were entitled to their autonomous place in a fraternity of equals.’<sup>50</sup> He is keen to stress two points: firstly, social class was also a determiner in shaping these affiliations; it was primarily the bourgeoisie that was most literate, and therefore had most immediate access to common printed language. Nevertheless, though shaped along class lines, it was access to language which above all defined the boundaries of nations; as Anderson puts it, ‘one can sleep with anyone, but one can only read some



people's words.'<sup>51</sup> Secondly, the relationship between a particular language and the community within which it circulates is essentially arbitrary; what is most important is the propensity for the language (any language) to build '*particular solidarities*' and therefore generate imagined communities.<sup>52</sup>

The language of the North East region has been shaped by a number of historical circumstances, particularly bound up with its location and status as a marginal, border territory.<sup>53</sup> The nature of the region as a zone of political and geographical conflict, itself an arena of mediation between competing national identities, is also manifested in the linguistic character of the North East, which draws upon the languages of those who have at various times invaded, ruled, occupied or simply passed through the region, however temporarily. Of course, being prone to such upheavals and conflicts can also serve to reinforce the need for continuity and stability. Hence the 'frontier spirit' of the region, articulated as an essential element in its character.

Robert Colls sees the emergence of a distinctive and distinguishing North East dialect at the turn of the twentieth century as being related to the industrial growth of the region, and the resultant foregrounding of working-class culture. In common with Anderson, he acknowledges that the dialect is potentially accessible to all; significantly, Colls points out that the rise of dialect bestowed agency upon its working-class users, who became, in a sense, guardians to the culture of the region. Language becomes a point of access, which is inflected by the particular social culture from which it arises.

The emergence of the dialect as a regional badge served to consolidate the working class claim. Certainly, the written dialect was as contrived a device as the People who were supposed to speak it. Both were a performance, but what is crucial here is that if the dialect was construed as regional and open to all, its true guardians were the

working class. The Trade may have been presented as a community of interests, the People as a community of history, and the dialect as a community of speech, but in each case it was the other classes who were invited to join the workers – even if only for ‘a try’ – and not the other way round. [...] <sup>54</sup>

Importantly, the written form of this dialect is acknowledged as being contrived, along with the construction of the very people who were imagined as speaking it. Despite both being a ‘performance’, there still emerged a sense that the supposed identity of the region was to be found, in part, in its language. The relationship between the two remains central, to the extent that Colls goes on to declare that even today ‘a middle-class Geordie sounds wrong.’ <sup>55</sup> Of course, such attitudes to language are likely to be reflected in children’s books. In particular, if people from the region are depicted (no matter how contrived this may be) as speaking in a characteristic way, indeed as having to speak a particular dialect and/or accent in order to belong truly to the region, then it follows that the link between regional language and regional identity becomes further embedded in popular consciousness. For the child reader, dialect comes to characterise the voice of the North-East insider. In Catherine Cookson’s children’s novels, for example, the community of working-class men and women at the heart of the region’s identity are always represented speaking in North-East dialect. The same is true in the work of Richard Armstrong and Frederick Grice, for example. Robert Westall follows suit, to some extent, and certainly David Almond is keen to celebrate the richness of North-East dialect, and has spoken of his desire to illustrate the artistic richness of the North-East voice, and its aptness for engaging with intellectually demanding subject matter.

The representation of dialect within a literary work raises questions for the writer, not least of which being those surrounding the motivation for doing so. The child reader must make decisions about the relationship between the speaker and their speech; the use of dialect codifies the experiences that are described by the character, which must consequently be decoded by others, including the reader. Of course, this is true of all language, but in employing dialect in characters' speech, the writer foregrounds the particularity of their expression, and therefore means of articulating the world. The situation is further problematised by the relationship between the writer and the dialect they portray, raising again questions of agency and affiliation; there is a difference, surely, between a language variety as represented from the *inside*, so to speak, compared to a recounting based on observation from the *outside*, especially if the language of the North East is to be seen as a distillation of the essence of the region. Tom Hadaway discusses and confronts some of these questions.

A language within a language, dialect is the community short-hand. Not itself necessarily comic, though it may seem so to the outsider, what it mainly allows is spontaneity; direct, forceful and expressive.<sup>56</sup>

Hadaway is here considering the way in which the portrayal of dialect makes it strange, often for comic effect. His view is essentialist, drawing upon the idea that the dialect of the region is linked to its very nature, reflecting historical and social roots. North East dialect 'best prospers in the soil to which it is native'; it contains traces of the time when 'something desolate and in the mood of hailstones made our Viking forbears smile as they enjoyed rowing something not much larger than a fish box over the North Sea', reflected in the remnants of 'their vowels, sullen as thunder.'<sup>57</sup> This link with the past, so central to the identity of the North East, resonates through the region's language as well.

Rooted in a shared history, this language unites its users, and in turn identifies them with the region's imagined working-class foundations; as Hadaway puts it 'dialect is the enabling power of the commoner.'<sup>58</sup> Of course, what unites one group can also serve to divide them from others, and even though all languages may be potentially accessible to all, dialect can become a method of demarcation which defines those within a culture and consequently those without.

Dialect is used to differing ends in different texts but a common usage identified by Hadaway is one whereby the use of dialect and non-standard language forms is intended, of itself, to create comic effect. This links to other ways in which the region is seen as strange or unusual, in relation to a perceived norm, and therefore a subject of amusement or entertainment. Cultural centrality is, of course, served well by ideas of linguistic standardisation, with standard English originating from and remaining more closely allied to dialect forms of the South East of England than the North East. This is not to suggest that such comic representations of the region's language are employed as part of a schematic attempt by those outside the region to render it as comical, quaint and consequently disempowered, though such motivations may exist.

The comic dimension can also be emphasised as a means of suggesting something about the essential nature of the region, as shared by those who belong here. Though there is clearly irony in a description such as the following, attributed to an elderly woman overheard on Wallsend high street in Tyneside, there is also an underlying assertion of the primacy of dialect, bestowing timeless, transcendent wisdom on its native users.

Her wry, discerning and withering irony [...] is available to her through instinct and dialect, and is a sure indication of the genius in nature that flourishes exuberant and

humorous in those who have not been educated out of their minds. She is the robust and eternal. Before Bede, before Dr Johnson and his first English dictionary, she was here, rich, commanding and revelatory, and she will be around speaking in her splendid terms when their pages have yellowed. For it is the strength and endurance of dialect that it is regenerative and innovatory, fulfilling the need of humanity for a voice in an ever-changing world.<sup>59</sup>

Dialect here is imbued with instinctual, almost mystical powers. Hadaway goes on to suggest it embodies the very struggle between the identity of the region and those who would seek to denigrate it; it is ‘always and forever about defiance’, and constitutes a ‘sacred grove wherein imagination fruits’, central to the ‘bringing together of the tribe.’<sup>60</sup> Such claims, poetically expressed, are indicative of the centrality of language to images of the region. Certainly, dialect in North-East children’s fiction often functions to indicate a tribal affiliation, always linked to working-class identity.

Scot James Kelman has written extensively about the experience of encountering, and representing, non-standard varieties of English within literature. He also makes the crucial link between language and class, as he explores the representation of marginalised groups within the fiction he read whilst at school. Kelman comments on the expectation placed upon him as a child reader to identify with the pupils represented in literary school stories, despite the fact that he never came into contact with boys from his own background between the covers of the books he read. Whilst acknowledging that there were Scottish characters to be found there, these never corresponded with the reality of people from the community within which he grew up. For Kelman, these boy characters could all be lumped together as functioning in a similar manner, as a kind of colonial cipher.

I'm not talking about Scottish kids in general I'm talking about Scottish working-class kids in general because it was possible to meet a scholarship boy or a boy from a colonial background, whether from Scotland or India or someplace. I cannot remember any African or Chinese boys making an entrance but perhaps it was possible, perhaps it did happen. These colonial boys would all be youthful aristocrats anyhow, back in their own country, even if they wore kilts, loin cloths or turbans, or whatever, they would be accepted as lower-rung aristocracy, and kids like Billy Bunter would give them the benefit of the doubt.

The language as spoken by these young colonials always exhibited idiosyncratic mannerisms that were quite funny. They were exotic creatures and never made it as heroes in their own right.<sup>61</sup>

The place of such characters within the text is purely perfunctory, as foils to the protagonists against which their exoticism was drawn. There are similarities here with the contrived use of dialect as explored above. Kelman draws clear parallels between the working-class Scottish experience and that of other groups subjugated by the colonial enterprise, and for Kelman the influence of this can be felt most strongly in the realm of language. One of the most marked ways in which such exoticism or otherness is rendered on the page is through what Kelman terms 'the apparent attempt at phonetic transcription', which bears no relation to any authentic attempt to represent non-standard language with accuracy.<sup>62</sup> Rather, the function of such language within the text is to mark out the strangeness and subservience of those who speak in such a way; in other words, non-standard language equals non-standard character. The distance between centre and periphery is mapped not just in geographical terms but through language and social class; all three are bound together, so that the movement from metropole to province is analogous with a descent into the lower social, and hence linguistic, realms. An 'underling' can originate from anywhere

outside the centre, as long as 'he is working-class, speaks funny and assimilates to the values of the ruling class'.<sup>63</sup>

Kelman's response to what he perceived as insidious, centralist linguistic domination was to take ownership of the language he used, and through this bring those silenced voices and experiences into being within his fiction. Kelman strives to centre his work in the community around him; for him, any division between art and society is unthinkable. Theories of art which distance the work from its social origins are seen as an attempt to further deny the validity of such sections of society. He seeks to represent this hidden culture as valid in its own right, with an intrinsic value which is not dependent on its relation to the dominant centre.

Such considerations of the relationship between art and community life also impact upon the critic's response, which is framed within a different cultural network than that which pertains directly to the art produced; such a network is, in Kelman's opinion, representative of the interests of a centralist elite.

Kelman's response to this was to use his insider position to give voice to the language of this un-represented group, thereby dispelling the muteness imposed from the centre. In order to do so, he found himself challenging literary conventions and searching for appropriate models, having to write against unwritten rules, so to speak. He draws attention to what he perceives as a kind of surreptitious censorship administered from the centre through received wisdom, which operates as a kind of hegemony within the literary-artistic world.

Yes, they say, go and write a story, whatever story you want, but do not use whatever language is necessary. Go and write any story at all, providing of course you stay within the bounds, not the bounds of decency or propriety or anything tangible; because that is not the way it works.

Nobody issues such instructions. It is all carried out by a series of nudges and winks and tacit agreements. What it amounts to is: go and write a story about a bunch of guys who stand talking in a pub all day but if you have them talking then do not have them talking the language they talk.

Pardon?

Write a story wherein people are talking, but not talking the language they talk.

Oh.<sup>64</sup>

The impossibility of such demands is due to the fact that language is not merely a minor feature of people's behaviour, but rather part of the very fabric of their identity. It is curious to note how much of North-East children's fiction avoids this key issue; although characters may use North-East dialect, it is often in a sanitised form, presumably in response to concerns over intelligibility of the prose for readers from outside the region. In Westall's case, as explored in the following chapters, this extends to the fact that his central child characters rarely have marked dialect voices, even when their families often do. A difference can be seen in David Almond's fiction, considered in Chapters 8 to 11, which foregrounds the idea that language itself shapes thought and identity. In *Clay* (2007) for example, the word 'nowt' encapsulates narrator Davie's grappling with existential concerns; Almond speaks of consciously 'using 'Being and Nowtness' [as] a very serious thing, saying, 'This language, which is marginalised and often being looked down on, actually contains huge poetry and huge power, if it's used in the right way.'<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Knox, "'Keep your feet still, Geordie hinnie": Women and work on Tyneside', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 93-114 (pp. 93-94).

<sup>2</sup> Knox, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Lancaster, 'Newcastle – capital of what?', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 53-70, (pp. 64-66).

<sup>4</sup> Lancaster, p. 66.



- <sup>5</sup> Richard Armstrong, *Sabotage at the Forge* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1946; Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1960), pp. 9-10.
- <sup>6</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, pp. 19-20.
- <sup>8</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, p. 38; pp. 51-52.
- <sup>9</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, p. 64.
- <sup>10</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, pp. 40-41.
- <sup>11</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, p. 64; p. 149.
- <sup>12</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge* p. 112; p. 144.
- <sup>13</sup> Frederick Grice, *The Bonny Pit Laddie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960; Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1980), pp. 23-24.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Bonny Pit Laddie*, p. 178.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Bonny Pit Laddie*, p. 78; p. 189.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Bonny Pit Laddie*, p. 181.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Bonny Pit Laddie*, p. 78; title page.
- <sup>18</sup> Frederick Grice, *The Courage of Andy Robson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1982), p. 18; p. 56.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Courage of Andy Robson*, p. 126.
- <sup>20</sup> Graeme J. Milne, 'Business Regionalism: Defining and Owning the Industrial North East, 1850-1914', in Green and Pollard, pp. 113-132 (p. 113).
- <sup>21</sup> Peter Dickinson, (1975), *Letter to Dr Griffin of NCB, 17th November 1975*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Peter Dickinson MSS, PD/01/11/05/08, flr.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Dickinson, *Annerton Pit* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977; Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1979), p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup> *Annerton Pit*, p. 37; p. 40.
- <sup>24</sup> *Annerton Pit*, pp. 165-166.
- <sup>25</sup> Subsequent references to *Billy Elliot* refer to Burgess's novelisation which, published by Chicken House Books, is aimed specifically at a young audience.
- <sup>26</sup> Melvin Burgess, *Billy Elliot* (Frome: The Chicken House, 2001), p. 100.
- <sup>27</sup> *Billy Elliot*, pp. 146-147.
- <sup>28</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 141.
- <sup>29</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 133.
- <sup>30</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 16.
- <sup>31</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 147; Richard T Kelly relates how original screenwriter Lee Hall 'claimed inspiration in a comment of Arthur Scargill's that works of "music, poetry, writing, sculpture" were lying "dormant" in working people because of the grind of their lives.'; see Kelly, p. 65.
- <sup>32</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 49.
- <sup>33</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 128.
- <sup>34</sup> *Billy Elliot*, p. 62.
- <sup>35</sup> Elaine Knox, "'Keep your feet still, Geordie hinnie": Women and work on Tyneside', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 93-114 (pp. 94-95).
- <sup>36</sup> Colls, p. 23.
- <sup>37</sup> Knox, p. 97.
- <sup>38</sup> Knox, pp. 97-98.
- <sup>39</sup> Knox, pp. 103-106.
- <sup>40</sup> Russell, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>41</sup> Russell, p. 39.
- <sup>42</sup> *Sabotage at the Forge*, p. 59.
- <sup>43</sup> Jane Gardam, *A Long Way from Verona* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971; Abacus, 1994), p. 14.
- <sup>44</sup> *A Long Way from Verona*, p. 13.
- <sup>45</sup> *A Long Way from Verona*, p. 108; Jane Gardam, *Bilgewater* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976; Abacus, 1995), p. 113.

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<sup>46</sup> Knox, p. 106.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Magrs, *Strange Boy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2002; 2003), p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Westall, *The Wind Eye* (London: Macmillan, 1976; Catnip, 2007), p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> Kathleen Hersom, (c. 1986) *Unpublished fragment*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Kathleen Hersom MSS, (uncatalogued at time of writing).

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, p. 84.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, pp. 133-134.

<sup>53</sup> This has not always been the case; indeed, Anglo-Saxon Northumbria was a fully-fledged kingdom, which itself exerted a form of cultural hegemony, before being overthrown by invading Danes. Interestingly, such centralised positions barely figure in the story of the North East in popular circulation; what is emphasised is the region's peripheral location, which of course presupposes a centre elsewhere. As explored earlier, the fact that present day notions of the region arise from specific historical events, in other words that the North East as it is now known at one point came into being, must be elided, disputing as it does the current identity of the region as timeless and eternal.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Colls, 'Born-again Geordies', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 1-34 (pp. 22-23).

<sup>55</sup> Colls, p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Hadaway, 'Comic Dialect', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 85-92 (p. 85).

<sup>57</sup> Hadaway, p. 86.

<sup>58</sup> Hadaway, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> Hadaway, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> Hadaway, pp. 89-91.

<sup>61</sup> James Kelman, "*And the judges said...*": *Essays*, (London: Secker & Warburg 2002, Vintage 2003), pp. 57-58.

<sup>62</sup> Kelman, p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Kelman, pp. 60-61.

<sup>64</sup> Kelman, pp. 64-65.

<sup>65</sup> David Almond, *Personal Interview with Nolan Dalrymple* (see Appendix).

## Chapter 4: Westall's Landscape Part 1

### **Robert Westall**

Robert Westall (1929-93) was a prolific writer of fiction for children and young adults, publishing forty-eight books (some posthumously). Born in North Shields, Westall attended school in Tynemouth, and studied for his undergraduate degree in Fine Art at King's College, Durham (then located in Newcastle upon Tyne). Following this, he left the region to pursue postgraduate study at the Slade School in London, before taking employment in teaching positions in Birmingham, Yorkshire and Cheshire; in other words, after spending his childhood in the North East, Westall left the region and never returned permanently as an adult. In 1978, Westall tragically lost his eighteen year-old son Christopher in a motorcycle accident, an event which had a profound effect for him personally and professionally: he describes his most successful work, *The Machine Gunners*, as one of 'the Christopher books', and maintained that the book which propelled him to literary fame was written solely for his son.<sup>1</sup>

Westall considered his fiction divided into two camps, 'the naturalistic-comic and the 'spooky'', and he achieved both critical and commercial success with both types.<sup>2</sup> In 1975, his debut novel *The Machine Gunners* was awarded the Carnegie Medal for an outstanding children's book; this was repeated in 1982 with *The Scarecrows*, with Westall the first author to receive the accolade twice. *The Kingdom by the Sea* was also critically acclaimed, winning the Guardian Children's Fiction Award in 1990, while *A Time of Fire* gained Westall a further

Carnegie nomination. Of all his fiction, Westall himself said of *The Wind Eye* that '[i]n spite of all this fuss about 'The Machine-Gunners' I think it's the best book I have written.'<sup>3</sup>

Westall's fiction is best known for those texts set in the North East. The main body of this work comprises ten novels set around the Tyne estuary: *The Machine Gunners* (1975), *The Watch House* (1977), *Fathom Five* (1979), *The Kingdom by the Sea* (1990), *The Promise* (1990), *The Christmas Cat* (1991), *The Christmas Ghost* (1992), *Falling into Glory* (1993), *A Time of Fire* (1994) and *The Night Mare* (1995). Alongside *The Wind Eye* (1976), which features a Northumbrian setting, the books vary in terms of theme, genre and date of publication/composition; nevertheless, they form a coherent body of work. For instance, several are set during the Second World War, and *Falling into Glory* is set just after in post-war 1950. These texts constitute a representative cross-section of Westall's work, featuring both his social-realist and supernaturally-themed fiction. Westall's war fiction makes up the most widely read portion of his output - though his supernatural fiction is also critically and commercially successful - not least because *The Machine Gunners*, *The Kingdom by the Sea* and, to a lesser extent, *Fathom Five* appear on many U.K. secondary school reading lists.

Many of these texts are important critically as well. *The Machine Gunners* was Westall's first published novel, and was considered controversial, particularly as regards the language it contained and Westall's uncompromisingly realistic portrayal of children's experiences of war. Valerie Bierman, writing in *The Scotsman* in 1990, recalled how '[s]hock waves reverberated around the children's book world which decried the book for being

everything a Carnegie winner should not be in terms of violence, language and plot'; she credits Westall's debut novel with ensuring that '[a]t last the cosy world of ponies and jolly adventures was shattered forever [...]'.<sup>4</sup> Critic Ann Thwaite similarly draws attention to its controversial nature in her review of the sequel, *Fathom Five*:

Robert Westall's first book, *The Machine Gunners*, attracted a lot of attention when it was published in 1975, and not only for literary and historical reasons. It won the Carnegie medal but still causes problems to many librarians and teachers. A Welsh librarian recently recalled that he had asked a group of teachers to read it for a seminar. Had they all enjoyed it? Yes. Did they think their pupils would enjoy it? Yes. Would they be using it in school? No, unanimously no.<sup>5</sup>

Thwaite goes on to note how *Fathom Five* may also achieve notoriety as 'the first book published in a children's list to mention syphilis.'<sup>6</sup> Despite such controversy, *The Machine Gunners* has remained very successful, never going out of print since its first edition.

What unites all of these texts is location. Many take as their primary setting the area surrounding the mouth of the river Tyne, the location of Robert Westall's own childhood, and all feature settings closely linked to the North Sea. Although Westall fictionalised the Tyne as the river Gar (and hence Tynemouth becomes Garmouth) in *The Machine Gunners*, *Fathom Five*, and *The Watch House*, he explicitly stated that he 'modelled the behaviour of the River Gar [...] on that of the River Tyne', and that 'much of this book is autobiographical'; details of Garmouth coincide so closely with elements of both North Shields and Tynemouth as to make the parallels unmistakable.<sup>7</sup> Within Garmouth, Westall conflates Tynemouth and North Shields, drawing on characteristics of both areas as desired.<sup>8</sup> The image of the North East presented in Westall's fiction is one

linked intrinsically to the North Sea and its tributary rivers; the childhoods depicted are urban and coastal.

### **Urban social landscape**

#### *Homes and gardens*

Many of these novels open in or near the central character's family home, a place almost uniformly presented as working-class, traditional and respectable. At the start of *The Machine Gunners*, twelve-year-old Chas McGill awakens in the family's air-raid shelter, and makes his way indoors to where his parents are in the kitchen. Here he finds his mother frying bread over a paraffin-heater, while his father sits drinking a pint mug of tea. Panes of glass in the window have been destroyed by the recent air raid, and Chas's father has repaired this damage using cardboard salvaged from a Nestle's milk box, which he has been careful to fit in place with the writing the right way up. This home is organised, well-run, and resilient to the hardship with which it is surrounded. Though there is no privilege in the McGill household, there is certainly respectability and cleanliness. This type of home regularly features in Westall's fiction, resurfacing again and again at the centre of his child characters' worlds. This working-class home, infused with standards of decency and hard work and lacking in frivolity and ornament, can be seen as a topos of Westall's North-East settings, standing as it does at the centre of the child's world he presents. This typical home is the kind against which other homes and places are judged; initially these homes represent safety and security to the children in Westall's North-East fiction, though ultimately, it is from homes such as Chas's that his child characters will attempt to escape,

with varying degrees of success. Each of these fictional homes has shaped and grounded the child character who lives there, but in the course of each novel these characters are shown to have outgrown them; often this development functions symbolically to represent what Westall perceives as limiting elements of the region itself. A pervasive sense of entrapment and escape becomes more prominent in the later texts within this group.

In *The Watch House*, the young protagonist, Anne, finds herself estranged from her London home and family as a result of her parents' marital difficulties, so stays in Garmouth for the summer with her mother's former Nanny, Prudie. The house in which Prudie lives with her brother, Arthur, becomes a kind of surrogate home for Anne, one which compensates for those elements of her life that have been neglected at her real home. Although much of the novel's action originates in the eponymous Watch House coastguard station, home is next door in Brigade Cottage.

The living room of Brigade Cottage was small as a ship's cabin. An oil-lamp hung from the ceiling. There was a roaring fire in spite of the heat of the day, set around with brass ornaments that shone like silver. And on the oil-cloth of the table, plates of scones and tarts and egg-custards giving off a symphony of glorious smells.

'You'll stay...?' asked Prudie.<sup>9</sup>

This living room is linked to a cabin of a working ship, which emphasises the proximity to the coast and how all life in Garmouth is infused with the sea. It is also proudly maintained and displayed for the sake of the visitors, not least in the amount of effort required to produce such baking and to polish the brass.

Cleanliness, polishing, and generally 'keeping up appearances' are all central to the image of the working-class home in Westall's writing. In *Falling into Glory*, for instance, protagonist Robbie describes being driven home from his

girlfriend's house in a more affluent area; although her father is unimpressed, he 'could see it wasn't a slum; all our door knockers are polished every day, and the privet hedges are cut regularly.'<sup>10</sup> There are echoes here of the fiercely held pride described by photographer Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen in her 1983 book *Byker*. When asking a disapproving woman directions to a neighbour's door, she received the reply, 'Ye cannit miss it pet, it's the ownly dorty step in the street.'<sup>11</sup> In such working-class homes, standards are maintained, with appearance signalling respectability and self-reliance to the outside world. Such homes can be seen as originating in Westall's own childhood experience, which he described as growing up "[...] in a place of clipped privet hedges, polished door-knockers and front steps holy-stoned each day – a safe, moral, prudish society where nothing was hidden, down to who didn't empty her chamber-pots. *Artisan working-class [...]*".<sup>12</sup>

One such feature linked to self-reliance is the garden. Many of the homes at the centre of these novels have gardens, which function as mini-allotments providing food for the house. Gardens are highly gendered places in Westall's fictional North East. In these functional rather than ornamental spaces, fathers and sons interact, and they also provide a refuge for fathers and other men from the indoor domestic sphere. Gardens, and the produce which is grown in them, support the image of the working-class home as well-tended and self-sufficient. In *The Machine Gunners*, for instance, Chas finds the vegetable patch into which he dives comforting as it 'smelt safe, because they had some in the vegetable rack at home' and its ordinariness is reassuring.<sup>13</sup> He also hides the machine gun in the greenhouse at home, wrapping it up and stowing it within the old disused boiler, and hiding the ammunition in his rabbit hutch. In *A Time of Fire*, Sonny



turns in at his gate, whistling, and walks past the water his dad ‘used for his chrysanthus in his greenhouse’ which again adds to the sense of normality Westall sets up before the ensuing world-changing air-raid.<sup>14</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea* opens with Harry fleeing the family home, with its comforting smells of ‘dad’s sweaty feet, and the fag he had burning in the ashtray’, for the relative safety of the air-raid shelter, running ‘down the long back garden’ and past the rabbits in the greenhouse, through ‘a nice cold smell of dew and cabbages’.<sup>15</sup> As he watches from within the shelter, images of the garden flash back to him in the glare of warfare, and indeed it is the effect on the garden that marks out to him most clearly the destruction and transformation wrought by the effects of war upon his social, urban landscape. When led out of the shelter, he walks across neighbouring gardens easily ‘because all the fences were blown flat’; finally he ‘came to his house slowly, up his garden’ to discover that all his rabbits were dead and his father’s tomato plants ‘bled green, and gave off an overpowering smell’.<sup>16</sup> In *The Promise*, too, the greenhouse where Bob and his father share a moment of male solidarity, with its ‘tomatoes’ sweet healthy smell [...] the smell of normality’, is threatened during an air-raid.<sup>17</sup>

The garden is an extension of the family home into the outdoors; once it becomes clear to Harry in *The Kingdom by the Sea* that the garden has been wrecked and the building he called home has been reduced to a pile of bricks, he realises he must abandon the urban landscape and seek safety and comfort elsewhere, as the town has lost its meaning for him.

He must have wandered round the town all day, in circles.  
Every so often, he would come to himself, and realise he  
was in Rudyerd Street, or Nile street.

But what did Rudyerd Street *mean*? What did Nile  
Street *mean*? Sometimes he thought he would go home,  
and Dulcie would be swinging on the front gate, shouting

rude things at the big boys as they passed, but running to the safety of Mam's kitchen if they made a move to attack her. And Mam would be doing the ironing, or putting the stew in the oven.

But the moment he turned his steps towards home, the truth came back to him; the burning pile of bricks. And he would turn his steps away again.<sup>18</sup>

This is more than a depiction of how a child must cope with the effects of war. In the context of this subset of Westall's fiction it is also a critique of the working-class family home. When Harry has his stable, safe, traditional home torn away from him and so is forced to confront the space left behind, what he discovers is that his former home in fact put limits on his experience of the world. Harry's pilgrimage away from North Shields and up the coast is a journey beyond the boundaries of his former social landscape; as his geographical horizon expands externally, so too does his internal, emotional world. As I explore later, Harry must re-locate himself within the natural landscape of the North East, before he can rejoin the social landscape.

This rejection of the traditional home in favour of elsewhere is also thematically important in *Falling into Glory*. In this text, home is above all else a limited and limiting place for Robbie. He describes his life as a sixth former at Tynemouth High as being like a desert, full one minute with excitement and activity, then empty and dull the next. Such lack of stimulation only serves to reinforce his view of his home as stifling and restrictive.

Then, suddenly, nothing, and you begin to wonder whether, if you don't get away from home soon, nothing will ever happen again; and the very air of your bedroom chokes you because, unlike the bed, it hasn't been changed for months.<sup>19</sup>

Robbie's illicit relationship with his teacher, Emma Harris, alters his horizons further, and he experiences this physically. Again the reader realises this as the social landscape of the home is disrupted by a character's emotional growth.

Robbie comes more and more to view his home as too small for him; an emotional response mirrored by the physical effects of his adolescent physical growth spurts. Emma's intervention in his life germinates his development; he describes how 'she made me grow so big that I didn't fit into anything any more', especially his home.

Home was like a tiny set of prison cells with carpets on the floor and wallpaper on the walls. The smell of my father's feet when he padded around in his socks; Mam's non-stop nagging, even the dog's occasional scratching drove me mad. The highly polished fender, those pictures on the walls – *The Boyhood of Raleigh* and the horse picture, *Mother and Son* – things that I'd loved since I could ever remember, became jailers.<sup>20</sup>

As Robbie's life changes so does his relationship with the landscape around him. Key to this desire for change and growth is the fact that Robbie has passed his eleven-plus exam and therefore attained entry to grammar school, a new landscape which appeals to him as it ushers in a 'new world of oak panelling' which represents a route for Robbie to escape from the confines of his home life.<sup>21</sup> This reflects Westall's own experience of growing away from his home and, to some degree, social class as part of the first post-war generation to experience the social mobility arising from a grammar school education.

“My parents were highly ambitious for me, but they'd made a Frankenstein's monster who then disobeyed by leaving home. I learnt things at grammar school that parents didn't know and didn't *want* to know, and the warmth of a working-class family can turn horribly sour if you break the rules. [...]

I'm a working-class lad with middle-class vices, like watching intelligent movies and collecting antique clocks [...] but that doesn't make me middle-class."<sup>22</sup>

Robbie is preoccupied with escape, and the potential for it to be thwarted; one of his fears as regards fully consummating his physical relationship with Emma concerns the possibility that she might become pregnant, an eventuality which would compromise his escape route of university. This same escape route appeals to Chas McGill in *Fathom Five*, who comes to realise that he must leave the security of his home for university if he is to equip himself with the skills necessary to change the world. Of course, university need not necessarily mean leaving the North East; for Robbie, as for Westall himself however, it does, as he plans to attend university at Leeds.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Industry and class***

The social landscapes of many of Westall's central characters are circumscribed by the two related factors of social class and industry. Residential areas in the towns featured are frequently organised around clearly delineated class boundaries which must be navigated by the young characters. Also, the physical world of the region around the mouth of the Tyne is bounded by evidence of its industrial background. Both of these limiting features are obstacles that the children must overcome, and in a sense they are also traps from which they must escape. For Robbie, meeting with Emma serves the same function of taking him outside of his usual social landscape. She lives in Tennyson Terrace, a street which had previously been off limits to him because of the social status of its inhabitants. Although the iron gates which would once have closed off these

houses from passersby have gone, they are 'still there in spirit' along with the front gardens which are 'an unloved device for keeping the riff-raff at bay.'<sup>24</sup>

Emma's home is different from Robbie's, and it gives him the space to grow and express himself. Nevertheless, he must cross a boundary in order to be in it with her, in more ways than one. Robbie's relationship with Emma moves him into a more adult world, while simultaneously pulling her back into a more youthful one. But this is also a different social world, and Robbie is only able to enter it clumsily at first, signified by the 'cluddering great dirty footmark' he leaves on her doorstep.<sup>25</sup> Clumsiness aside, Robbie does escape, at least for a time, from his stifling home world into the wider sphere which Emma opens for him. In a sense, Emma's home is the first staging post for Robbie's escape from the region.

Because life for Robbie in North Shields is bounded by the town's industrial backdrop, he feels the need to escape from this as well, which is reflected in the way that early in the novel he looks out of a window at school across idyllic scenes of boys playing cricket and girls playing tennis, to the 'big ugly asbestos garage and the disused pit heap of Preston Colliery' beyond.<sup>26</sup> On their first romantic trip together, the two lovers set off north through a landscape of pit villages. Robbie leaves home, where his father is watering his 'chrysanthus' in the greenhouse, and heads into the more natural landscape with Emma. As they travel, they gradually leave behind the 'cinder tracks, rows of outside privies, bright-striped pigeon crees' and head into rural Northumberland.<sup>27</sup>

The dross of pit heaps was left behind; we were new-born, clean out of our everyday lives. Eagerly watching through the brown-edged windscreen for the new gifts that our new-found land presented to us. [...] I wanted only what

this land was giving us. [...] This was our land and we would rule it wisely as king and queen.  
 [...] My body was quite calm; my fumblings with Joyce now seemed beneath contempt; with all the rest of Tyneside's squalor.<sup>28</sup>

I consider such images in detail in the next section, which explores Westall's depiction of the natural landscape. What is significant here is that Robbie's emotional and sexual journey with Emma inscribes a pattern analogous to his journey away from the industrial landscape of North Shields. When they have to return home later in the day, he describes how the 'air smelt of tar and smoke, salt and rust. It was like driving into a hostile country.'<sup>29</sup> As their relationship progresses and builds in intensity, they are forced to find locations within the town for their lovemaking. A powerful image of the hostility of the urban landscape comes in the form of the 'stinking guano factory' that becomes their favoured haunt; apart from its obvious lack of romantic appeal, it is also the place where they are spotted by a fellow pupil from the school, an incident which sets in place the eventual downfall of their relationship.

The process of producing guano involves the treatment of seabird excrement in order to produce a form of fertilizer, and the powerful odour produced is redolent of the stench of industry working upon the natural world, reinforced by Robbie's observation of the stark contrast between this industrial location and the pastoral surroundings of their earlier rendezvous on the Hilltop above Vindobala, in rural Northumberland.<sup>30</sup> In earlier unpublished writings, Westall betrays his concern with the impingement of the industrial landscape upon the natural/rural, which he envisages as an 'urban unreality' which threatens to suffocate the putatively corresponding rural reality in its 'sickening embrace'.<sup>31</sup> In an unpublished poem fragment, he laments, '[t]he worst crimes

that were ever committed on Northumberland / The spoilheaps and the pit-head winding gear [...]', alongside images of 'Men crushed, men twisted mortally, men choked with dust, / Children starving, women trapped forever in the grid of narrow streets.'<sup>32</sup> Although such bleak images of industry do not find their way fully into Westall's children's fiction, they are indicative of an early tendency on his part to privilege the natural and rural North-East landscape over the industrial and urban.

In a number of these novels, the place that functions as home for the central character is not actually their family home. I have already mentioned how the character of Anne is adopted into a surrogate home in *The Watch House*. There are parallels in the other texts. In *A Time of Fire*, for instance, Sonny finds himself (initially) temporarily adopted by his paternal grandparents after his mother is killed in an air raid, and his father joins the air force in an attempt to avenge her death. He moves from his family home in Newcastle out to his grandparents' home in Tynemouth, which will, his grandfather hopes, give him the opportunity to make a fresh start. This sees Sonny moving from his urban home environment to one much more closely associated with the natural landscape of the coast. In *Falling into Glory*, the younger Robbie finds some solace from his stifling home at his Nana's house, where he sits in his 'dead book-loving grandfather's chair' across from his Nana's 'clippie rug'; it is the safety of the past that Robbie retreats into here, describing how 'the whole house was like the British Museum'.<sup>33</sup> But even this house is not beyond the reach of 'the smell of the guano works.'<sup>34</sup>

In all of these examples, then, the social landscape surrounding the Tyne estuary is divided along class boundaries which were a reality of Westall's early

life in the region. In an unpublished semi-autobiographical short story, the narrator recounts walking home from his aunt's house, which 'lay amidst the rigid red-brick terraces of the old town, famous for their spotless lace curtains, highly-polished knockers and front-steps holy-stoned every day', through the socially deprived Meadow Well estate, inhabited by 'That Lot' who 'never walked through our suburb' as '[t]hey knew their place.'<sup>35</sup> The landscape itself seems delineated along class lines to the narrator; for instance, the 'road that's the boundary between the Meadow Well and our estate' which is 'pretty wide and busy, as if it knows its [sic] a frontier.'<sup>36</sup> The title of the short story, 'Restoring the Differential', refers to the way in which social class distinctions must be upheld by those further up the economic scale, and although the story on one level undermines such prejudices by showing how much the narrator has in common with a girl he meets from the Meadow Well estate, it also underscores the way that such divisions shape the social identities of Westall's typical North-East adolescent characters.

In *The Machine Gunners*, Chas and his gang befriend the young boy Benjamin Nichols (known to them all as Nicky) whose background is much more privileged financially. It is in the grounds of Nicky's home that they build their den, Fortress Caparetto. This middle-class home is presented by Westall as decayed and decadent; following the death of Nicky's father, Mrs Nichols has allowed the house and its grounds to fall into a state of disrepair which serves to underline her behaviour as negligent and morally suspect. The gardener's Lodge at the entrance to the grounds is abandoned and boarded up, and the house itself has 'a great white front door, like a Greek temple, but the paint was peeling off it.'<sup>37</sup> Once inside, Chas notices 'the plates of cold egg and bacon in the sink with



cold water dripping on them' leading him to feel sorry for Nicky and realise that 'money wasn't everything.'<sup>38</sup> This state of abandon extends into the garden, where everything is overgrown with ivy, including the pots which Chas suspects of being the Nichols' 'pots of money' often mentioned by his mother.<sup>39</sup> Though Chas finds such decadence alluring, ultimately he prefers the respectability of his working-class home.

Chas discovers the crashed bomber and machine gun in a wood in the grounds of West Chirton Hall.

The Wood was in the grounds of West Chirton Hall. At one time, his father said, the people at the Hall had owned everything. But then the factories came, and the council estate, and the owners of the Hall just curled up and died for shame. Now the house itself was just a hole in the ground lined with brick, and a black cinder floor. There was a big water-tank full of rusty water, and nothing else.<sup>40</sup>

Again Westall shows the industrial side of Garmouth as encroaching upon the social landscape. In the case of the Wood, this has led to the hall becoming abandoned and derelict, and ultimately a dangerous and mysterious place; adults do not go here, and children do not venture into the middle as the Wood is rumoured to be haunted, and in a sense it is - by the ghost of its former, pre-working-class stature.

A recurrent feature in Westall's treatment of the social landscape in these novels is his characters' disdain for, and fear of, what they describe as 'slummy' areas. Early in *The Machine Gunners*, Chas comes across a bomb-damaged council house while searching for the results of a recent air-raid. He describes the inhabitants as 'West Chirton rubbish' after a brief altercation with them, and they

retort by calling him a ‘Balkwell snob’ and telling him to go ‘back where you came from’.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, Harry finds it impossible to believe that his family now live on the Ridges estate where ‘the slummy people lived.’<sup>42</sup> In *Falling into Glory*, after he and Emma are disturbed *in flagrante* at the guano factory, Robbie initially convinces himself of the insignificance of the onlooker as the factory lies in the middle of ‘slumland, where poor people lived.’<sup>43</sup> Belonging, within Westall’s North East, is related to distinct, class-bounded areas, and Westall always focalises the child’s experience of the region around the respectable, working-class home. This is not to suggest that characters do not move between different socially defined areas; indeed, this very desire to test and cross such boundaries is central to the North-East childhoods that Westall constructs, partly as a product of the social context in which Westall was writing. As noted above, Westall himself was part of a generation who experienced upward mobility as a result of widespread, post-war education reforms. Much of Westall’s North-East fiction was written in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of profound social and economic change for the region as the centrality of heavy industry became gradually more untenable. The impact of both these contexts can be seen in Westall’s writing, particularly in the way that central characters must navigate increasingly fluid social class boundaries. One text where this is thematically central is *Fathom Five*.

### ***Crossing the ‘rotting gap’***

*Fathom Five* was first published in 1979 by Macmillan, and tells the story of a group of teenagers in Garmouth during the Second World War who believe they have uncovered a German spy operating somewhere within the town, sending

radio signals detailing the whereabouts and activities of local ships. Their suspicions immediately fall upon the residents of Low Street, an area located near to the river quay where the signalling devices have been found. Low Street is an area of Garmouth which is out of bounds to the group of friends, due to the social class of its inhabitants. Much of the story surrounds their attempts to infiltrate this area of the town in order to locate the spy.

Originally, *Fathom Five* was not published as a sequel to *The Machine Gunners*, partly on advice from Westall's editorial team at Macmillan. Correspondence between Westall, editor Marni Hodgkin, and author/editor/critic Aidan Chambers suggests concerns over the quality of the novel, especially in comparison with *The Machine Gunners*. Chambers raises a particular concern over the representation of the North-East setting in the novel, which he suggests 'doesn't have [...] that particular-to-place feeling that TMGs [*The Machine Gunners*] rejoices in [...] [a]nd maybe that in itself alters the nature of the book', and he suggests it might 'be a book less disappointing to your readers' and more likely to 'succeed if the characters' names were changed'.<sup>44</sup> Hodgkin describes his comments as an 'interesting and perceptive' appraisal which 'roughly coincides with our tentative plans for it', and it therefore seems likely that these concerns influenced the decision not to market the book as a sequel.<sup>45</sup> However, *Fathom Five* was re-published with revisions by Puffin Books in 1982, with the main character's name changed from Jack Stokoe to Chas McGill in order to tie in with *The Machine Gunners*; in other words, the novel was effectively re-issued as a sequel to Westall's 1975 debut. Interestingly, Westall had attempted a direct sequel to *The Machine Gunners*, which remained unfinished and unpublished, and which itself began to explore in greater detail the class

divisions in Garmouth.<sup>46</sup> Although he abandoned the project, later describing how '[h]alf way through, I lost interest in the book myself' and was 'too bored to go on' so 'gave it a decent burial in the waste-baskets of Macmillan', nevertheless this central theme of social division shaping the North-East landscape persists into *Fathom Five*.<sup>47</sup> The novel develops ideas from *The Machine Gunners* regarding the relationship between place and class in Garmouth, exploring further the gap between respectable working-class areas and those deemed either more 'posh' or 'slummy'. Low Street fits into the latter category. Chas describes the background and development of the area.

Years ago, everyone in Garmouth lived down Low Street. Then the toffs moved up Bank Top, into Albion Road and Northumberland Square. But even that didn't content them. They kept on moving outward. Now they were three miles up the coast at Whitley Bay, with their rockeries and crazy-paving paths; well clear of the smell of the fish they still made their money from.<sup>48</sup>

Abandoned by the affluent merchant ship-owners, the area fell into disrepute, until it was populated only by 'riffraff' who fortunately 'knew their place' and 'didn't mess about in the Upper Town, where decent folk lived.'<sup>49</sup>

The physical landscape of Low Street emphasises the degree to which it is socially detached from more apparently respectable areas. The houses here are built in cramped physical spaces, squeezed into the very margins of the town to such an extent that they are forced to extend at the back over the river on stilts. They are described as seemingly unfinished and abandoned in construction, looking like '[f]ailed bridges with houses on top' in 'the last place God made, the backside of Low Street.'<sup>50</sup> Later in the novel, when Chas has befriended the infamous Nelly Stagg, self-styled Queen of Low Street, he promises to return

and visit her in the future; they both know, however, that although there was ‘a wide gap between Low Street and Garmouth’, eventually gossip would pass over into the respectable neighbourhood of Chas’s home and reach his father who would be sure to disapprove.<sup>51</sup> This wide gap is social and physical; a steep hill known as Tanner’s Bank sits as a ‘rotting gap between Low Street and decent folk’.<sup>52</sup>

Equally divided from Chas’s world is the town of Whitley Bay, hometown of the girl he is interested in courting. As Chas approaches her home he feels panicked, partly by the size and grandeur of the houses, which ‘got bigger and bigger; the gardens posher and posher.’ The street on which she lives is ‘the kind of road you didn’t enter *at all* unless you had definite business.’ As he approaches, he is confronted by a lawn ‘as big as a prairie’ which sends a similar message to that experienced by Robbie in *Falling into Glory* on approaching the more exclusive Tennyson Terrace, and by Bob Bickerstaffe in *The Promise* (1990) as he tentatively enters the ‘posh’ house where his girlfriend-to-be Valerie Monkton lives, and is confronted by a forbidding entrance-hall ‘as big and dark as a church’.<sup>53</sup> Even once inside the house, Chas finds himself informed by Sheila’s mother that he must be mistaken in believing he has met her daughter down at the Fish Quay Sands, as this is ‘not a place Sheila goes.’<sup>54</sup> Harry, in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, perceives similar barriers between himself and the socially lower Ridges estate, which lies in an area of social deprivation; he and his family do not belong among the ‘jungle-like front gardens and broken fences’ which, along with the ‘cracked ugly front path’, mark this out as a wild and untamed place, in stark contrast with the ordered

world of home.<sup>55</sup> These places constitute barriers within the social landscape which the young boys must cross.

A central theme of *Fathom Five* is Chas's developing perspective on the different social groups within Garmouth, and his increased awareness of the socio-economic factors which shape the social landscape of the town. Through the course of the novel, Chas and the other children gradually come to reassess their prejudices about the different areas of Garmouth, and in particular Low Street. They move from seeing the social landscape, and its people, as delineated along simplistically conceived boundaries, towards a more nuanced understanding, indicative of their growing maturity. They come to realise that rather than being divided neatly into definitions of slummy, decent and posh, the boundaries between such groupings are much more fluid. For instance, early in the novel, Low Street is contrasted unfavourably with the area of the town which lies above it (both literally and in terms of status) as Chas and Cem are described ascending 'into Northumberland Square where decent folk were coming out of chapel'; tellingly, this image is revised later in the novel.<sup>56</sup> Rather than the 'rotting gap' previously mentioned, the derelict area between Low Street and Northumberland is revealed as a row of 'Georgian houses where the sea captains used to live'.<sup>57</sup>

Through devices such as this, status in Westall's North-East fiction is shown to be unstable and shifting. Even though Low Street's beginnings as the original Old Garmouth have been acknowledged, Cem still believes that the buildings in the area are inherently deceptive, a 'rabbit warren' full of secret doors which allow residents to 'go from one end of Low Street to the other, without ever having to see the light of day'.<sup>58</sup> This description echoes Westall's

own observations in an early piece of biographical writing where he describes his grandmother's first experiences of North Shields' houses as 'all interconnected, by a warren of steps and passages [...] only known to a few.'<sup>59</sup> Such beliefs are shown to be predicated on a fear of the unknown, for example when Sheila actually enters what ought to be the most dangerous and depraved house in all of Low Street, belonging to the notorious Nelly Stagg, and discovers it to be a domesticated, though still exotic, home.

The Maltese took Sheila upstairs and pushed her through another door. She was shaking; frightened of being hit again.

But it wasn't a room for violence. Flowered wallpaper, and long red velvet curtains. Every available space filled with spindly tables and cabinets, loaded with tiny objects. There was a cigarette lighter, made from a brass cartridge case. Paperweights of the Crystal Palace. Pictures of Japanese ladies, made from iridescent butterfly wings. A porcelain boot, marked *A Present from Hamburg*. Everywhere, presents from somewhere.<sup>60</sup>

The room here reflects the personality of its inhabitant, being decorative, sensual and worldly. Most importantly, it challenges Sheila's expectations, at least in terms of social class. As I explore later, Nelly Stagg represents a strongly gendered view of hard-won respectability which lies at the heart of the Low Street community. The landscape she inhabits reinforces this view, and Sheila's visit to Nelly's rooms marks a turning point in the novel regarding the reality discovered by the young protagonists in contrast to their preconceived expectations about the area and its inhabitants. This episode marks a significant awakening for Sheila and the others.

In Westall's writing this sense of upheaval corresponds to the experience of growing up. His child and young adult protagonists often find the seemingly

self-evident certainties of their childhood disturbed, leaving disturbing uncertainties in their place. Such disruption is figured also in the physical worlds of Westall's fiction, particularly through the impact of war upon the urban landscape. I have already noted how Harry, in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, finds himself wrenched apart from the security of his home in the aftermath of the air raid. A similar effect is wrought in *The Machine Gunners*, when Chas accompanies his dad as he seeks to ascertain whether Nana and Granda's house has survived Garmouth's previous night's bombing.

The whole world seemed broken in half. Nearby, the same old streets, women gossiping at doors, kids peering over walls. But above the familiar rooftops billowed more smoke than he had ever seen: oily black smoke rolling over itself, trailing east to cover the rising sun, so that they walked from sunshine to shadow every minute.<sup>61</sup>

Further evidence of the devastating disruption of the child's world is found as they approach what Chas considers 'the most important street in the town with no less than three toyshops'; Saville Street has been wiped completely from the landscape of Garmouth, reduced to 'just piles of bricks'.<sup>62</sup> Such irrefutable and dramatic transformations of the urban landscape have a profound effect upon Westall's young protagonists. In *The Machine Gunners*, it allows them the freedom and the means to build their fortress in the overgrown garden of Nicky's house. In *Fathom Five*, the gang is led onto the River Gar, and in both *The Kingdom by the Sea* and *A Time of Fire* the war's destructive impact drives the children from their family homes towards the coast. In *The Promise*, an errant bomb destroys the grave of Bob Bickerstaffe's girlfriend, and consigns her to a state of limbo from which her vampiric behaviour stems. In *The Wind Eye* (1976), the Studdard family experience the landscape twisting and transforming



around them as it reverts to its pre-urban existence, and although the cause of this is supernatural rather than military, the effect is similarly to efface the urban landscape, albeit temporarily. In all of these novels, Westall's central child characters find themselves driven from the urban and industrial North East, and forced to relocate within the natural landscape of the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hollindale, 'A Freedom in Ghostliness: Interview with Robert Westall', *Children's Books*, (December 1986), 2-4 (p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Hollindale (1986), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1976) '*Writing about a Saint*' manuscript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/165, flr.

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Bierman, 'Lack of Glittering Prizes', *The Scotsman*, 30 May 1990, education section; accessible at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/03/01.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Thwaite, 'Review of *Fathom Five*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 December 1979; accessible at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/03/05.

<sup>6</sup> Thwaite, 1979; see Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/03/05.

<sup>7</sup> *Fathom Five*, pp. 248-249 (Author's Note).

<sup>8</sup> In reality, Tynemouth village is a subsidiary of North Shields, and falls within its boundaries; however, its socio-economic profile is quite markedly different to the area more commonly referred to locally as North Shields. Historically, fishing boat owners lived in Tynemouth, their fishermen in nearby North Shields.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Westall, *The Watch House* (London: Macmillan, 1977; 2002), pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Westall, *Falling into Glory* (London: Methuen, 1993; reissued Mammoth, 2000), p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Tom Hadaway, 'Comic Dialect', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 85-92, (p. 86).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Westall, 1991, quoted in Stephanie Nettell, 'The ruler of the kingdom of the imagination', *The Guardian*, 28 March 1991, Review/Arts section, p. 32, accessible at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/05.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Westall, *The Machine Gunners* (London: Macmillan, 1975; 2001), p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Westall, *A Time of Fire* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Westall, *The Kingdom by the Sea* (London: Methuen, 1990; Egmont, 2002) pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Westall, *The Promise*, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 87; pp. 74-75.

<sup>18</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Westall, 1991, quoted in Nettell, p. 32, accessible at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/05.

<sup>23</sup> Though Westall initially studied Fine Art at the University of Durham (then King's College in Newcastle upon Tyne) in 1948-1951, he subsequently left the region to pursue postgraduate study at Slade School, University of London, 1955-57, after which point he never returned to live in the North East.

<sup>24</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 85.

- <sup>26</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 43.
- <sup>27</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 148.
- <sup>28</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 149.
- <sup>29</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 162.
- <sup>30</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 256-257.
- <sup>31</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1960s), *Notebook: various notes and sketches*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f8r; f6r.
- <sup>32</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1960s), Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f17v-f17r.
- <sup>33</sup> A home-made rug, created using remnants of material, and popular in the North East. Westall uses a similar idea in a metaphor he employs to describe the writing of *The Kingdom by the Sea*, of which he says, 'I am reminded of my mother's rag-bag.'; see Robert Westall, (1992), 'What inspired the characters in *Kingdom by the Sea*? ' press cutting, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/02/04, p. 4; published in the June 1992 edition of *New Windmills News* newsletter.
- <sup>34</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 37-42.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1990s), 'Restoring the differential' manuscript and typescript drafts, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/104, ff. 10-11.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1990s), Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/104, f13.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 74.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Machine Gunners* pp. 74-75.
- <sup>39</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 76.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 8.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 5.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 204.
- <sup>43</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 260.
- <sup>44</sup> Aidan Chambers, (1977), *Letter to Robert Westall, 2 May 1977*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/14/01/15/01.
- <sup>45</sup> Marni Hodgkin, *Letter to Robert Westall, 16 May 1977*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/14/01/15/01.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1980), 'Sequel to *Machine Gunners*' unpublished novel, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/111; though dated within the catalogue as c. 1980, it seems likely that this draft was composed earlier than *Fathom Five*.
- <sup>47</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), 'Worlds Apart' conference speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/26, f10r.
- <sup>48</sup> *Fathom Five*, pp. 13-14.
- <sup>49</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 14; see Chapter 7, where I consider Westall's treatment of social class in more detail.
- <sup>50</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 92.
- <sup>51</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 200.
- <sup>52</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 47.
- <sup>53</sup> *Fathom Five* pp. 74-75; *The Promise*, pp. 21-23.
- <sup>54</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 76.
- <sup>55</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, pp. 204-205.
- <sup>56</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 47.
- <sup>57</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 171.
- <sup>58</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 141.
- <sup>59</sup> Robert Westall, (1969), 'Sarah' manuscript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/108, f2r; the descriptions of North Shields in this piece strongly suggest it as a precursor for images of the region found in *Fathom Five*.
- <sup>60</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 175.

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<sup>61</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 58.

<sup>62</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 60.

## Chapter 5: Westall's Landscape Part 2

### **Purity in nature**

Westall frequently sets up a dichotomy and counterpoint between the natural landscape and the urban and industrial places discussed earlier, in line with the dominant aesthetic. The images associated with nature are particularly influential upon what are presented as essential elements of the region's identity, bathing them in associations with the natural, pure and untouched. This can be understood as a manifestation of what Dave Russell terms the "true North" [...] exceptional and not really of it', though in Westall's fiction the effect is rather to assert an alternative bucolic tradition as underpinning present-day urban images than to further emphasise their grimness in the way suggested by Russell.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Westall's representation of landscape parts with tradition in that it places the rural landscape at the centre of his child characters' North-East worlds. Unlike novels such as Richard Armstrong's *Sabotage at the Forge* or Frederick Grice's *The Bonnie Pit Laddie*, which largely consign the natural world to the margins of the North-East landscape, Westall's fiction reinstates a more pastoral North East, and has more in common with the kinds of images found in the later work of David Almond, who works for greater integration of the rural and urban (see Chapters 8 and 9).

As Westall's young characters move away from their predominantly urban homes and toward natural/rural spaces, they often also participate in a form of temporary regression which takes them back to a purer place, described by Pamela Knights as 'pristine, even prelapsarian [...] terrifyingly empty', from

which they are able to re-centre and re-start their lives.<sup>2</sup> Images of retreat or escape into the natural world are common enough motifs in children's literature generally, associated often with Romantic views of childhood which position the child as similarly unspoiled and 'organic', and there is an element of such imagery here. More importantly, however, in Westall's fictional North East, such images say as much about the landscape itself as they do about childhood.<sup>3</sup> Children in these novels must experience the primal, natural essence of the region, embodied in the natural landscape, before they can grow up.

In *The Machine Gunners*, the move away from the urban landscape in favour of the natural parallels a shift from an adult-centred and managed world to one where the children are in charge. I have already noted how Chas comes across the crashed bomber in the environs of Chirton Wood, where only children go. It is the barren nature of this location that makes it both appeal to children and keeps the plane beyond the enquiring eyes of the adult population, at least for a time. A similarly wild location is chosen for the children's den. Although the site of Fortress Caparetto is located in the grounds of the Nichols' house, its existence and effectiveness as a hideaway for the gang are dependent on the fact that the house has been destroyed in an air-raid. The garden therefore becomes a kind of barren wilderness, and the fortress has been dug into the earth in a suitably remote spot. In one episode, Chas accesses the fortress via a circuitous route which takes him across the Mud Flats, a 'vast swamp by the river below the town [...] used only by anglers and small boys'.<sup>4</sup> The remoteness of its location emphasises the extent to which the adventures of the gang at the fortress comprise a relinquishing of the civilised, domestic home in favour of an untamed place and way of life, so easily found within a North-East garden.

A large part of the fortress's appeal comes from the fact that the children must carve out this home for themselves, both physically and socially.

Admittedly, this is achieved using salvaged materials from the urban world, and in a manner reminiscent of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the children are quick to establish and maintain a set of rules governing their social behaviour at the fortress.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, their time here sees them retreating from the urban into a form of wilderness, and living in the earth, images which have clear parallels with the actions of children in David Almond's *North East*. The novel's denouement sees every member of the gang, including the captured German parachutist Rudi, relinquish their family environments in favour of the fortress, which has by this point come to embody what they understand by the word 'home'.

A similar abandonment of the adult-managed, civilised landscape in favour of the natural and uncivilised, again reminiscent of the way Golding's child characters attempt to escape from the difficulties created by adults, occurs in *The Kingdom by the Sea*. Here, the pilgrimage embarked upon by central character Harry leads him away from his home in urban North Shields, further North through the natural landscape of the Northumbrian Coast. After surviving an air-raid which has destroyed his home and, he is told, killed his family, Harry decides to become a walking exile and uproots himself from the urban, domestic landscape. As he seeks temporary refuge underneath an upturned, unused boat on the beach (Harry too digs himself into the land on more than one occasion, as Westall draws upon the thoroughly mined nature of the North-East landscape in a way which, as I explore later, is echoed in Almond's imagery), he watches an air-raid from much closer proximity than has previously been possible for him

when at home. Harry experiences this attack as if it were a natural phenomenon, 'like a thunderstorm, if you were out in it, and not afraid of being hit by lightning'. His exposed position on the open beach adds excitement for him, and a vitality to the event; without the shelter of his domestic home, Harry feels 'huge, as huge as the sky.'<sup>6</sup> Harry's new-found independence, thrust upon him by events partly beyond his control, aligns him, in his own world-view, with the natural landscape of the region. Though his quest is initially only vaguely formed in his mind, nevertheless his initial instinct is to abandon the urban and civilised world in favour of an imagined land of natural bounty.

Away. Up the coast. To where there were no people to bother them. To where there was plenty of food.<sup>7</sup>

Inevitably his journey brings Harry into contact with many people, and ultimately what he learns is how much better suited he is to the kind of life he experiences after being adopted by the grieving Mr Murgatroyd on Lindisfarne than to his previous urban existence. It is by turning away from the urban world and attuning himself to the natural landscape of his 'kingdom by the sea' that Harry comes to grow and develop.

Earlier I pointed to the way in which the characters of Robbie and Emma in *Falling into Glory* feel trapped within the urban, social landscape of North Shields. The natural landscape functions in this text firstly as a foil which casts the oppressive nature of the urban landscape into sharp relief, but also more generally as symbolic of purity. The lovers' journeys into the rural landscape constitute a form of retreat into the untouched world which lies just beyond the boundaries of industrial Tyneside, a realm outside civilisation. Their affair truly begins when they return to visit the hillside above Vindobala, and is able to

happen here because they feel temporarily dislocated from time. North Shields is associated, for both Robbie and Emma, with the inescapable progression of time. Robbie is growing up, with the prospect of university on the horizon; Emma feels her encroaching age as a form of entrapment, which is simultaneously relieved and emphasised by her awareness of the age gap between her and Robbie. The natural landscape, on the other hand, boasts a timeless quality, embodying as it does a sense of the primitive pre-industrial way of life which stretches back into history, a trait which also persists in David Almond's work. The North East that the lovers inhabit exists in the tension between the industrial/urban here-and-now and the natural/rural there-and-then. There are parallels here with Benedict Anderson's ideas about the simultaneous forgetting of memory, which contributes to the way in which collective identity tends to be narrated as both rooted in historical events, yet trans-historical and timeless. In Westall's writing the natural landscape is timeless and so ever available to his characters as a place of respite from the urban modernity of the present day region.<sup>8</sup> This can be read as representing a desire on Westall's part to evoke a North East with roots which are both spatially and temporally pristine, a desire which stems in part from Westall's concerns with what he saw as the threat of encroaching modernity upon the region.<sup>9</sup> By excavating beneath the present day surface of the landscape to reveal what he offers as a timeless, transcendent bedrock beneath, Westall displays an anxiety to avert a future crisis of rootlessness he perceives as approaching the region.

Robbie's journey into the pastoral landscape begins when he decides to cycle to Clatterburn Hall to join the Sixth Form History trip. The road ahead will take him to the very edges of the region, near the Scottish border, and it leads



across ‘high and lonely moors’.<sup>10</sup> For Robbie, this journey represents a kind of quest or pilgrimage; he must overcome the obstacles of the urban landscape in order to burst free into the pastoral. If Robbie’s home has become a stifling place, then his cycle ride represents the beginning of his entrance into the seemingly boundless adult world of independence. In order to do this he must generate enough ‘exit velocity’ to propel him away from his family home and into his adult life.<sup>11</sup> The cycle ride represents an important first example of this, and significantly Robbie must resist the grasping clutches of the industrial world as he heads into the pastoral, avoiding ‘a string of colliery villages, to be passed with speed and stealth, lest they waken and swallow me again into a world of smoke.’<sup>12</sup>

As with Harry in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, Robbie’s emergence from the confines of his youth must take place through an engagement with the natural landscape. Away from the urban, domestic world, he and Emma feel the burdens of their predicament lift from their shoulders, directly linked in Robbie’s account with their distance from the industrial world.

The dross of pit-heaps was left behind; we were new-born, clean out of our everyday lives. Eagerly watching through the brown-edged windscreen for the new gifts that our new-found land presented to us. I wanted nothing from the past, not even the things I normally clung to, like my brilliant O-levels, or my rugby triumphs, let alone parents of soul-destroying aged dullness. I wanted only what this land was giving us. [...] This was our land, and we would rule it wisely as king and queen.<sup>13</sup>

From Robbie’s perspective, being here in this rural landscape is a kind of re-birth, away from the constraints of everyday life. As they cross the moorland in search of a resting place for their picnic, the freshly burnt heather draws in

charcoal on Emma's legs, and this intervention by the landscape, elevated to the status of an active character, further enflames Robbie's desire. He feels the silence of the outdoors pressing the two of them closer and 'blessing us and what we were doing...I was very aware of her quickened breathing, as the hill got steeper.'<sup>14</sup>

I return later in this chapter to consider Westall's treatment of the relationship between the natural North-East landscape and the human body. What is already apparent is that it is the natural landscape which enables the lovers' physical consummation, in another example of Westall's tendency to lean towards Romantic images of the relationship between landscape and identity. This is partly due to the simple fact that their location is secluded and therefore affords them the opportunity, but the relationship between location and events is more closely linked. In this novel, the natural landscape intervenes, and conspires with the couple to bring their affair to fruition. The landscape lends credence to their physical urges, rendering them significant and fated, which of course contributes to (and arises from) their self-perceptions as star-crossed lovers; if the silence of the landscape blesses their union and the violence of the squall forces them to shelter together in such a confined space, then surely they are powerless to resist such super-human interventions?

The exact place where they first have sex, underneath the stone needle redolent of ancient rituals and sacrifices, further underlines the enduring/ageless nature of the landscape, leading Robbie to ask 'What does time matter, up here?' Emma goes so far as to declare she 'wouldn't mind being *buried* here' amongst what Robbie describes as the 'sun and wind for ever'.<sup>15</sup> Dislocated from time, the two feel able to transcend the time difference between their two lives and

overcome the age difference which so painfully separates them back in North Shields. Rather than giving a schoolboy reply and poking a 'bit of fun', Robbie senses the gravity bestowed by the hilltop location, 'a place where lies didn't work.'<sup>16</sup> Of course, their time out in this natural world is limited, and they must return to industrial Tyneside which is where the most part of their affair will be acted out. Nevertheless, it is against a backdrop of the natural landscape that 'the bomb we'd been tinkering with all those weeks finally exploded', and it is this landscape to which Robbie will yearn to return later, even in the midst of their physical intimacy, when he wishes they could "[...] go out into the country and make love all night under the trees [...] in a cave by the sea [...] on a mountain top, to watch the dawn. [...]"<sup>17</sup>

Such movements from the urban to the natural do not always take Westall's characters away from Tyneside into the rural North East, but they always represent a return to a purer state, even if this is realised only temporarily. In *A Time of Fire*, central character Sonny is taken in by his grandparents after his mother is killed in a bombing raid and his father joins the army in an attempt to avenge her death. This sees Sonny leaving his home in urban Newcastle in favour of his grandparents' house, a converted former coastguard building in Tynemouth. Sonny's grandfather proclaims that "[...] Down Tynemouth he can make a fresh start. [...]", and although this is partly attributed to a simple change of scenery for Sonny, his fresh start is also echoed in the freshness and purity of the landscape at Tynemouth.<sup>18</sup> Compared to his urban home in Newcastle, Granda's garden 'bloomed like the Garden of Eden.'<sup>19</sup> It is in this pure and natural place that Sonny will finally have to make his stand against an invading German parachutist, who is almost swallowed into the earth by a water-filled

gaping hole in the garden. Rather than let him drown, Sonny realises that his death would ‘poison the whole garden’, and instead resolves to ‘cleansing the garden’ by risking his life to save the German.<sup>20</sup> Tynemouth’s proximity to the sea certainly contributes to its cleansing power for Sonny, but the purity of this place is also inherent in its very essence, its soil and earth. A similar description is given of Garmouth air, which the character Anne in *The Watch House* is told will ‘soon put roses in yer cheeks’, presumably in contrast to the air of London she has left behind.<sup>21</sup>

This purity is not only transcendent, it is also transformative. The effect of the natural landscape on Westall’s focalizing central characters is often, by association, to transform the impurity of the industrial landscape in their view. When set alongside others who write about the region for children and young people, the way Westall uses the natural landscape of the North East to elevate is a familiar device, but he goes further so that the natural landscape of the North East becomes a lens through which the industrial and urban North East can be perceived afresh. It is not simply that the urban is seen as built upon a natural, pre-industrial bedrock; the young characters central to these novels come to see the industrial world as arising from, and intrinsically related to, the natural sphere. The urban, modern landscape is thus made natural itself, which serves to lend further credence to the part played by such industrial heritage in shaping the region.

An example of this process can be seen in *The Watch House*, where Anne re-acquaints herself with the view from her window in Brigade Cottage, Garmouth.

She jumped up quickly and opened her porthole wide, letting the breeze play through her night-dress as she looked across the river.

It shouldn't have been pretty. The far shore was mainly oil-refinery, and the Gar rolled into the North Sea striped with sewage. But the morning mist pressed the refinery to a flat blue lace, and the morning sun glinted on the sewage like moving jewels. Even the miserable mass of the Middens was alive with gulls [...]<sup>22</sup>

The natural landscape here subsumes the urban, transforming and purifying it in the process. Such an act of purification is central to this novel, where Anne and the others must work to purify the rocks of the Black Middens which are described as 'polluted and urban rocks' with 'rusting tins in their nooks and crannies.'<sup>23</sup> By the end of the novel, the evil presence haunting the rocks will have been absorbed and neutralised within the natural landscape. Regaining such purity is clearly linked to ideas of renewal through contact with the past in *The Watch House*, in particular the ability to return to earlier, more natural times. This is evident in the very appearance of the area to Anne, when she explores the surroundings of Brigade Cottage and discovers that it is distanced from both 'industrial Garmouth' and nearby South Shields which is 'full of factories, houses, buses.' Unlike those places, this part of the coastline inhabits a purer, lonelier time, which has been left 'to history'.<sup>24</sup> This place has very strong links to the past, links which Anne will come to explore vividly and terrifyingly when she later inhabits the mind of the Old Feller's ghost and time-slips into the nineteenth-century, pre-industrial Garmouth in which he lived, and from which the haunting originates. This is a purer place and time, yet steeped in the primal violence of both man and sea. It is only by returning to this pre-industrial version of Garmouth that Anne is able to cleanse the present-day town of the troubled

spirits which plague it, ultimately through a purifying exorcism which takes place on the beach.

Something similarly purifying occurs in *Fathom Five*, when the characters of Chas and Cem are exploring Fish Quay Sands, a beach adjoining the River Gar. Here, amongst ‘so much death’ they explore the rubbish and debris washed up by the river. What could be a stomach-churningly distasteful waste ground is transformed and purified by the ‘salty breeze’, so that it comes to seem so natural to Chas that ‘[o]n holiday, the smell of rotting fish always made Chas homesick.’<sup>25</sup>

Whilst the natural landscape of the North East constitutes a place of refuge for Westall’s young characters, it does so only to a limited extent. Although this landscape is a place to which they can escape from their urban and industrial homes to rediscover their world, it is not a place without dangers and threats. Indeed, its impact upon their lives is largely due to the challenges it affords them. Often in Robert Westall’s North-East fiction, adolescent experiences of confronting and overcoming adversity are mirrored, and indeed enacted, through engaging with the natural landscape of the North East, which is frequently depicted as intimidating if not downright hostile.

### *Hostility in nature*

As established in Chapter 2, representations of the physical landscape of the North East within children’s literature have tended to emphasise an image of the natural world as harsh, barren and inhospitable, and to present man’s experience of such a place as a struggle against the elements, typically in an attempt to tame

the landscape. One example of this has been through the representation of industrial labour within the region, a masculine domain, which is characterised by images of hard physical engagement with the land even to the point of seeming like a form of battle with the landscape. Westall's fiction draws upon and participates in such images, but also develops them.

I noted earlier how the social landscape of Garmouth is clearly delineated along social class lines, with the young characters' perceived descent into those areas of the town associated with lower moral standards mirrored by their physical descent downhill towards Low Street. This is accompanied by a corresponding shift in the natural landscape.

But it seemed to Chas that they slithered down the cobbles into a great gulf of dark, only broken by the fireflies of dimmed car headlights moving on the far side of the river; and out to sea, the intermittent stars of the lighthouses [...] in the otherwise total dark, the lighthouse stars seemed dangerously bright, casting four walking shadows like intermittent ghosts on the blitz-stripped walls and chimneys of Tanner's Bank. A cold wind off the sea made the girls yelp as it curled round their nyloned legs. A wind from Norway and Denmark; a German wind...<sup>26</sup>

The wind here is perceived as hostile and invasive, a reminder of how the North Sea coast links Garmouth to Nordic countries, and to the land of the enemy that is Germany. As they travel into the darkness and danger of Low Street, the group also make their way closer to the river side, which of course connects the town to the sea, and beyond. On their way down into Low Street, Chas is accosted by a drunken sailor, who mistakes him for a companion from his ship. He proclaims to Chas that “[...] Hell's doon under the sea' and that it 'comes up at night, when ye're sailing along in a flat calm.[...]”<sup>27</sup> Although he is clearly referring to

the hostility of the sea, which is considered in more detail later, nevertheless this episode occurs as the group are walking down into Low Street, and its effect is to emphasise their fears of being metaphorically swept away and drowned in what seems to them a sea of sin and depravity. The central idea is that, down here in this morally degenerate part of town, the hostile natural landscape is never far below the surface of things.

In *The Watch House* too, the hostility of the natural landscape often makes its presence felt emphatically. The location of the Watch House is itself precipitous, balanced on the very edge of dry land. When Anne first arrives and explores the place, she notices how the garden leads to a cliff-edge which ‘dropped sheer to the blue distances of the River Gar’.<sup>28</sup> In Part Two of the novel, Arthur takes Anne with him as he goes to inspect the cliff-face after an episode of heavy rain; she discovers it is ‘downright dangerous’ being ‘eighty feet high, but only made of chocolate-brown soil’.<sup>29</sup> The landscape here poses a constant threat to the Watch House, which now stands only ten feet from the eroded cliff face, and this fact is significant in the novel as it drives the sub-plot involving Anne’s attempts to preserve the building and its history. The Watch House is symbolic of a sense of neglected nineteenth-century tradition within the North East, and Arthur’s battle to save it represents the idea that the local individual, rather than any larger municipal organisation, holds the key to preserving culture and tradition. Although he may employ Anne’s skills at ‘Modern Thinking’ (described using Westall’s characteristic capitalisation, indicating a sense of gentle mockery), these are used to preserve a traditional way of life, and to shore up a building locked in combat with the ancient forces of the natural landscape.<sup>30</sup>



The cliff face at the bottom of the Watch House garden will prove almost fatally hostile for the children later in the novel. After they salvage Hague's bones and bring them back to dry land for burial, the cliff face conspires with the malevolent spirit and collapses suddenly, almost burying them alive in the process and indeed taking the life of Arthur's Galloway pony. Such threats to their lives also come from elsewhere in the natural world around them, which aligns itself with the destructive force against which they are striving. The figurehead from the lost Hoplite ship is wrenched from the ground and crashes down in an apparent attempt to crush Timmo.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, as the group makes its way towards their intended site for the burial of Hague's skull, the natural landscape seems intent on hampering their progress at every available opportunity.

It was a nightmare journey. A worrying little sporadic wind had got up, turning the long grass and gorse-bushes of the place into an orchestra of inexplicable noise that could be hiding other noises. The very trench itself seemed hostile. Briars reached down from the roof and snagged their clothes; and it needed someone to hold the torch close before you could disentangle. The old railway line lay in the long dead grass, in wait for unwary feet. There were loose stones in the grass, too, with sharp edges, that turned under your ankle. The lantern-light seemed to shatter into a thousand twisting shapes, with pitch blackness beyond. [...] Below and far away, Front Street seemed another world; a cool, calm miniature world of lighted pubs and double-decker buses.<sup>32</sup>

Such images, which pitch the hostile, harsh natural world against the strangeness and artificiality of the man-made, recur throughout *The Watch House*. Anne's timeslip experiences of nineteenth-century Garmouth almost invariably take her into a wild and dangerous natural landscape, and demonstrate to her the role played by the Watch House and its men in mediating between such savageness

and civilisation in bringing sailors and their boats to safety. Indeed, it is the fact that Hague and those who murder him have transgressed such attempts at taming the natural danger that leads to the haunting and terror experienced by the Old Feller. The root of such horror lies on the suitably terrifying Black Middens rocks, which themselves form a kind of intermediary zone between land and sea. They are shown to be volatile and unforgiving, effecting complete destruction of those who are unfortunate enough to come into contact with them. The newspaper report of the Hoplite disaster, which the children discover as a result of their research, describes bodies as '*dreadfully mangled*', one discovered with '*the head completely off, though the neck and lower chin remained.*' (italics in original). These corpses have been so abused by their contact with the Middens that most have had their clothes '*torn off by contact with the rocks*' with one female victim's body '*so jammed in between some rocks that some considerable force was required to extricate it.*'<sup>33</sup> Although the rocks of the Black Middens initially seem strange to Anne due to what seems to her their urban quality as compared with cleaner and safer rocks she has seen on holiday on Scilly, they are nevertheless a powerful image of the destructive and hostile forces which arise from the natural landscape of this place, and which lie only a very short distance from the Watch House itself. Similarly frightening forces threaten the children in *The Wind Eye*.

*The Watch House* culminates in an exorcism on the Long Sands beach at Garmouth. During the ritual, which calls forth the monstrous figure of Hague himself, the group's battle with the supernatural is again framed within a hostile natural landscape. After burying Hague's dismembered hand, the sand retaliates against the group as the 'whole beach seemed to lift and throw itself at them',

before a piece of driftwood violently attacks the chanting priest, Father da Souza, and all four members of the exorcism party are assaulted by a sandstorm which comes ‘[h]issing, cutting, reaching through clenched fingers, through clenched eyelids.’<sup>34</sup> This image of the natural North-East landscape as being both responsive and attuned to human circumstances is found elsewhere in Westall’s fiction.

### *Personification and pathetic fallacy*

Towards the conclusion of *The Machine Gunners*, Chas McGill feels an emotional connection with the weather as he struggles to comprehend the reality of the gang’s predicament. His confusion seems to him paralleled in the way the ‘mist was clearing from the landscape now’ but ‘settling into his mind instead.’<sup>35</sup> He is to experience similar feelings in *Fathom Five*, when he finds himself separated from his new-found love, Sheila Smythson. Chas finds that he suddenly hates the town in which he lives (Garmouth), preferring instead the passionate, untamed natural landscape.

Otherwise [...] he walked along North Pier on stormy nights, when the waves broke over and soaked him. It fitted his mood. The only God was the God of rock and wave; uncaring as rock, violent as wave. [...]

One night he nearly chucked himself down from the piers, on to the rocks and waves. Might as well finish the farce; get it over with.<sup>36</sup>

Such turbulent features suit Chas’s mood, particularly given the way they evoke images of the primal nature of this place ‘of rock and wave’. Such a sense of affinity between the hostile natural landscape and adolescent emotional turmoil occurs for other Westall protagonists as well. In *A Time of Fire*, grief-stricken Sonny searches for signs of the bomber that killed his mother by scanning the

‘fat uncaring sunlit clouds’, which mirror his own feelings of emptiness and futility.<sup>37</sup>

Such personification of nature is not always hostile; in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, for instance, Harry also turns in his grief to the physical world, and here it provides comfort and support rather than frustration. The difference is that Harry believes himself to be entirely alone. In an episode on the beach, before he even acquires the dog which will become his closest companion, Harry feels the presence of the natural world as a kind of surrogate parent as ‘the warmth of the sun smoothed out his face, like Mam had often done’, a soothing presence which continues the next day, as he awakens and sees how ‘[l]ittle wavelets crept up the beach, gentle as a kiss.’<sup>38</sup> The landscape here sustains Harry, seeming like a living presence to him in opposition to the death all around. As he continues on his journey, however, he experiences its hostile side as well, in more than equal measure.

Such an empathetic connection with the natural landscape also bolsters Robbie’s perception of his own importance in *Falling into Glory*. He finds his emotional state reflected in the landscape of the coast, as Westall makes use of pathetic fallacy in order to foreground Robbie’s adolescent egocentrism. After their first romantic encounter, Emma writes to Robbie in an attempt to distance herself from what has happened and draw a line under the incident. Robbie experiences his rage at this rebuttal as framed within the physical landscape of Tynemouth pier, ‘with the waves coming like pale ghosts out of the wild darkness and crashing over the wall’ which ‘suited my mood to perfection’, and even wishes for oblivion in the landscape, hoping for a wave to suck him ‘back into the sea’ and revelling in howling Emma’s name into the night only to feel

‘the wind snatching my voice and tearing it to rags’.<sup>39</sup> Such images echo Westall’s recollections of his own childhood, where he describes how ‘noises of wind and water have soothed me all my life’, in particular ‘walks along Tynemouth pier as a sixth former, when the sound of breaking waves and the hooting of the foghorn cooled my adolescent furies’.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, when Robbie later fears that Emma may be planning to marry a fellow teacher, he telephones her and suggests that he is putting himself in danger by walking home along the cliffs, using the dangerous nature of the landscape to provoke her into action. She drives to collect him instead, and as they sit together Westall employs characteristically militaristic imagery as he describes their confrontation inside the car.

We sat silent, like two armies waiting to attack. The wind came off the sea, and rocked the car on its springs. It was my ally; it was as wild outside as I was wild inside.<sup>41</sup>

Significantly, it is the aggressive and hostile side of the landscape with which Robbie feels allied. I consider the combative dimension of such imagery in greater detail below. Importantly, this provides another example of Westall’s tendency to imbue aspects of the natural world, in this case the weather of the region, with the characteristics of a living organism. Again and again, his protagonists find themselves participating with a place that is curiously alive, and which reaches out to embrace them, for good or ill. The North East becomes a character in Westall’s fiction.

Along with experiencing the hostility of the natural landscape in *The Watch House*, the character of Anne finds herself confronted by an impression of the land as alive immediately upon arriving at Garmouth. As her mother drives into the town, Anne looks out at the remains of Garmouth Priory, described as

'ruins like crumbling hands, with fingers pointing skywards.' Below this, an 'army of tombstones' seems 'huddled', and Anne thinks of how the 'sea must eat away the cliff' so that 'bones long buried in earth must receive final burial in the sea.'<sup>42</sup> These images suggest that the landscape acts consciously, reflected in the image of the Watch House itself which 'did seem to watch you' from its windows which 'look like eyes in a white planked face.'<sup>43</sup> Even though these buildings - and the graveyard itself - are man-made, the overall effect is one of a place suffused with an ancient, natural life force. In the Watch House, artefacts of figureheads seem to come alive and imprison Anne.<sup>44</sup> As she slips through time to the Garmouth of the nineteenth century, such forces are less dormant, perhaps most powerfully in the image of the Black Middens. Here, the force of the breaking North Sea waves one hundred years before is described as exhibiting the wildness of 'mating stallions', while the destructive rock mass seems to be 'clutching the boiling Gar like a spread hand of six fingers' and consciously 'reaching for the hulls of ships as though it were a living thing.'<sup>45</sup> The danger of the modern-day Middens lies in their ability to manifest the power of their nineteenth-century ferocity, despite more recent attempts to tame their violent forces. In an earlier unpublished manuscript, Westall touches upon a similar sense of underlying danger when he describes how the nineteenth-century North Sea that his grandmother remembers 'is a crueller one than we know now.'<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the terror of the haunting experienced by Anne and her friends is itself rooted in the past; Anne's arrival at the Watch House awakens the ghost of the Old Feller, and the resolution of this disturbance requires the removal of all of Hague's bones from their disparate locations along with an exorcism performed by the two ministers, which effectively constitutes a settling of the

past. Hague's murder occurred as a result of the Black Middens 'clutching' the ship on which he was travelling and tearing it to pieces. Anne's encounter on the Middens, which sees her submerged in the water of the rocks and transported back to the time of their infamy, is itself part of a series of episodes which see her returning to a time when the landscape was more wild and untamed than in the present day. The life of the landscape reaches forward from the late nineteenth century into the late twentieth, and speaks to the young reader of forces which lie just below the surface of the seemingly civilised present day world of the region. Westall suggests that the landscape of this place has always been alive, unpredictable and potentially hostile, and that such forces are ultimately untameable, able to arise again should the occasion require it. This is an example of the allure of the late nineteenth century as a grounding for such images of natural forces, and humans' attempts to contain and harness them. The horror that comes from Scobie Hague originates in an unfulfilled attempt to lay such a wild landscape to rest. Anne is drawn into the region's savage, yet pure, nineteenth-century past.

Similar images of the desire to subdue and conquer the natural landscape are found in *Falling into Glory*, in a highly gendered form. Here, Robbie associates the natural world with the female body, and conceptualises his sexual exploration of both Joyce and Emma in images of geographical exploration. In tandem with his journey from the industrial landscape into the natural and rural, Robbie embarks on a voyage of physical and sexual discovery. He views the female body as a landscape, similarly pure and unblemished as that of the natural world. Robbie's movement from the urban, industrialised landscape of North Shields into the rural, natural world is analogous to his progress from the

masculine realm of his own physicality into the 'New Found Land' of his encounters with the female physical body, echoing John Donne's elegiac *To his Mistress Going to Bed*.<sup>47</sup> As his desire for Emma grows, he conceptualises his feelings in terms of the natural world. Robbie becomes fascinated by women, which he sees as being 'like flowers, that close up at night but re-open in the morning'; such a preoccupation with the mystery of the female form, a recognisably male adolescent concern, leads him to comment how 'that was the first time I thought of *exploring* Emma.'<sup>48</sup>

This thought encapsulates Robbie's fascination with Emma; to him she is a world to be explored, and if Westall's imagery does not quite extend to the militaristic here, it does not stop far short in the realm of pioneering exploitation and domination. The lovers' first fully physical union is presented slightly obliquely, in imagery evocative of the pioneering impulse to explore.

The real thing is that you are journeying, exploring, into a country that you don't know, but a country that is entirely on your side. Where you are absolutely safe. You pause, and wonder whether you dare go on. You creep on in fear and trembling [...]  
And in that land you can raise storms, tempests, at your will, and you feel sick with power because you are a great magician.  
[...] And there is nothing else in the world; there is no world but this safe darkness.<sup>49</sup>

Couched as it is in terminology suggestive of the male impulse to explore and bring under control, Westall's presentation of the male adolescent's intoxication with the experience of encountering female sexuality evokes the colonial impulse to tame and order the exotic 'other land'. Just as the physical landscape of the North-East coast is appropriated by Harry as '*his kingdom* by the sea' (my emphasis), so Robbie comes to view Emma's physical and emotional realms as



places he has inhabited and, in a sense, colonised with his presence.<sup>50</sup> Enraged by Emma's denial of their relationship, he threatens to bring about 'a revolution in your kingdom' by evoking her deeper passions.<sup>51</sup> Kingdoms are a preoccupation of Robert Westall's, both in his fiction and elsewhere in his writing. In biographical writings, he refers to his 'father's magic kingdom', an image echoed in the novella *The Christmas Ghost* (1992) where the narrator talks of visiting his father at work 'in his enchanted kingdom.'<sup>52</sup>

It is this same impulse to occupy a natural 'kingdom' that drives many of Westall's protagonists to forego, albeit temporarily, the industrial world of Tyneside in favour of the natural landscape. Such an impulse is manifested overtly in the kingdom-building of *The Kingdom by the Sea*; it also finds expression in the attempts of the gang to dominate the wilds of Nicky's garden in *The Machine Gunners*, and in *Fathom Five* it sends Chas and Cem to explore Fish Quay Sands and ultimately the River Gar itself. Just as Robbie initially loses himself in Emma's feminine sexuality only to discover his magician-like mastery of her sexual landscape, at least in his opinion, so the natural landscape of the North East serves as an arena in which Westall's protagonists can lose themselves to a rite of passage which will see them return to the urban landscape both more grounded and in control. This process is frequently figured in images of labour characteristic of the region. When Robbie takes manly care of Joyce at her 'wrong time of the month', it makes him feel 'like the captain of a ship, with a whole precious cargo.'<sup>53</sup> Similarly, after he and Emma finally manage to spend a whole night alone together, the effect is to abolish his usual waking sensation of 'feeling like a drifting boat without oars that's about five hundred miles from land.'<sup>54</sup> Ultimately the outcome of exploring both landscapes, natural and female,

is solid grounding for Westall's male protagonists' return to the urban/masculine landscape, now cast in a suitably commandeering role. It is interesting to note how Westall's primary trope in representing such experiences relates to the maritime industry, whereas Almond's writing draws upon images of mining and metal-working (see Chapter 4). Both writers employ imagery which draws upon the industrial traditions native to the parts of the region from which they come, and which form the primary settings in their fiction, to figuratively render the adolescent experience of searching for a sense of place.

Not only do these last images in *Falling into Glory* return Robbie to a workmanlike position of control, they are both also images which draw upon central motifs in Westall's representation of the North-East landscape: the river Tyne, and the North Sea beyond.

### *The rivers Gar and Tyne, and the North Sea*

In Robert Westall's fiction, the rivers Gar/Tyne and the North Sea often feature prominently. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that Westall's most common setting in these texts is the area of the North East with which he was most familiar as a child, Tyneside near the mouth of the Tyne. In common with other coastal areas, life in this region might be expected to be imbued with close connections to the sea; as Simon Schama notes, communities arising near to rivers and the sea have typically been associated with 'fluvial myths' of circulation, and 'metaphor[s] that rivers were the arterial bloodstream of a people'.<sup>55</sup> These bodies of water also function symbolically within Westall's writing, and are intrinsic elements of the identity of the North East he constructs. Firstly, they contribute to the relationship between the North East and the natural

world. The river Tyne and the coast of the North Sea are vibrant, powerful elements of the natural landscape, existing side by side with the inhabited areas of the region. The North Sea comprises one of the North East's borders or limits, and it exerts an influence over the region stretching beyond those places lying immediately adjacent to its coastline. The physical geography of the region is such that the North Sea coast can be seen as the most uniform geographical factor in relation to the area. The western limits of the region vary considerably along its perimeter, and the elongation of the area makes its northern and southern limits relatively small in comparison with the length of its coastline. The region's rivers and the sea have also played significant roles in its economic success, primarily by enabling the large-scale export of the products of heavy industry (including coal and ships) from within the region to the world beyond, and most importantly to the southern capital.

These waterways, then, have existed for the North East as both barriers defining its limits, and important channels of communication between the region and elsewhere. The physical geography of the region dictates that few places are ever far from the influence of the North Sea, and particularly as regards Tyneside, the North Sea can be seen as connected to the lifeblood of the region via its arterial River Tyne. Westall's fiction often foregrounds the region's relationship with the sea and rivers, and his protagonists frequently find themselves compelled to engage in a relationship of their own with these bodies of water. Typically, Westall uses rivers and the sea to embody those characteristics of the natural landscape considered above, including purity, hostility, and defence. Indeed, it is here that Westall most emphatically explores the interaction between the natural landscape and the identity of the North East.

The region's sea and rivers, as portrayed in these novels, can be seen as epitomising the way in which images of the natural world sit at the centre of Westall's depiction of North-East identity.<sup>56</sup> Characters in Westall's fiction often experience the intervention of the sea in their lives, impacting powerfully upon their experience of childhood in the region.

### *The sea/rivers as providers*

Often in these texts, the sea functions as a benevolent force, representative of the natural world of the North East as a bountiful provider. Just as Westall's representation of characters' movement into the natural world constitutes a form of escape from the industrial world they inhabit, so their relationship with the sea can often be seen as a rejection of the modern in favour of more primitive means of survival. While the result of such a move is often to demonstrate how the industrial landscape can be seen as arising out of the pure yet hostile natural world, it is often the case that when Westall's characters submit to the more primitive guardianship of the sea, what they ultimately come to learn is that natural bounty and provision are intrinsic to the very essence of the region, grounded in its close ties with its underlying natural roots.

In *The Machine Gunners*, the sea provides for the needs of two central characters in different ways. For Rudi, as he confronts the realisation that he is stranded behind enemy lines, his thoughts turn to the sea where he hopes to find a means of escape. Despite what he accepts as the probable futility of such desires, he still pledges that 'before he was captured or killed he would look on the sea once more.'<sup>57</sup> Later in the novel, Rudi realises this desire when he is given the boat belonging to Captain Nichols in return for his help with repairing

the machine gun. Even though he abandons his voyage and returns to the fortress to assist the children, for a short time the sea offers the possibility of salvation and escape for Rudi. Elsewhere in *The Machine Gunners*, a similar sense of salvation comes to the character Nicky out of the water. Nicky's father has been lost at sea, and this has transformed his relationship with the water. While his father was alive and active as a sailor, 'Nicky had liked that smell of the sea and the sound of the foghorn', but since losing him 'the smell of the sea and the sound of the horn were a desolation.'<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, it is out of such hostile desolation that Nicky is awakened to the impending danger threatening the house, which will shortly be destroyed in an air raid. In the novel's only gesture toward the supernatural elements that figure so prominently in Westall's later fiction, Nicky proclaims to Chas that '[m]y father came in a dream and warned me.' Certainly, the presence of the sea, however hostile, intervenes to offer protection to the young boy.<sup>59</sup>

A similar sense of reassurance and support occurs elsewhere in these texts. In *Fathom Five*, for instance, while the water at the mouth of the river is largely hostile and dangerous, it also provides for the young characters. At the start of the novel, Chas visits Collingwood's Monument at the mouth of the Gar, and surveys the riverside. He comments upon the area known as Fish Quay Sands, a 'little crescent of beach' where 'You could always find something smelly and interesting washed up'.<sup>60</sup> Even though those things provided by the river/sea are often dirty, smelly, rubbish even, nevertheless they provide entertainment and sustenance for the young characters. Chas and Cem sunbathe amidst the discarded fish-heads and assorted refuse on Fish Quay Sands, and towards the novel's climax it is in fact the rubbish in the river which thwarts the

spy Sven's attempts to murder Chas, by blocking the seacock he has opened in order to flood the boat and drown the young boy.<sup>61</sup> When the gang come to build the raft with which they will explore the dangers of Low Street and investigate the activities of the suspected spy, they construct the makeshift boat entirely from materials salvaged by 'fishing planks and beams from the oily bosom of the all-providing Gar'.<sup>62</sup> The fertile water embraces the children, providing for their needs just as it imperils their lives.

This sense of abundance permeates Westall's depiction of the North Sea. After surrendering themselves to the guardianship of the natural landscape, the protagonists of *The Kingdom by the Sea* and *A Time of Fire* both come to rely on the providence of the sea. Both of these characters collect fish from the water, and the manner in which they do so is revealing. Rather than having to seek and harvest their own catch, the sea in fact gives up its provision willingly into their hands following the dropping of bombs in air raids nearby. These explosions, which have missed their intended urban targets, send shockwaves which kill the fish outright, allowing them to be collected simply and safely from the shoreline. In this way, potentially deadly human actions are transformed by the sea, into an act of beautiful generosity; rather than taking lives, the shockwaves end up giving sustenance to the young boys. Westall's imagery here suggests a yearning for earlier, simpler times, and the act of collecting the fish occurs against a backdrop of sparkling natural beauty.

Granda's hands were full of old straw fish-baskets. He led the way down the steps to the cove. There were quite high waves breaking on the shore, under the moon to the east. The sky in the west was pink and the sky to the east was blue-silver. And under the moon, every wave was full of shining silver fish.<sup>63</sup>

A similar scene is portrayed in *The Kingdom by the Sea*. Again a young boy is taught how to harvest the shoreline by a man of his grandfather's generation, Joseph. Along with a similarly precious 'silver [...] solid wave of fish', the sea here also provides other commodities of sea-coal and slank (an edible seaweed), along with discarded treasures carried in on the tide. All of this adds to Harry's earlier success in fashioning a leash for his dog Don from a piece of salvaged rope. Joseph, the old man with whom Harry is sheltering, is particularly pleased with the gems of amber the sea offers up to him, relics originating in 'resin oozing out of a fir tree in Denmark, hundreds and thousands of years ago.'<sup>64</sup> Once again, the past reaches out from the natural landscape, as the North Sea provides for the needs of man, boy and dog.

All such bounties serve to emphasise an image of the sea as benevolent guardian, even to the point of its characterisation in the role of a parent figure for the young boys. Joseph reassures Harry that a person 'can always manage, by the sea' and sets about teaching him how to do so.<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, he sends Harry forth better equipped to continue his pilgrimage towards the holy island of Lindisfarne.

'Better go now, Harry. Go and find your own beach. I taught you all I know. The sea will be your mother and father, now. Goodbye.'<sup>66</sup>

There are strong biblical resonances here, emphasised both in the old man's name, and the seemingly endless, almost miraculous, provision of fish from the 'father' sea. Later in the novel, the sea delivers Harry a human surrogate father in the form of the bereaved teacher Mr Murgatroyd. He rescues Harry after the boy has suffered a night of peril and real danger attempting to cross the causeway that connects the tidal island to the mainland.

The very air he breathed was full of salty spray, so that he breathed a mixture of air and water, half boy, half fish. And the bigness of the sea overwhelmed him; the bigness of the sound of it. The land seemed so far away, it was nowhere. Nothing but sea. The sound of the waves did not soothe him. The sea had tried to kill him. Might still kill him. Meanwhile, he watched it.

In the end, with bitter satisfaction, he watched it lose its force, like a beaten army, and start to retreat, rung by rung.<sup>67</sup>

Harry experiences both an evolutionary regression to a primal state as ‘half boy, half fish’, and a symbolic baptism in salt water. Its effect is to purify and cleanse him of his former life and self, and render him open to the new life which lies ahead. Harry surrenders himself to the notion that ‘his own personal tide had gone out forever’ and resigns himself to failure in his quest to reach ‘Lindisfarne, the further shore’. Only once he has had his hope broken to such a profound extent that he ‘wished they’d drowned last night’ is he fit for salvation, which arrives in the form of Mr Murgatroyd.<sup>68</sup>

Such biblically resonant images of sea as bountiful provider feature much more explicitly in *The Wind Eye*. Here, the sea makes many offerings to the Studdard family, and in particular the three children at the centre of the story. The supernatural figure of Cuddy himself enters and emerges from the sea at one point, leaving his robe behind, and two otters also appear out of the water and play with him, in a visitation witnessed by six year-old Sally.<sup>69</sup> After she visits Cuthbert on the island Inner Farne, Sally tells of seals fetching items in their mouths to Cuthbert, and of a bird which provides the saint with fish from the sea.<sup>70</sup> Most significantly, it is by sailing out across the North Sea, through a timeslip into the seventh century, that all three children receive a kind of communion with Cuthbert which proves transformative in their lives.



Although the impact of the North Sea upon the lives of Westall's young characters is often benevolent, providing for their needs and offering support in the uncertain worlds they inhabit, its darker side is also acknowledged through moments when it becomes a dangerous and threatening presence, and the relationship between the young characters and the sea is often presented as adversarial, even combative. The sea, more so than other dimensions of the natural landscape, becomes a character in Westall's fiction, capable of seemingly conscious actions and interventions.

*Sea changes: the sea/rivers as agents of removal*

One of the ways in which the influence of the North Sea on the landscape is manifested in Westall's fiction is through the way it takes from the land. This is particularly prominent in *The Watch House*, the plot of which centres on the story of a man whose life has been unfairly taken at sea. The novel's central character, Anne, comes into contact with a number of examples of the sea's impact upon the land. As she arrives, Anne notices the fragile cliff edge, a result of coastal erosion. She considers how the 'sea must eat away the cliff', and how on 'wild nights, bones long buried in earth must receive final burial in the sea.'<sup>71</sup> From the outset, she views the sea as predatory, almost parasitic. As I explore later in this chapter, the character of the Watch House building itself is based on its location at the margin of the land, dangerously poised as a defence against the dangers of the sea. Its purpose is to act as a lookout point for the Garmouth Volunteer Life Brigade, an indication of the volatility of the coastline in this place. The threat from the sea suffuses the Watch House, and indeed the whole

town of Garmouth. Death in the water was once a very immediate reality for the people of this town, and in this novel Westall emphasises the threat posed by the North Sea in the nineteenth century in particular. Arthur talks to Anne of past tragedies, where boats were destroyed in the treacherous waters and ‘Aall the men drowned, within sight of their own front door.’<sup>72</sup> The Watch House itself is filled with evidence of the danger of the sea, in the form of a ‘sea of maritime curios’ which ‘had seeped in’ to permeate the building.<sup>73</sup> Even outside of the Watch House, elsewhere in the town, Anne is never far from the ‘graves of drowned men’ in the grounds of Garmouth Priory, or simply by being near the river which ‘is where men get drowned.’<sup>74</sup> Similarly in *The Wind Eye*, evidence of the sea’s capacity to take life surrounds the Studdard children in their rooms at Monk’s Heugh, including a photograph of a drowned nineteenth-century lifeboat crew, and a human skull trawled from the sea by a fishing boat.<sup>75</sup> Likewise in *A Time of Fire*, Sonny notices that many of the gravestones in the grounds of the Priory bear inscriptions listing water-related occupations such as ‘Tyne Pilot’ and ‘Master Mariner’.<sup>76</sup> Living, and dying, by the water is characteristic of this town. Returning to *The Watch House*, numerous characters mention the corpses of sailors which lie unclaimed under the water along the coast. The haunting which Anne is drawn towards investigating and ultimately resolving itself originates in just such an unclaimed corpse, whose bones lie submerged in the murky mud of the Black Middens. The trauma suffered by the Old Feller is a result of his having witnessed the brutal power of the sea in taking life; importantly, however, such natural savagery is not the root of the haunting, which is caused by the unnatural death of Hague at the hands of men rather than

the sea. Nevertheless, the North Sea remains an awe-inspiring force, always close at hand and with the potential to take life.

The River Gar takes away a somewhat different cargo in *Fathom Five*, at least in the children's imaginations. As they venture beneath the houses of Low Street, whose inhabitants literally live upon the sea as their houses extend above the water on stilts, the young gang members discuss the drainage system of the area. This part of town is inhabited by a predominantly Maltese community, believed by the children to lead a depraved as well as deprived existence. Cem describes how the "[...] Maltese have no sewers" and that instead the "[...] tide carries all away [...]"; similarly, when a floral smell passes by the group, the boys take it as evidence of the ablutions of the notorious Nelly Stagg, "[...] Queen of the Low Street" who has "[...] done you-know-what with every sailor in the Navy!"<sup>77</sup> The river is seen as carrying away the traces of Low Street's sinful, decadent existence, which is of course extremely appealing to the young boys. In the scene immediately following this, the river almost takes the lives of the three youngsters, further underlining its menacing presence in their lives. Later in the novel, as Chas grapples with his growing maturity and understanding of the complexities of adult life, the river again surfaces as a powerful motif symbolising change and transformation.

Chas just stood staring and staring at the gap between the piers. Where Nelly had gone, along with the cods' heads and fishboxes, the tin cans from Newcastle, and branches of trees that had fallen in the water as far upstream as Hexham. All carried away by the strong brown waters of the Gar. Nelly, who'd loved him. While all he, Chas, cared about was school exams and tennis...

That awful Shakespeare poem came into his mind. The one Stan Lidell had made him learn, though he hated it so much.

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
 Of his bones are coral made;  
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
 Nothing of him that doth fade,  
 But do suffer a sea-change  
 Into something rich and strange.

Rich and strange nothing. Sewage. Seagulls screaming,  
 feeding.<sup>78</sup>

Although unable to appreciate its significance, Chas is shown beginning to understand the symbolic importance of the river and sea as representing beauty, continuity and mystery. It takes many things from the land, both disposing of those less desirable aspects of the area but also embracing and transforming others, in a similar fashion to the way in which the industrial landscape is transformed by the natural. The natural world of the North East is again shown here as possessing mystical qualities, able to transcend and transform the ills of the modern world. At the novel's close, Chas is much closer to comprehending the importance of the water's ability to effect a symbolic 'sea-change' upon his whole perception of life in and beyond Garmouth.

In *A Time of Fire* too the sea plays a part in removing painful and difficult experiences from the young protagonist's life. As he struggles to come to terms with the death of his mother, a tragedy he believes he has caused, Sonny must also face his conflicting emotions at the departure of his grief-stricken father to join the RAF. Once he has 'vanished into the mist', Sonny feels that 'his heart was lighter' as now his world consists of 'only the sea-mist and Nana and Granda [...] The world was empty and clean'.<sup>79</sup> I have commented earlier on the way in which the move out to the coast is seen as a form of renewal for Sonny, and here this is emphasised further and linked directly to the sea, which reaches out its mist to embrace him and fill the gap left in his life. When Sonny's

dad returns briefly on leave, he takes him down to the cliffs where he shoots several sea-birds. This violent affront to the beauty of the natural world is partly absorbed by the river, as the 'loose feathers blew away across the rocks into the Tyne.'<sup>80</sup> Later in the novel, in the aftermath of Sonny's father's death in action, Sonny confesses to his grandfather what he believes to have been his role in his mother's death. The two stand side by side in the garden of the cliff top Coastguard Station, as Sonny feels his guilt absolved by the landscape.

Then Granda let him cry. Not cuddling him, as Nana would have done, but standing beside him with his big hand on his shoulder, squeezing tight, as they both stared out to sea, though Sonny could see nothing but blurred blue light through welling waves of tears. It was better than cuddling; it was free, and the grief was not shut in, it went away, out over the sea.<sup>81</sup>

Sonny's grandfather goes on to tell Sonny of a similar experience of his own, during his time as a soldier in the First World War. There is a solidarity here, between boy and man generations apart, united as the sea hears their confessions. The sea offers an appropriately masculine response to their shared grief, silently carrying it away in a manner 'better than cuddling', and leaving them both metaphorically washed clean of guilt in its wake.

In Westall's fiction, then, the North Sea and its tributary rivers function as a kind of fulcrum for his portrayal of the intersection between physical landscape and identity. The sea, along with its tributary rivers, both provides for characters' needs, physical and emotional, and threatens their sense of stability. Life in Westall's North East is saturated with the influence of water, which seeps into the land and the lives of those who live here.

### *A marginal zone*

Often in these texts, the region's proximal relationship with the sea serves to emphasise its marginal status, as a zone located at the edge of the hospitable landscape. The relationship between land and sea is dynamic, and the tension between the two is reflected in the inhabited landscape. Many key locations in Westall's novels are situated at the very margin of the region, between land and sea. In an unpublished journalistic manuscript describing the history of real-life North Shields, Westall also emphasises the importance of the town's location at the edge of the landscape in shaping the town's identity, as he suggests that 'its life came from the bigger spaces of the sea' to such an extent that 'this is the aesthetic keynote of North Shields – the sudden bursting from narrow dark confinement into the dazzle of infinite space.'<sup>82</sup>

In both *Fathom Five* and *A Time of Fire*, central characters are drawn at different times to Collingwood's Monument, a memorial at the mouth of the Tyne/Gar which commemorates local-born Admiral Lord Collingwood's contribution at the battle of Trafalgar. They are brought here variously to watch sunken ships being raised, to rage at the injustice of the world, and to contemplate difficulties facing themselves and their families. The monument stands just above the location of the Black Middens where ships had previously sunk and men drowned in sight of their homes and families, and in *A Time of Fire* Sonny has learnt from his Granda that 'Collingwood never came home from Trafalgar' but instead 'stayed at sea [...] Longing to feel dry land under his feet until he died of it [...] in that blistering salt-laden air.'<sup>83</sup> Other locations too symbolise the bond between life on land and life, with the threat of death, at sea. In both *The Watch House* and *A Time of Fire*, the young protagonists spend a

great deal of time in buildings which originate as coastguard stations, and in both cases must engage with these buildings' functions as beacons of defence against possible deadly threats which come out of the water. In *The Watch House*, Anne must follow clues she discovers within the station, and evoke a trance-like state in order to experience at first hand the role played by the Watch House in the tragic sinking of the Hoplite ship. She is initially alerted to the maritime tragedy's significance as the root of the haunting by a subliminal message she receives from the past, transmitted to her psychically as she is submerged beneath the sea water on the Black Middens. Ultimately, she must face the deadly supernatural threat of Scobie Hague, who exists in the overlap between land and water, a 'something red that stank of the river' who comes towards her out of the sea with a horrid relentlessness 'outlined against the foam of the waves, approaching.'<sup>84</sup>

Other locations also emphasise the region as a place of defence against hostile threats from the sea. In *A Time of Fire*, Granda takes Sonny to learn about the working military defence outpost located in the grounds of the Priory. This is seen to be an ancient place of fortitude, which has provided defence against potential invasion from Saxons, Romans, and Vikings, and Granda asserts its identity as '[a] strong place, Pen-bal-Crag [...] Never been taken by the enemy.'<sup>85</sup> This symbol of the impenetrability of the area fascinated Westall, appearing in various manuscript and typescript drafts described as the 'natural fortress' of Pen-bal-Crag (or 'Benebalcrag') as a 'high and unscaleable [...] easy place to defend', and 'our refuge'.<sup>86</sup> In *A Time of Fire*, the militaristic dimension to the image builds upon an earlier description of Sonny's view from the window of his new bedroom at his grandparents' house in Tynemouth. Tellingly, Sonny's

room is located in what was previously the lookout tower at the former coastguard station, which leads him to muse upon the relationship between place and protection.

The setting sun shone on the mouth of the Tyne, enfolded between the arms of the two great piers that stretched a mile out to sea. On his left, every detail picked out in brilliant gold, was the great cliff of Pen-bal-crag, with the castle where the army still stood on guard, and the ruins of the Priory, and the flat grey concrete shape of the new coastguard station, and the tall radio-masts, and finally the great guns that guarded the harbour.<sup>87</sup>

As I explored earlier, such personification of the landscape is characteristic of Westall's writing, particularly in terms of the natural world. Here he extends such images to include places where man has built upon and adapted the landscape, in this case in the form of 'the arms of the two great piers' reaching out from the land in an attempt to enclose the sea and therefore beckon in the safe passage of ships. The overall effect of this short passage is to emphasise the centrality of defence in the structure of the North-East landscape, linked to the idea of this place as existing on the border of sea and land. The old coastguard station comes to function as a kind of military outpost, as Sonny uses it as a vantage point from which to patrol the skyline in search of the German bomber responsible for his mother's death. When an Army officer suggests demolishing the building and relocating the family, Sonny's grandparents respond by vociferously defending the house and taking it upon themselves to reinstate its previous defensive nature. As the family work to bolster the fabric of the building, Sonny sees it as 'becoming a fortress' and thinks of the 'deep endless cellars' which render the place even more impenetrable than the nearby Castle.<sup>88</sup> This appearance of the house which 'looked more like a fortress than



ever' is completed by Granda's raising of the Red Ensign flag, which he uses to herald their readiness to resist any invasion or attack which may come from the sea.<sup>89</sup> Even though ultimately these defences will be breached by the German parachutist who manages to scale the natural obstacles he faces, nevertheless it is at the site of this building that Sonny confronts him, and returns him to the water. Something similar occurs in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, where Harry finds himself protected from the danger of the sea by various sheltering elements of the landscape which lies on the margins of dry land.

### *Empathy and significance*

Westall's treatment of this part of the natural landscape imbues the sea and adjoining coastal area with a heightened significance for his child characters. One of the ways this is manifested is through the way that the natural landscape connects empathetically with Westall's fictional North-East children. In *The Wind Eye*, the children discover that the 'cradle-like' boat Resurre, St. Cuthbert's funeral vessel which has become a kind of time-machine, is so attuned to the character of the person steering that the type of landscape it evokes reflects their emotional state.<sup>90</sup> In *The Kingdom by the Sea*, after the young boy Harry has found refuge beneath an upturned boat following the destruction of his family home, he falls asleep on the beach, cradled in the womb-like embrace of the coast.

He gave one deep sigh, and was asleep. All night his breathing lay hidden under the greater breathing of the sea. He wakened once, to hear rain patting on the boat. But it only made things cosier.<sup>91</sup>

Significantly, Sonny in *A Time of Fire* experiences a similar feeling of acceptance on the beach. In an intertextual episode, he encounters another boy who, although it is never stated outright, exactly fits Harry's description 'playing with his dog, swimming in the sea' and even though the only communication that passes between them is a brief salutary nod, Sonny recognises their shared experience and feels saddened at Harry's departure, feeling he 'would have liked to have known him.'<sup>92</sup> This episode occurs directly before notification arrives of Sonny's father's death in action, emphasising the effect of the war in curtailing relationships that might offer companionship in times of need, an effect sorely felt in Tyneside which was bombed extensively during the Second World War due to its industrial significance. Of course, the brief encounter between the two boys occurs on the beach, and their stories momentarily connect here at points of high emotion for them both.

Earlier in *A Time of Fire*, Sonny reflects on the events happening around him, and here Westall assigns this coastal location a sense of centrality within this child's experience. The drama of war being played out across Europe finds a microcosmic expression in Sonny's immediate surroundings.

This harbour, with things happening all the time, things coming and going, was like a huge theatre. And all things, from the warships to the gulls fighting and squawking round the distant sewerage-outlet, were actors. The newspapers were beginning to talk about 'the European theatre of war'. He'd never known what they meant, till now. Now he had his own theatre of war, and the best seat in the world...<sup>93</sup>

In this book, as elsewhere, when Westall chooses to explore major themes through their impact upon the people and places of the North East, he does so in

a setting at the confluence of land and water, which emphasises the North-East landscape's marginal character.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, Dave, *Looking North: Northern England and the national imagination* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Knights, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Anne Smith notes a similar fascination with 'the entirely accessibly bucolic North East' as 'a means of escape' in North-East poetry; see Smith, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> This parallel with Golding's novel was also commented upon in a review of *The Machine Gunners* in the Daily Mail (date and author unknown, but contemporary with the novel's publication) which noted how it 'begins with a scene reminiscent of 'Lord of the Flies.''; see Various Authors, (1975-2000) '*The Machine Gunners*' reviews, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/03/01.

<sup>6</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> This is a trait which places Westall in the same tradition as writers such as Penelope Lively and other contemporaries, who also employed landscape to similar ends.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Robert Westall, (c. 1960), *North Shields (unpublished manuscript)*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/088, f1.

<sup>10</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> For a broader treatment of this concept, see Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, 2007), p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 156; pp. 245-246.

<sup>18</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Fathom Five*, p.146.

<sup>27</sup> *Fathom Five*, p.147.

<sup>28</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 5; pp. 63-65.

<sup>31</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 197.

<sup>32</sup> *The Watch House*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>33</sup> *The Watch House*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>34</sup> *The Watch House*, pp. 237-38.

<sup>35</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 201.

<sup>36</sup> *Fathom Five*, pp. 189-90.

<sup>37</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 11; p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 120.

- <sup>40</sup> Robert Westall, *The Making of Me*, ed. by Lindy McKinnel (London: Catnip, 2006), p. 18.
- <sup>41</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 226.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 4.
- <sup>43</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 5.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 20.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 181.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Westall, (1969), 'Sarah' manuscript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/108, f10.
- <sup>47</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 53; see John Donne, 'To his Mistress Going to Bed' in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1971; first published 1654 in *The Harmony of the Muses: or, The Gentlemans and Ladies Choisest Recreation*).
- <sup>48</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 85.
- <sup>49</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 157.
- <sup>50</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 211.
- <sup>51</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 227.
- <sup>52</sup> *The Making of Me*, p. 32; Robert Westall, *The Christmas Ghost* (London: Methuen, 1992; Mammoth, 1994), p. 20.
- <sup>53</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 217-18.
- <sup>54</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 247.
- <sup>55</sup> Schama, p. 258; p. 363.
- <sup>56</sup> Westall describes his first conscious memory as being able to 'see and hear the sea [...] the same watery rhythmic swoosh [...] [t]he infinite blue of space'; see Robert Westall (1986), 'Something About the Author: Robert Westall' proof copy, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/30, f1v.
- <sup>57</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 122.
- <sup>58</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 97.
- <sup>59</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 100.
- <sup>60</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 12.
- <sup>61</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 79; p. 225.
- <sup>62</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 82.
- <sup>63</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 98-99.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 79; p. 76.
- <sup>65</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, pp. 73-74.
- <sup>66</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 80.
- <sup>67</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, pp. 158-59.
- <sup>68</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 162.
- <sup>69</sup> *The Wind Eye*, pp. 66-67.
- <sup>70</sup> *The Wind Eye*, pp. 110-111.
- <sup>71</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 4.
- <sup>72</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 16.
- <sup>73</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 46.
- <sup>74</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 130.
- <sup>75</sup> *The Wind Eye*, p. 23.
- <sup>76</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 67. The novel's working title was 'Downstream', indicative of the thematic importance of the river and the sea; see Robert Westall (c. 1992-1994), 'A Time of Fire' typescript, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/10, fragment / 'post-it note'.
- <sup>77</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 93.
- <sup>78</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 210.
- <sup>79</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 26.
- <sup>80</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 37.
- <sup>81</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 124.

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<sup>82</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1960s-1980s), *'North Shields' draft*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/088, f2r.

<sup>83</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 102.

<sup>84</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 137; p. 229.

<sup>85</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Westall, (c. 1960s), *'Miracle on Benebalcrag' typescript draft*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/082, f1r; Robert Westall, (c. 1960s), *North East history articles drafts*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/087, f32r.

<sup>87</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 30.

<sup>88</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>89</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>90</sup> *The Wind Eye*, pp. 69-70, pp. 75-76.

<sup>91</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>92</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>93</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 34-35.

## Chapter 6: Westall's People Part 1

### **Children and adults**

In Robert Westall's North-East fiction, the child's experience of life in this region is always central, occurring for the most part at some remove from the world of adults, both spatially and emotionally. When children in these novels engage with what are often extremely powerful forces, their life-changing experiences are framed within the landscape of the North East, and it is often a central concern of Westall's in these novels to confront questions of what it means to be a child growing up in the North East of England.

The kinds of North-East childhoods represented by Westall are broadly similar, and the shared characteristics go beyond being situated geographically in the region. However, it is worth scrutinising the way Westall represents people in this part of the country for the light it throws upon some of his abiding concerns about childhood, social class, family, gender, and ideas of belonging and otherness, though as these are experienced from the perspective of North-Eastern childhood.

The North-East childhoods Westall represents, in common with the landscape of the region as explored in Chapters 2 and 3, are often threatened with change, an idea which distinguishes Westall's version of the region from more stable images found in earlier works such as *Wildcat Tower* or *Sabotage at the Forge*. This threat takes different forms, but is always something which impinges upon the child characters' experiences of normal life, forcing a confrontation with the world as it shifts and alters around them. This is in part attributable to Westall's own childhood in the region in the 1930s and early 1940s, which saw

the North East threatened firstly by an economic depression, and secondly by heavy bombardment during the Second World War, due to its strategic importance as an industrial and manufacturing centre. The narrative thrusts of these stories take place against a background of the remnants of what until this point had been normality. In many of these works, the catalyst for change originates in war, which is shown as tearing apart the security and routines of the child's world. One manifestation of this is the way Westall often features children who carry around their possessions in attaché cases, in an effort to sustain the familiar routines of what had been their home lives. In the case of Harry in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, his attaché case provides him with a moment of solace after the loss of his home and, he believes, his family. He opens it and finds it full of 'precious things' such as 'a bar of Mam's pongy special toilet soap', and the experience of such powerful emblems of his previous everyday childhood normality underlines for Harry the disruption he is experiencing, to which he responds by vowing metaphorically to carry his parents with him in the case, 'Like the Ark of the Covenant that the children of Israel carried all the way to the Promised Land.'<sup>1</sup>

Harry's journey through his kingdom by the sea really comprises a relinquishing of such a limited view of the world, in favour of the more difficult but ultimately more liberating mature perspective he achieves by the novel's end, where his biggest difficulty has become trying to understand 'how he was going to keep his own mouth shut, over all the years [...] before he got back to his kingdom by the sea.'<sup>2</sup> In *The Watch House* a similar journey from a view of life based on simplistic certainties towards a more complex perspective is undertaken by the central character Anne, with her growing maturity emphasised by the way

in which she must be hypnotised into a deep trance in order to regress into her previous ‘lovely state of childhood irresponsibility’.<sup>3</sup> Westall’s North-East childhoods are always about children putting away their childish views and shouldering their fair share of responsibility. In Westall’s North East, children grow up quickly, the inference being that this area constitutes a place and culture which requires children to face realities that are challenging and often harsh.

*The Machine Gunners*, the best-known of all Westall’s writing, centres on just such a process, as the gang of children literally turn their backs on the adult-run world of Garmouth and take on the responsibility of fighting the war themselves. For Chas, this arises partly as a response to his growing realisation of his father’s fallibility. As he realises that he ‘wasn’t any kind of God any more’, Chas finds an increased resilience and determination within himself, which allows him to succeed in improving the Fortress.<sup>4</sup> This same developing maturity impresses itself upon the German airman Rudi too; he goes from feeling ‘like a *lehrer* [teacher] in some kindergarten’ when in contact with the gang, to realising that ‘in another way, they were no longer children.’<sup>5</sup> Despite remaining an important adult presence in their lives, and one that will ultimately bring closure to their dangerous activities, Rudi comes to see how the children themselves have been transformed by their experience of the war; by pricking through some of the common illusions and simplistic ideas about friends and enemies, they have achieved a degree of bravery and insight surpassing that of their adult role models. The war in these novels functions as a catalyst for maturity, and Westall uses it to demonstrate his young characters’ apparently intrinsic North-East qualities of communal fortitude in the face of hardship, bound to a strong work ethic and sense of fair play.



When writing about young characters from the region, Westall emphasises the importance of learning and education. In *Falling into Glory* for instance, the experience of scholarly study at the local public library heralds a new phase in Robbie's development. He describes, using terminology which is later applied to his growing sexuality, how 'just as with the rugger, [he] fell into glory', an experience 'like finding a new home you never knew you had'.<sup>6</sup> This intellectual growth appeals to him so strongly because he has found it himself, and it relates to his feelings of being stifled within his childhood existence and home, discussed in the previous chapter. Just as Robbie's mind and world-view grow through his studies, which significantly for this discussion Westall deliberately shows as connecting him to the region's ancient past, so too his sexual and emotional experiences with Emma make him '*grow* like that little bottle in *Alice in Wonderland* [...] grow so big that I didn't fit into anything any more' to the extent that he outgrows his childhood and comes to feel that 'Every door into every other part of my life was now too small to go through.'<sup>7</sup> These combined growths ultimately result in his leaving the North East, for the experiences which await him at university in Leeds. Here Westall explores his preoccupation with the way in which aspiration and ability drive the young away from their childhood homes. This was a central concern in Westall's own life, and is a tension which runs through much of his North-East fiction. In autobiographical writings, he draws a parallel between his self-imposed exile from the North East of his childhood, and various instances when he sought to distance himself from organised religion.

I constantly packed my bags and went out slamming the front door. And then hung around outside indecisively. I have spent years in the act of leaving and never yet left. The world outside is bitterly cold without Mother Westall

or Mother Church. So one stays, and snipes and quarrels and leaves and comes back. The movement gives the illusion of progress, but is as regular as the swing of a pendulum. An uneasy pendulum. Yet better than the cold outer dark or the suffocating inner warm.<sup>8</sup>

That such an act of leaving is incompletely realised is a central theme in Westall's work, informed by the way in which, despite spending his adult life elsewhere, he was compelled as an artist to return again and again to the North East in his fiction, rendering it a place both 'suffocating' and simultaneously 'never yet left'. Such a central ambivalence regarding ideas of belonging distinguishes Westall's writing from the tradition of writing about the North East which precedes his work, and it is Westall's contribution to foreground the way in which some of the central tenets of North-East identity, in particular the close affiliation with working-class culture, were shifting and changing in the late twentieth century.

### *Ideas of childhood/adolescence*

A concern with children's experiences of confronting the boundaries of their childhoods permeates Robert Westall's work, both in terms of the spatial and physical dimensions of their worlds, and in relation to the physical and emotional limits of childhood. Throughout his writing career, Westall was an active critic, both in print and through appearances as a public speaker, earning himself a reputation for being outspoken and forthright. One topic to which he returns often concerns his views on the type of child reader he felt he was addressing in his fiction, and his reasons for doing so. Such concepts, along with broader questions about childhood itself, have been problematized and interrogated

repeatedly within the field of children's literature criticism, particularly regarding the extent to which the so-called 'real child' can ever be knowable to the adult author/critic, and its relationship with the constructed 'child in the book'.<sup>9</sup> In common with many other writers of his era, however, Westall betrays no difficulty with conflating the two concepts, though he is sensitive to the complexities involved in making statements about an implied readership. Characteristically, Westall held strong beliefs about why, and for whom, he wrote the kinds of books he did. At the centre of his work is a reaching-out to a readership he sees as troubled, with the intention of offering support and guidance.

I say 'teenage novels' and not 'children's books'. I am not concerned with the under-twelves. They are, in a way, still warmly encapsulated in the gentleness of home and primary school. My readership starts at the point when, soon after reaching secondary school, the adolescent realises he must protect his own parents from the harsher facts of adolescent life. It is then he becomes alone.

Children's books have different aims; broadening vocabulary, widening the imagination, simply inculcating the habit of reading. The teenage novel must enter what I might term 'the battle of the myths'.<sup>10</sup>

There is a polemical edge to these comments, which clearly identify the act of writing for teenagers as necessarily political. For Westall, his readers exist in a distinct realm of physical, emotional and psychological development; he locates them at a point of crisis. Such a crisis of identity is rooted in Westall's relationship with the North East, particularly his own experience of simultaneous belonging and exile, and also his perception of the North East as itself suffering a crisis in terms of its regional identity.

In Westall's opinion, the most desirable response is the intervention of the writer on behalf of the young reader in instituting and reaffirming an appropriate narrative tradition. Notably, his imagery here, as so often, is militaristic and combative in tone; this is a 'battle of the myths', and Westall situates himself firmly on the side of his implied reader. As he expresses it, the need for suitable narrative engagement on the part of 'teenagers' novelists' arises from the corrosive effects of the combined modern ills of television advertising and what he terms 'the Monty Python Gang', by which he means what he sees as a vogue for indiscriminate cultural satire. Both of these influences are presented as undermining the nourishing and stabilising effect of the established myth, a term he uses to mean 'a story that blasts a channel in your mind, down which future experience may flow.'<sup>11</sup> In some of his strongest work, Westall seeks to shape the kinds of narratives about the North East that future readers will encounter.

Although such polemic initially may sound reactionary, Westall has something much more liberating in mind. The purpose of the myths he proposes is to aid in the emancipation and empowerment of the teenage reader. In a separate piece of writing also from 1977, Westall refers to *The Machine Gunners*, the novel at the centre of his North-East oeuvre. Writing in *The Puffin Post* two years after the novel's publication, Westall again outlines his intention to empower his reader through story.

But the machine-gun of the book became more than a mere plot-device; it became a symbol of the power latent in children to drastically affect their own lives and the lives of those around them.<sup>12</sup>

This latent power is manifested in Westall's fiction as a source of confrontation and disruption, and again the symbolism he employs is militaristic, linking as it does the release of children's 'latent power' with the gun's explosive violence.

For Westall, adolescence is characterised as a time of conflict. I explored earlier the way in which (in novels such as *The Kingdom by the Sea* and *The Machine Gunners*) he uses images of the physical landscape torn and disrupted by the effects of war as symbolic of the turmoil experienced as his adolescent characters attempt to navigate their path through the new adult world in which they find themselves. Having read and compared his fiction and related archival material, I have concluded that Westall's decision to stage such stories of confrontation in the North East is deliberate, and reflects his relationship with the region on a number of levels:

- firstly, as the location of his own childhood, and the place where his adolescent confrontations were played out;
- secondly, as a landscape, both social and geographical, from which he felt it necessary to escape in order to embark upon adulthood, but which nevertheless remained as a realm which exerted an allure which the writer found difficult to resist;
- and thirdly, as a place which was itself, in Westall's opinion, undergoing a crisis in its history as it struggled to adjust its sense of identity in relation to the modern world and in particular its changed socio-economic position.

Although he often returns to the time of his own childhood as the temporal setting for his adolescent novels, Westall maintains an acute awareness of the

fact that he is writing for a readership located in the present, a place he sees as suffering from a dearth of the kind of channel-blasting stories he wanted to write.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, Westall's stories are as much about the changes confronting the North East as a region as they are about individual adolescents' engagement with maturity. At least, they are concerned with how future readers will experience stories of the region's past.

Certainly, in his adolescent fiction set in the past, Westall sought to resist lapsing into nostalgia, a temptation he described as 'the enemy of children's realism.'<sup>14</sup> In a speech written in 1978 and later published in an abbreviated form in *Signal*, 28 (Jan 1979), Westall discusses his attempts to avoid the 'temptation to send-up children' and instead to write with authenticity in order to communicate directly with his young readers rather than via a kind of proxy voice which he berates as fulfilling a desire to 'first please adults; editors, critics, parents, librarians.'<sup>15</sup> Here, Westall explores the impact of his attempts at writing for different imagined readers in the aftermath of the critical and commercial success of *The Machine Gunners*; clearly he believes he produces his best work when he has a very particular type of reader in mind.

The crowd looking over my shoulder as I wrote got bigger and bigger. And then 'Machine-gunners' won the Carnegie and it felt like the whole world was watching; for a month I couldn't write at all. The burden of all their expectations was totally flattening. My target-figure had grown from one to thousands; how could I please them all?

To my shame, I tried. Crawlily and contemptibly, though unconsciously, I tried. The amount of swearing in my books dropped; the intellectual content, the scholarship and research grew. I began writing books for the children of publishers, librarians and the literary gent of the 'Times'... [...] I recall hearing somewhere that twenty percent of the people in this country own eighty percent of the property. In the same ghastly way, their children own eighty percent of children's books...

Now I feel the only way back to freedom is for me to write a really dreadful book – not one that’s perverted or full of sex and violence, but simply one that will get me dragged to the Head-critic’s study and given six of the best. So I’ll know again whose side I’m on – the eighty percent of kids who, like my son, would probably enjoy ‘Machine-gunners’ but wouldn’t get beyond the first three pages of ‘The Wind Eye’ or ‘The Watch House’.<sup>16</sup>

In the search for validity, authenticity, and ‘realism’, Westall here seeks to distance himself from what he sees as his betrayal of his rightful readership in favour of the more privileged child. Although the terms he actually employs are more oblique, this is clearly a question of social class, with the occupation of those parents whose children he sees as less deserving of his attention all lying within the professional, middle classes. This desire to speak to the overlooked and disenfranchised majority of ‘eighty percent of kids’ is strongly connected to the long-standing affiliation of the North East with working-class culture, which I have earlier outlined in both broad terms and, more specifically, in relation to the field of children’s literature. One of the functions of both the place, and more particularly the people, of the North East as foci within Westall’s adolescent fiction is to address more emphatically ideas of struggle and conflict as central to the experience of adolescence. Westall employs characters from the North East because it helps him to align himself as writing about, and on behalf of, those adolescents ‘whose side I’m on’, and to reject the precocious, pretentious Robbie Atkinson in himself.

I suggested earlier that the natural landscape often functions in Westall’s work as a place of refuge for his adolescent characters, a space they are able to inhabit as they assimilate and come to terms with those threats which assail them from their impending adulthood. In the same way, the idea of childhood which

Westall had in mind when writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s is equally rooted in a desire to retreat from the threat of the present moment, and in particular those elements of the modern world which seemed to herald a dizzyingly rapid sense of relentless change and progression. This is not to say that his fiction is entirely reactionary, but rather that it is partly driven by a desire to engage with the unsettling sense of instability which Westall perceived as characterising the world in which his young readers were approaching the crisis of adolescence. In a typescript of a speech dating from the early 1980s, concerning the use of myth in children's literature, Westall considers the appeal of such a place of retreat.

[...] We are reaching an end, an end to man's thought being relevant, an end to man's work being relevant.

[...]

Unthinkable? I want not to think it myself. I want to withdraw from the horrors of it – as wealthy men withdrew from the horrors of the first Industrial Revolution, into the Arts and Crafts movement, the Gothick Revival. I can see every symptom of withdrawal in myself. [...] I am consciously building Fortress Westall, against the storm that is coming. I thought for a while this was simply the onset of middle-age. But when I talk to some of my old pupils, successful vigorous people still in their thirties, I find the same impulse – towards the old, towards history and philosophy, religion and psychology, towards the things they enjoyed doing with their fathers when they were children...

[...]

But our children, coming in a never-ending stream, have to go on into the future, whether they like it or not.

[...]

If literature is going to do more than amuse, to give enjoyable frights, or while away an hour with nostalgia, it must create myths...helpful myths. We are all faced every day with a chaos of impressions, upon which we have to enforce some order before we can even act on our own behalf. Myths, to me, are tools to force order from chaos.<sup>17</sup>



The impact of such ‘an end to man’s work being relevant’ would be particularly painful for a region such as the North East, where images of work, especially male work, have been so central to its identity.

Prominent here is the idea of literature as a tool for ordering otherwise chaotic experience. As he saw it, the luxury of retreat into nostalgia is not open to the child in the way that it is to adults who can ‘withdraw [...] towards the old’. In order that they might ‘go on into the future, whether they like it or not’ (with the implication being that they will most probably not), new ‘myths’ must be provided by those writing for teenagers, as a way of offering a kind of lifeline to some sense of stability. Westall goes on to outline an example of his contribution towards such a mythic framework in the character of Chas McGill from *The Machine Gunners*. Making reference to comments he has received from the *Sunday Times* about how ‘children entering the large and bewildering world of comprehensive school empathise with Chas’ and his ‘attempts to make sense of a large and bewildering war’, Westall notes, ‘[t]hat is what I mean by the useful mediating nature of a myth.’<sup>18</sup> I will return later in this chapter to consider Westall’s comments concerning the effects of a shift in family structures. Importantly, it is the story of Chas’s adolescence in the North East to which Westall refers in support of his comments regarding the mediating effect of narrative in the lives of his teenage readers.

Westall sees his role as responding to a need within his readership for a literature of guidance. Such an urge may in part be attributed to the sudden death of his eighteen year-old son, Christopher, in 1977 as a result of a motorcycle accident. Naturally, this tragic event shaped Westall’s perceptions of himself and his relationships with other young people, and also his approach to writing.

Chris's presence can be felt in much of Westall's writing, not just those books set in the North East. Writing about the inspiration behind *The Kingdom by the Sea*, he draws a direct parallel between 'inarticulate grieving Mr Murgatroyd' and 'me as I am today', as '[a] man who thought you could make the world better by serving the young, and lost his own son; who looked for another everywhere and could not find one.'<sup>19</sup> Westall wrote often of the origins of *The Machine Gunners* in an impulse to 'share childhoods with Christopher' through 'a book written solely for one boy', and after his death continued to describe how "[...] I still write for him [...]".<sup>20</sup> Christopher's death intensified Westall's anxiety to offer a kind of narrative compass that might help the child reader navigate the disorienting experience of coming of age in an unstable, modern world. He explores these ideas by playing characters and events off his version of the landscape of the North East, which parallels some of these concerns, and the adolescent characters he creates in order to tell such mythic narratives are predominantly North-East children.

### *Landscape of childhood*

In *The Machine Gunners*, most of the significant action in the novel occurs in child-centred locations such as the Fortress or the woods; in *Kingdom by the Sea* Harry spends much of his time if not literally then figuratively alone in his kingdom; the Watch House lets forth its secrets only when occupied solely by children, just as the children in *The Wind Eye* must sail forth unaccompanied into the mist surrounding the Farnes in order to experience the events that will so irrevocably change their lives. The deployment of settings such as these, apparently the domain of children and distinct from the world of adults, is a

recurrent feature of Westall's writing, and indeed of many children's writers. Westall foregrounds the way in which the child's view and experience of the landscape may be markedly different from that of the adults in their world, and he links this idea with the needs of the child growing towards adolescence and adulthood. Though this clearly draws upon concerns shared by other children's writers, it is particularly central to Westall's work because the gulf he perceived as opening up between the life experiences of his young readers and that of their parents was particularly acute for those children growing up in the North East, where profound far-reaching shifts threatened existing stabilities to a marked extent. This is what makes the North East such an apposite setting for Westall's stories of late twentieth-century adolescence: because it was the place which for him embodied the idea of threatened identity.

In Westall's North-East novels, the landscape provides for the child's needs, (see Chapters 4 and 5), but beyond that the landscapes inhabited by his child characters are appropriate for the experiences they require; they are just the right places at just the right times. The North-East landscape in which his child characters find themselves is always conducive to their development, almost as if the region were attuned to the needs of the adolescent experience.

Westall's interest in the child's landscape can be seen in a relatively early piece of writing, produced some time in the 1970s while he was still an active secondary school art teacher. This consists of a draft school textbook he was planning, the tenth chapter of which is provisionally titled, 'A children's landscape?' In it Westall sets the following questions.

Where do you go to escape from adults? What do you do when you get there? Children adapting to adult landscape. Adults' idea of what children should like – the Victorian playground, the conventional modern playground, the

enlightened playground and the adventure playground.  
 But the adults still control them. One child paradise. What  
 should come first, a child's need to explore, build and  
 destroy, or the adult liking for tidiness?<sup>21</sup>

This idea of the child as an agent of exploration, creation, and destruction, as opposed to the adult as agent of stability, continuity and tradition, finds a resonance in the landscape and people of the North East, with the child characters of Westall's fiction often functioning as catalysts for a creative reappraisal of life in the region, even if they ultimately emerge from their experiences ready to assimilate to the adult status quo. Just as the child needs to 'explore, build and destroy' in opposition to the adult's desire for 'tidiness', similarly the North-East landscapes and people which surface in these stories are often linked to the dangerous and creative dimensions of the region as set against its notionally civilised modernity. If, for Westall, modernity is a disturbing force with which he feels compelled to engage, it seems that the corrosive effects he seeks to curtail, or at least counter, through his fiction are rooted in his perception of the stultifying uniformity he sees as inherent in the modern world. The North East that his child characters inhabit is a place of 'escape from adults', and also escape from the encroaching similitude of the modern landscape. By setting these novels in the North East, a place imbued with an attendant sense of disruption and crisis, Westall enables an exploration of adolescence both detached from a now-redundant preceding tradition, yet also struggling in the face of an uncertain and disturbing future.

Fantasies of escaping from adults, or at least evading their control, permeate Westall's fiction. Just as the physical landscape of the region is divided along child and adult boundaries, so too the social landscape of the North East

often positions adults and children as adversaries.<sup>22</sup> In *The Machine Gunners*, this combative relationship between the two groups is thematically central. Adult characters are often threatening figures, against which the children must defend themselves and each other. When Chas senses he is being followed on his way to the fortress, his first concern is that he may be at risk from ‘one of those awful strange men his mother was constantly warning him never to speak to’, rather than his child enemy Boddser Brown.<sup>23</sup> This fear of adults even extends to parents in some cases; when attempting to uncover the whereabouts of the machine-gun, the police sergeant questions Audrey Parton’s parents and suggests that they have tried physically hitting her in order to extract the information.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Audrey’s parents turn out to be cowardly and untrustworthy, and this revelation drives her towards the place and people with whom she shares a closer affiliation, namely the Fortress and her child friends.<sup>25</sup> Earlier in the novel, Clogger fakes his own disappearance in order to spend more time with Nicky at the Fortress, and at this point the gang grows much closer, with the children envisaging themselves as resistance fighters unified against the oppressive interventions of the adult world.<sup>26</sup> The novel’s denouement sees the gang of children literally take up arms against the adults of the town, and almost win, and even after this climactic confrontation is resolved, a divide still exists between the acknowledged honest bravery of the children and the adults who, in contrast, ‘were already busy, tidying things up in their minds, making them into more comfortable shapes.’<sup>27</sup>

It is Westall’s child characters who embody most emphatically the sense of indomitable spirit and community with which the reader is encouraged to associate the people of the North East. One of the strengths of Westall’s North-

East child characters is their understanding of and insistence upon the importance of friendship, not only with each other but often extending to animals and other creatures. The idea of solidarity in the face of shared threats has been central to the image of the North East as a community unified against common hardships, and in this sense Westall's child characters can be seen as embodying values which underpin the region's identity. In *The Machine Gunners*, such communal values find powerful expression in the Fortress itself, which can be seen as a microcosm of 1940s' North-East society governed by children's common sense rules and shared responsibilities. It is significant that it is the children in this novel who create a space that restates such values, in the face of an adult world profoundly disrupted and uprooted by war. This can be read as another attempt by Westall to offer the possibility of anchorage to his young readers, especially those from within the region, in the face of the threat from 'encroaching modernity'.<sup>28</sup>

### *Westall's child's landscape*

One reason why the region features so strongly in Westall's fiction arises from its relationship with Westall's view of the child's landscape. Chapter 1 draws on the work of Edward Royle to argue that, conceptually and bureaucratically, the idea of the region exists powerfully for people because of the position it occupies in a hierarchy of place; the region is large enough to be worthy of one's affiliation, over and above the individual town or city, yet simultaneously small

enough to be manageable and therefore less unwieldy than the more distant nation, or beyond.

In the same way that the North East draws its strong sense of identity from a combination of factors which unify the region in a concurrent act of dismissing, or at least distancing from, affiliation with the larger nation and in particular the dominance of the capital, so too the places that Westall's child characters inhabit also draw their strong sense of identity as places for North-East children, and not for others, especially adults. By presenting the North-East landscape as primarily the domain of children, Westall both reflects and undermines broader images of the region as marginalised and overlooked.

All the best places in Westall's North East are domains of children, though they continue to exert a powerful influence on the adult writer. Writing circa 1979, Westall recalls the writing of *Fathom Five*, in particular its setting around the mouth of the Tyne.

Where would the action be? There was only one place it could be, once the Battle of Britain was over – beside the River Gar, where every tide brought in the flotsam and jetsam of the Battle of the Atlantic. That river (really the Tyne) was to us lads a place of endless magic – especially Fish Quay Sands. [...]

Even today, after thirty years, I still go straight to Fish Quay Sands every time I go home. As evil-smelling and fascinating as ever. I sit and watch a new generation, hurling half-bricks at floating bottles, as they patiently wait for the eternal Tyne (or Gar) to throw up something interesting. They stare at me, the bearded gent in his sheepskin coat, sitting mysteriously on *their* territory. Could *he* possibly be a spy? Or merely someone their mothers have warned them not to take sweets from? They'd never believe me if I told them the truth.<sup>29</sup>

In Westall's writing, the North East exists as a child-centred land, a place from which the adult is exiled. Drawing upon both memories of his own childhood,

and his vicariously gained experiences of his son Christopher's childhood, the region Westall writes into being is limited in scope, manageable enough for his child characters to consider it '*their* territory', and as a consequence often too constricting for post-adolescent life. This, I would argue, stems partly from the knowledge on Westall's part that his adult world, in particular the world of professional, middle-class work, lay beyond the boundaries of his North-East childhood. For Westall, the North East would always remain a half-remembered, half-imagined world of childhood, bound to the space he had 'spent years in the act of leaving and never yet left.'<sup>30</sup>

The realm of the child that shapes Westall's writing is clearly bounded and limited, characteristics which, whilst adding to its appeal for the child, are more problematic for the adolescent. Speaking in 1977 at a conference of the School Library Association, Westall describes the scope of the child's world as circumscribed by the 'track' traversed in the course of daily life. The world of the young child he suggests is 'best represented by a star-shape – a huge nucleus of security – home – surrounded by radiating points that represent the child's foray into the world.' By age twelve, this has developed a reassuring structure and a 'shape best represented by a triangle' linking home with the 'semi-permanent' journeys to school and the location of the 'neighbourhood gang.' Westall comments that the 'triangle is a very stable shape, and the child is now at his most stable.'<sup>31</sup> However, this stability quickly changes to a sense of restriction upon reaching adolescence.

And then, at fifteen-sixteen, the track starts to break down. The gang dissolves, under the impact of homework, or starting work, or the advent of sex. [...]



But worst of all, home begins to shrink; it is no longer more than half the universe, ruled by the twin-gods of mother and father. Those of you who still have parents living in your childhood home will know what I mean. You go back now, and the back lawn, that huge prairie of a million grass-roots, where you could spend whole days empathising with a solitary ant, has shrunk to the size of a green pocket-handkerchief.<sup>32</sup>

Adolescence is seen as a time of greater complexity, and Westall conceptualises this through imagery of space and place.<sup>33</sup> I explored earlier how in *Falling into Glory*, Robbie Atkinson's emotional landscape expands in parallel with the physical landscape he inhabits. Similarly in this passage, one of the most profound effects for the adolescent's sense of self and belonging occurs as the security of the childhood world 'dissolves' into the instability of adolescence. In Westall's fiction, this dissolution manifests itself in the build up of exit velocity, which drives his characters to venture beyond the boundaries of their previous experience in one way or another.<sup>34</sup> Just as for many of his characters the family home changes 'from a place where you can permanently live into a place where you can temporarily hide', as for Westall himself, adolescence heralds a change in perspective which sees the North East as a region from which it is necessary to escape, at least for a time.<sup>35</sup>

Westall returned to this subject of the limited scope of the childhood world repeatedly in the many speeches he made from the 1970s until shortly before his sudden death in 1993. Speaking at Loughborough University in 1979, he describes how for 'the average thirteen-year-old the adult world is an utterly mysterious and terrifying terra incognita.' The adolescent is 'like a savage, knowing his school, his home, his street and territory intimately, but once off those he is in real terror of sailing off the edge of the world.' (Westall's

emphasis) The subject of the speech is a survey Westall had conducted of the reading habits of his students, and his main conclusion is that ‘the dominant and recurring theme was that of the journey [...] it has always seemed to me that those people I have met in life who were most unhappy were those who had lost all sense of life being a journey.’<sup>36</sup> This suggests a hunger on the part of the adolescent reader for narratives about moving on, and exploring the expanded terrain of the adult world. Roberta Seelinger Trites similarly notes how Young Adult novels ‘tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual’, typified by fiction which is ‘predicated on demonstrating characters’ ability to grow into an acceptance of their environment.’<sup>37</sup> In Westall’s own experience, this kind of growth and development meant leaving the North East and embarking on a journey which would see him never return to the region permanently.

As I have shown, Westall’s concern with producing narratives that might help map this new terrain for the adolescent reader is a response to both the disorienting experience of adolescence *per se*, and the instability of the world in which such adolescents were embarking upon their ‘journey’. Such dual concerns are reflected in Westall’s discussion of whether his ‘one character that has gained a life of his own, perhaps in time to stand alongside Toad or Christopher Robin [...] Chas McGill’ did indeed possess a sufficiently transcendent relevance to make his story capable of speaking to the experiences of present-day adolescent readers. Though confident that he ‘was certainly relevant to the world of 1973, which was in so many ways, not unlike the world of 1940’, Westall seems troubled by ‘how quickly he is now losing his

relevance.<sup>38</sup> This anxiety can be attributed, at least in part, to the changing social landscape of the 1980s.

Chas gained a lot of his security from living in the middle of a huge mass of mother, father, grandparents, aunts and cousins, all of whom had lived within walking-distance of each other all their lives. Nowadays, many kids have no more family than a single parent.

Chas knew his home territory very well, and it was a very small territory, geographically – about four square miles. A trip to the big city of Newcastle, only seven miles away, was a Christmas treat. Summer holidays were a week in some Northumbrian seaside town within thirty miles. The Costa Brava was as foreign as the far side of the moon.<sup>39</sup>

Certainly, the structure of society portrayed in *The Machine Gunners* was no longer the norm of teenagers' experiences in the 1980s. There is a paradox here of course, insofar as the eroded stability which can be seen as driving Westall's concern also enabled him to break free and move beyond the stifling stasis of his childhood in the region. The implied major differences between 1973 and 1983 focus on two related concerns, both of which herald the expansion of the child's world and experience. Physically, the limits of the child's world have been expanded as a result of a greater ability to both travel within and beyond his or her immediate environs, but the child's social perspective has been transformed too. The fabric of the traditional family unit is seen as profoundly reconfigured, a response on Westall's part to prevalent concerns over shifts in social structure and in particular the emergence of the one-parent household as a by-product of such shifts. Importantly for the North East, by 1983 the Thatcher government had been in office for four years, and had begun more fully to implement a free-market monetarist agenda with profound socio-economic consequences for the region; it is perhaps no consequence that the year in which Westall began to fear

such a shift in the child's experience of the world also saw the beginning of the 1983 to 1985 miners' strike, an event symptomatic of drastic shifts in the working-class way of life that had underpinned dominant images of North-East identity.

## *Family*

### *Parents*

For the most part, the families represented in Westall's North-East fiction are conventional, stable, and structured along traditional lines. In those texts where this is not the case (such as *The Watch House*, *The Wind Eye* and, to a lesser extent, *A Time of Fire*), the absence of such stability is usually quite marked, and to some degree such stories can be considered as the exceptions which prove the rule. The extent to which such families are conventional is usually reflected in the characters of the parents.

Both *The Machine Gunners* and *Fathom Five* feature the McGill family, a household which conforms to a traditional working-class model of family life, including those features Elaine Knox identifies such as 'the man as breadwinner, and the woman as wife and mother, working in the clearly defined and separate spheres of home and workplace' and a '“dinner on the table' ethic' which she suggests typify images of family life in the North East.<sup>40</sup> Mr McGill is a hard-working father and responsible member of the community. His appearance is often linked either to his occupation at the gasworks or his wartime role as Air-raid warden; one moment 'grimy [...] awfully sooty and oily', the next 'immaculate now, beret under shoulder strap', both images emphasise his practicality and role as a provider and protector.<sup>41</sup> In *Fathom Five*, the now

teenage Chas finds it more relaxing eating breakfast with his stoic and no-nonsense Dad who ‘never talked about Life and its Meanings; only fried bread and thrushes.’<sup>42</sup> Fathers are associated with protection and action, whereas Westall’s fictional mothers belong to the domestic sphere; in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, the image of ‘Dad in his warden’s uniform, who would sort everything out’ is contrasted with the image of ‘Mam, who could cuddle him and make everything all right’, and a similar contrast is drawn between Mr and Mrs McGill when ‘a peaceful evening, like one before the war’ sees Mrs McGill cooking whilst Mr McGill works at a mechanical task which results in his unknowingly building a tripod that will support the gang’s machine gun.<sup>43</sup> Similarly in *A Time of Fire*, Sonny yearns for his Dad as he remembers him being before the war-time death of his mother when he was ‘[a]lways making [...] wonderful things’ and ‘always whistled happily as he worked’.<sup>44</sup>

Westall comments on his memories of his own father as he was growing up who was ‘always making things’; this made a lasting impression on the writer who describes how ‘[i]t was just assumed in our house that the mark of manhood was to make, make, make, every waking hour. Nothing’s changed with me since.’<sup>45</sup> I explore Westall’s representation of gender in the North East in detail later in this chapter; for this discussion of his fictional families it is sufficient to note the recurring association in his writing between fatherhood and the physical act of manufacturing, which reflects the centrality of manufacturing industry within North-East culture, particularly in relation to ideas of masculinity.

In *A Time of Fire* Sonny’s mother, like Mrs McGill, is presented as domestic above all else. She first appears in the novel ‘coming up the path, a laden leather shopping bag in each hand’ before returning to the shop in order to

buy matches to light the fire in preparation for her husband's return from work; it is while doing this domestic task that she is inadvertently caught and killed in an air-raid.<sup>46</sup> Back at home following her funeral, Sonny hears her described as a "[...] good wife, and a grand little mother", and his grandmother implores everyone to eat up as "[...] our Maggie [...] hated wasting good food."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, as Harry struggles to grasp the full extent of the devastation that the war has wrought upon his home life, he falls back upon familiar images of 'the safety of Mam's kitchen' where 'Mam would be doing the ironing, or putting the stew in the oven.'<sup>48</sup> Harry turns to the physical landscape to provide a surrogate mother, and as the warmth of the sun lulls him to sleep he dreams of 'a usual day at home, with [...] Mam baking, and Dad coming in from work and taking his boots off with a satisfied sigh.'<sup>49</sup> Westall's North-East family home is structured around traditional working-class parental roles.

For the North-East children in Westall's fiction, the effect of such tradition and stability is twofold: it represents support/security, yet it also contributes to feelings of being stifled and limited by the life of the region. An example of this can be seen in *Fathom Five*, where Chas is both grateful for his mother and father's standing by him when he gets into trouble, yet also resentful of their intrusions into his life. This is a common enough attitude to find in novels exploring the onset of adolescence, but is also related specifically to Westall's perspective on the North East since it both reflects the stability of its working-class roots yet also acknowledges the tensions caused by Chas's aspirations which threaten to take him beyond his parents' locally-based, confined world. Such aspirations, and their effect on the child's place within the

family, are manifested in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, too. At the end of the novel, Harry rediscovers his parents and sister, but realises that his life now lies beyond the restrictions of their world. Harry's experience here can be mapped quite closely onto Westall's own life trajectory.

Harry had grown, and they hadn't. Harry had grown too big for his family, as if he'd drunk from some magic bottle like in *Alice in Wonderland*. And Dad knew it. And hated it.<sup>50</sup>

Westall's description of Harry's growth bears a striking resemblance to that found in *Falling into Glory*, where Robbie considers the effect that his affair with Emma Harris has had upon him. In both novels, Westall employs an *Alice in Wonderland* simile in describing the young boys' perception of their development, imagining themselves to have suddenly expanded beyond their previous horizons. In correspondence with editor Miriam Hodgson between 1989 and 1992, Westall makes explicit connections between the family lives of these two protagonists and his own experiences of growing up in the North East. Firstly, in letters concerning the development towards publication of *The Kingdom by the Sea*, Westall suggests that Hodgson's comments may have 'almost conjured up a new novel in me [...] the story of an adolescent's struggle to be free of family', suggesting that this theme was of some interest to him.<sup>51</sup> In response to a query from Hodgson regarding Harry's relationships with his real and surrogate parents, Westall relates the character's position to his own boyhood family life.

Like me, he is an intellectual snob, or about to become one. Of course, it is good for him to go home – as it was always good for me to go home, though I sometimes groaned at the prospect.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than any degree of antidote to his growing snobbery, what Harry gains from going home is a heightened sense of the gulf that exists between himself and his parents. This too Westall relates to his personal experience, comparing the ‘brutality of his return home in the last chapter, or the stark way he sees his parents on that return’ with his own memories of the difficulty of returning home from college to a ‘boring empty echoing box.’<sup>53</sup>

The parallels between his fiction and own memories of family life in the North East are made even more explicitly in the dialogues between editor and author concerning the text of *Falling into Glory*, the work in progress immediately preceding Westall’s sudden death. Writing in 1992, Miriam Hodgson requests that Westall include more detail regarding Robbie’s family and home life, to develop the ‘rather condemning remarks’ and ‘other negative views of home’ and therefore give ‘more sense of place [and] vision of his home.’<sup>54</sup> Westall’s response emphasises the extent to which he considers the novel to be ‘all most [sic] pure autobiography’, and he is therefore resistant to altering the portrayal of family life.<sup>55</sup>

Robbie’s Parents I have thought and thought about this, and realized what a low time my parents and I had come to. My childhood had been very happy and whole (cf. Christmas Ghost etc) until I went to grammar school. From then on, I grew and [...] I realised I would have to hide my growing from them, because they could not share it, and it hurt them. I suppose I was a gigantic cuckoo in their little nest. I also became a snob – not so much a money snob as an intellectual snob. I did my best to keep up a ‘home act’ but they became increasingly distressed and negative about me being ‘like nobody but myself’. Things were pretty bad by the time I reached Robbie’s age. We lived separate lives in the same small house. It must have been a wretched disappointment for them. And, re-reading the ‘parent’ episodes in the book, I came to the sad conclusion that



was exactly as we were. Even to using the reported as opposed to direct speech; that rings true too. [...] So, on this, I can't come to meet you halfway. I know how much parent/child relationships being good means to you, but this is a pretty brutal story. It was a brutal story.<sup>56</sup>

This dialogue is also reflected in marginal annotations to the novel typescript, where Westall characteristically engages with editorial suggestions. In response to a note from Hodgson drawing attention to ‘another negative, oblique view of the parents!’, Westall responds by writing that this representation ‘is true and absolutely essential to the plot.’<sup>57</sup> Westall’s own feelings of the ‘brutal’ divide between his adolescent self and his parents would eventually contribute to his moving away from the region, and the impact of such a divide can be felt in many of his North-East novels. In part, the distance between his child characters and their parents’ generation enacts some of Westall’s concerns over the changing face of life in the region. This is informed both by Westall’s own experience of reaching adolescence in the 1940s, leading to increased aspirations as a result of economic and social change occurring at that time, and also by his concerns over contemporary adolescents who he worried were inhabiting a world increasingly alien from that of the previous generation. This phenomenon was not unique to the North East, of course, and is arguably more related to a generational experience. Nevertheless, the North-East childhoods Westall constructs seem particularly apt for exploring these issues, reflecting as they do a traditional culture under siege from the threat of change.

Typical of Westall’s writings, such concerns over the present drive him towards the past. This aligns Westall’s fiction with the dominant aesthetic, characterised by a tendency to institute a sense of timelessness as essential and

ubiquitous in the region's identity, qualities which have also been argued as intrinsic to children's literature itself (see, for instance, Rose (1984)). In relation to the family, this desire to connect with earlier, and by inference purer times, manifests itself in the relationships between child characters and adults of their grandparents' generation.

### *Grandparents*

Many of Westall's North East novels treat close and important relationships between children and their grandparents as central. The effect of this is twofold. It both reinforces the position of the stable family unit as being typical of the family lives of North-East children, by emphasising the role of the extended family in their upbringing, and simultaneously foregrounds the closeness of such children to adults with an outlook on life shaped by their experiences growing up and living in an earlier generation. Both of these elements link the North-East children in these books more closely to the past, and an implied sense of tradition and stability.

Grandparents in Westall's fictional North East almost always stand for solidity, traditional values, and a sense of continuity. In *A Time of Fire*, for example, Sonny's time with his Grandparents restores stability to his life in the absence of his parents. Evident from the start is the extent of his Nana's stoic resolve and fortitude in the face of tragedy, as Sonny observes how 'her lips were set in their usual determined way, and her massive folded arms looked ready to do anything that needed doing.'<sup>58</sup> Later in the novel, the family sleeps in the cellar for added security, and here Nana's resourcefulness is evident as she stretches out the last of the old shrivelled remaining vegetables in a spirit of

‘Waste not, want not’.<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, it is a product of her frugality that disables the invading German parachutist, in the form of her ‘famous elderberry wine in its dark dusty bottles.’<sup>60</sup> Nana exudes a reassuring influence over Sonny, which he feels in everything she does. On the return journey from London after collecting Sonny’s father’s award for bravery, the sound of Nana’s knitting needles combines with the rhythm of the train, and seems to say to Sonny “‘We’re going home, we’re going home’”.<sup>61</sup> A similar sense of support and reassurance is provided by Sonny’s Granda, particularly as he comforts him following the death of his father.

Chas McGill’s grandparents in *The Machine Gunners* display similar values and characteristics. In the face of hardship, they too respond with indomitable stoicism and old-fashioned pragmatism. Following a near miss on their home during an air-raid, Chas’s Nana rails against “[...] Hilter and his Jarmans’”, and Chas imagines that ‘one attack by Nana and her famous rolling-pin would settle the war once and for all.’<sup>62</sup> Later in the novel, in the face of what they believe to be the feared German invasion, the two grandparents decide to stay put and face the threat together rather than attempt escape, again emphasising their stoicism.<sup>63</sup> Even their house suggests a North-East coastal tradition through and through, with its ‘white seashells in the garden, and freshly-painted flagstaff’.<sup>64</sup>

In *Falling into Glory*, the difference between Robbie’s relationship with his parents and his grandmother is quite striking. In contrast with the strained relationship at home, Robbie feels in awe of his Nana. Her solidity is represented in her ‘forceful’ cooking and ‘small, very solid figure’. Robbie admires her ‘simplicity’, and describes how, in times of adolescent turbulence and

uncertainty, '[i]n her was utter safety.'<sup>65</sup> Westall discusses the significance of this relationship in the young boy's life in his correspondence with Miriam Hodgson concerning an early draft of the novel. In response to Hodgson's comment that she found the 'visit to Nana so touching', Westall explains the difference between his own relationship with 'Nana' and with his parents.<sup>66</sup> He treats the text as a piece of autobiography, as he has previously outlined.

Nana was different. She didn't oppress me. I was able to love her, perhaps because we didn't have to live together. I feel this difference, this love for her, also helps the book. Anything she does / says has to be right, because she is the magic woman.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, the closer emotional relationship between grandparent and child is a common enough image in juvenile fiction. There is also a sense, however, in which grandparents in Westall's fictional North East are symbolic of the attraction of the past for the adolescent child, and in particular are perceived as links to the late nineteenth century. Just as I suggested earlier that Westall's North-East children can be read as regressing into the natural landscape, there is also a sense in which their relationships with their grandparents anchor them in a relationship with a time of particular significance for the enduring image of the North East upon which Westall draws, namely the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 210; an example of what John Stephens identifies as '[a]rguably the most pervasive theme in children's fiction [...] the transition within the individual from infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness.' See Stephens, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>5</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 146-149.

<sup>6</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 25

<sup>7</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 118

<sup>8</sup> *The Making of Me*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Rose (1984), Lesnik-Oberstein (1994), Hunt (1994), Hollindale (1997).

- <sup>10</sup> Robert Westall, (1977) 'The Vacuum and the myth': press cutting from *School Book Shop News*, 6 (Spring 1977), Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/21, f3r.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/21, f3r.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert Westall, (1977) 'What is True?': press cutting from *Puffin Post*, Vol. 11, 6 (1977), Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/24, p. 23.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/21, f3r.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), 'Reading the Entrails of Realism' speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/12, f2r.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/12, f2r.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/12, f6r.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1983-85), 'I rise to address you today' speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/06, ff3r-5r; unfortunately, the context/intended audience of this speech is unacknowledged.
- <sup>18</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1983-85), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/06, f7r; though Westall refers to comments in the *Sunday Times*, he does not identify the article in question.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), 'What inspired the characters in *Kingdom by the Sea*? ' press cutting, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/02/04, p. 4; originally published in *New Windmills News*, June 1992.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Making of Me*, pp. 186-187; Robert Westall, (1983), quoted in 'Authorgraph No. 18: Robert Westall', *Books for Keeps*, 18 (January 1983), 12-13 Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/02.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1970s), *Town planning textbook drafts and associated material*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/11, p. 4.
- <sup>22</sup> The delineation of this landscape along class boundaries has been explored in Chapter 2.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 155.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 140.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 173-174.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 103.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 203.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1960s-1980s), 'North Shields' manuscript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/088, f1r.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1979), 'Talking in the Dark' press cutting, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/16, f2r.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Making of Me*, p. 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), 'The Chaos and the Track' speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/18, f2v; f3v.
- <sup>32</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/18, f3v.
- <sup>33</sup> J. A. Appleyard relates this to 'the discovery of the subjective self', typically reflected in a desire on the part of adolescent readers for fiction that 'makes them think' (emphasis in original); see J. A. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 97; p. 100.
- <sup>34</sup> Consider, for example, Chas McGill in *The Machine Gunners* and *Fathom Five*, Harry in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, and Robbie in *Falling into Glory*; all experience the force of exit velocity.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Westall, (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/18, f4r.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert Westall, (1979), 'Why I read that book' speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/25, ff7r-9r.
- <sup>37</sup> Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000), pp. 19-20.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1983-85), 'I rise to address you today' speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/06, f7r.

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- <sup>39</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1983-85), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/06, f7r.
- <sup>40</sup> Knox, p. 94; pp. 103-106; see Chapter 1.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 52-53.
- <sup>42</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 35.
- <sup>43</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 7; *Fathom Five*, p. 19; *The Machine Gunners*, p. 115.
- <sup>44</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>45</sup> Robert Westall, (c 1983-85), 'The Author in the Classroom' typescript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/17, f1r; subsequently published as Robert Westall, 'The Author in the Classroom', *The Use of English*, 31.1 (Autumn 1979), 5-13.
- <sup>46</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 4-7.
- <sup>47</sup> *A Time of Fire*, pp. 17-18.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 10.
- <sup>49</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 11.
- <sup>50</sup> *The Kingdom by the Sea*, p. 208.
- <sup>51</sup> Robert Westall, (1989), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson, 23 June 1989*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/04, f2r.
- <sup>52</sup> Robert Westall, (1989), Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/04, f3r.
- <sup>53</sup> Robert Westall, (1989), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson accompanying annotated typescript of 'The Kingdom by the Sea', 5 August 1989*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/07, f1r.
- <sup>54</sup> Miriam Hodgson, (1992), *Letter to Robert Westall, 2 June 1992*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/28, f2r.
- <sup>55</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson, 11 July 1992*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/29, f1r.
- <sup>56</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/29, ff1r-2r.
- <sup>57</sup> Robert Westall, (1993), *Falling into Glory: publisher's typescript*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/07/012, f84r.
- <sup>58</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 10.
- <sup>59</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 95.
- <sup>60</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 96.
- <sup>61</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p.122.
- <sup>62</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 62.
- <sup>63</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 176-177.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 58.
- <sup>65</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>66</sup> Miriam Hodgson, (1992), *Letter to Robert Westall, 2 June 1992*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/28, f1r.
- <sup>67</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson, 11 July 1992*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/29, f2r.

## **Chapter 7: Westall's People Part 2**

### **Gender**

Given that a sense of tradition and stability permeates Westall's fictionalised representations of North East family life, it is perhaps unsurprising that a similar focus on traditional roles and attitudes informs his broader representations of gender within the region. This is not to suggest that such representations are entirely conformist or backward-looking, but rather that gender in Westall's North-East fiction is shaped by the values of two particular cultural moments, namely the time of Westall's own childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, and the time in which he found himself writing, the 1970s to 1990s. The first of these can be situated in a North East still greatly attuned to the values of its nineteenth-century roots, that key moment of becoming for the identity of the region, yet which he writes about with an anticipation of the profound social changes being wrought by the Second World War and its after effects. Such changes, not least of which was the influence of modernity upon gender roles in society and the challenges this posed to traditional social structures, span Westall's writing career, (1975 to 1993).<sup>1</sup> Earlier archival material within the Robert Westall Collection helps to illustrate some of Westall's concerns from the 1960s as well, and to trace the development of his thinking on gender within the North East.

### ***North-East masculinity***

It is reasonable to describe the North East of Westall's fiction as masculine, insofar as most of his stories set in the region are primarily focalised around the experiences of boys and young men growing up in the North East. Two notable

exceptions to this are *The Wind Eye* and *The Watch House*, but both of these feature strong subplots centred on the male experience of life in the region and, as I will show, both novels clearly situate their protagonists within a masculine domain.<sup>2</sup>

*The Machine Gunners*, described by Westall as ‘very much a boys’ book’, centres almost exclusively on the experiences of boys: Chas McGill and his gang, later extended to include the young German airman Rudi.<sup>3</sup> The only girl, Audrey Parton, is accepted into the gang somewhat reluctantly, and as a result of her being ‘the only girl Cem and Chas ever talked to’ as her ‘chest was quite flat’ and she ‘said she’d always wanted to be a boy.’<sup>4</sup> By the end of the novel, Chas pays Audrey the highest compliment available to him when he tells her, “[...] You were as good as any boy.”<sup>5</sup> Audrey’s role in the gang is explored in greater detail in the following section, but from the outset it is clear that her membership is allowed in spite of her sex, and because she defies her gender role.

Within the Fortress, it is the boys and Rudi who operate the machine gun, and they demonstrate stereotypical forms of masculine aggression in other ways too. Chas enables the gang headquarters to be built by rescuing Nicky using violent intervention with Boddser Brown.<sup>6</sup> Clogger’s main contribution to the gang’s activities is strength and brute force; he is introduced as ‘silent and very hard’ having ‘once played a whole match after losing two front teeth [...] spitting blood thoughtfully’.<sup>7</sup> Nicky, though initially a victim ‘with a pale girl’s good looks’, eventually overcomes his fears, follows his father’s inspiration and asserts his manhood in the final confrontation.<sup>8</sup>



Almost all other characters of any significance in the novel are male, from schoolteacher Stan Liddell, who has nobly faced the ‘barbed wire, mud, stink and exploding chaos’ of genuine warfare at the front line, through to ‘strong and pot-bellied’ John, without whose combination of child-like simplicity and sheer brute strength the Fortress would not be possible.<sup>9</sup> Such a focus on qualities linked to physical prowess and fortitude can be read as contributing to images of North-East masculinity, with its focus on physical strength and hard labour. That the novel is so sharply focussed on the male world is an issue which Westall acknowledged in correspondence with a class of pupils from a Birmingham school in 1988. The correspondence primarily concerned what the pupils argued was the novel’s questionable politics, in particular its ‘racist comments [and] sexist remark[s]’.<sup>10</sup> Westall defends the novel firstly on the grounds of narrative viewpoint, by pointing out that often the passage in question comprises ‘a Chas-statement, seen through Chas’s eyes, and said through Chas’s mouth – and not my mouth.’<sup>11</sup> He does acknowledge the novel’s strong gender slant, which he attributes to his authorial intention when writing it.

I’m sorry there were not more girls in the story; but the story was originally meant only for boys; only girls seem to have got quite fond of it, over the years. I have other books with heroines, ‘The Watch House’ for example, and ‘The Wind Eye’. But it is harder for a man to write about girls than about boys – he doesn’t understand how they feel inside.<sup>12</sup>

Westall is being slightly disingenuous here, as his writing shows little reluctance on his part to attempt writing from a female perspective. By this stage, though he had only recently committed himself to writing full time he had nevertheless produced a substantial amount of work which featured female protagonists. What is certainly true is that in his North-East fiction, Westall is

most confident in writing boys' stories, especially in terms of his realistic fiction. All of the North-East war novels feature boys' perspectives on growing up in the region, regardless of their date of composition or publication.<sup>13</sup> Both novels which feature female central characters have supernatural themes, and feature elements of timeslip. In much of his North-East fiction, Westall takes as a starting point his own boyhood memories of growing up in the region, and this accounts for their similarities in terms of themes and temporal settings, and also for their male focus. In Westall's realistic fiction, North-East childhoods are time and gender specific. As he suggests in the correspondence featured above, the North East he remembers from his youth was experienced from a masculine perspective, and his fictional representation of the region is inflected by such a viewpoint. To some extent, Westall's fictional North East can be seen to contribute to the centrality of the masculine experience, in images of the region. As I considered in Chapter 3, in the history of the North East the female experience has tended to be framed within a negative cultural space, which elides the reality of such experience in the interest of shoring up and underpinning existing androcentric images. Westall's realistic fiction draws heavily upon such images. Elsewhere in his North East writing can be felt the influence of wider cultural shifts in gender politics, with which Westall attempts to grapple. His North East remains, however, a primarily masculine domain; this can in part be attributed to what Rebecca Anne Smith identifies, in the work of North-East poet Barry MacSweeney, as 'a reaction to the emasculation of the North East following the demise of traditional industry.'<sup>14</sup>

Examples of North-East masculinity can be traced in the various male influences upon boy characters' lives. In *Fathom Five*, as Chas navigates his way

through his developing awareness of different social roles within Garmouth, he also comes into contact with a range of exemplars of North-East manhood. Most important of course is his father, a similar presence as in *The Machine Gunners*. The kind of manhood exemplified by Mr McGill is one of stalwart respectability and good humoured self-reliance in the face of adversity. As the novel draws towards its conclusion, his father's presence becomes more central in Chas's life, as he attempts to understand the complexities of the deception he has uncovered in Garmouth. In discussing the situation, Mr McGill firmly excludes Chas's mother from the conversation, telling her they are talking "Men's talk", the effect of which is described 'as if Dad had softly closed a door.'<sup>15</sup> The real business of this adventure, the implication seems, is best discussed and handled by men. Although Chas must face the German spy's attempt on his life alone, it is to an earlier image of his father that he turns in the midst of the uncertainty that arises from his experiences. As he attempts to come to terms with his shaken world view, Chas turns to a poem he has memorised in his English class with teacher Stan Liddell, 'Ariel's Song' from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.<sup>16</sup> It is from this 'dizzying poem' that the novel's title is taken, and Chas is drawn to the lines, 'Full fathom five thy father lies;/ [...] Nothing of him that doth fade;/ But doth suffer a sea-change...', as he considers the disorienting events that have occurred.<sup>17</sup> However, unlike in the poem, Chas's father represents stability, certainty and continuity, in contrast with the surrounding 'sea-change' occurring in Chas's adolescent world.

You could trust nothing.  
Then he saw the man on the cliff top; old black bike  
and greasy cap. Waiting for him.  
He laughed, a little wildly. The poem was wrong.  
Everything had suffered a sea-change *except* his father.  
Dad was the same, forever and always...<sup>18</sup>

Chas's most dominant male role model, then, is to him a figure of permanence and solidity.

Two other North-East men make a significant impact on Chas's experiences in the novel. These are Dick Burley, captain of the tugboat 'Hendon', and Chas's cousin Robert, a Royal Navy Commander. Both are men of the sea, and both play important roles in attempts to intercept the suspected spy. Dick Burley is reminiscent of a wild, and untamed pirate, with 'eyebrows big as moustaches, and a beard that blanketed his chest'. His language is intemperate, and he reveals to Chas how he 'nearly killed ye once' as a result of taking Chas's mother on an ill-advised trip while pregnant.<sup>19</sup> Dick Burley represents a dangerous kind of masculinity, though tamed, controlled and, fortunately, on the right side. To Chas he seems 'almost like God [...] Except God wouldn't say things that made Cem laugh like a rotten drain' and 'as big and safe as the Rock of Gibraltar.'<sup>20</sup> His presence is reassuring and inspirational for Chas, who wonders 'How could Britain lose, with men like Dick Burley?'<sup>21</sup> His salt-of-the-earth approach to adversity is something for the young adolescent to aspire towards.

A similar kind of masculinity is found in the figure of Cousin Robert. He too has faced the hardships of combat, and carries the battle scars to prove it. When Chas first meets him, he is shocked by his dishevelled appearance, and flees the 'horrible mechanical man'.<sup>22</sup> Yet later, he regains his composure and plays his part in thwarting the actions of the German crew. When he returns Chas to the safety of his home, he is greeted by Mr McGill, and after an awkward period of explanation, his masculine credentials are affirmed as he is admitted

into the North-East masculine domain as the ‘two men fled to the greenhouse, by the light of a shaded torch.’<sup>23</sup>

In *The Machine Gunners* and *Fathom Five*, traditional North-East masculine values are celebrated. Although Chas must use cunning in order to steal the machine gun and operate the Fortress successfully, and to outwit the spying operation, ultimately it is the bravery and physical prowess of men which is employed to save the day. The machine gun itself can be read as symbolic of the gang’s attempts to assert their growing masculinity and contribute to the war effort; ultimately, its eruption marks an assault not upon the German enemy line, but rather upon the world of adulthood by children; nevertheless its penetrative force remains resonant, and the gun is only ever handled by men and boys. Similarly, in *Fathom Five*, Chas’s quest is also largely an attempt to assert his position among the daring and forthright male hierarchy that surrounds him. Though this sequel does attempt to address some of Westall’s concerns over the lack of girl characters in its predecessor, it nevertheless remains firmly centred on what is undoubtedly a masculine North-East world.

Such a focus is clearly echoed in the later novel *Falling into Glory*. From the novel’s outset it is clear that the development of adolescent male sexuality will be thematically central. The fall of the novel’s title refers both to protagonist Robbie’s developing sexuality, paralleling biblical notions of the Fall, and to the development of his sporting skill on the rugby pitch. By linking Robbie’s growing sexual prowess with his increased sporting prowess, Westall underlines how male coming-of-age in the North East is closely bound to images of physical skill and power.

Robbie's masculinity does grow and change in the course of the novel, but it remains resolutely chauvinist. I explored earlier the way in which images of exploration and domination characterise Westall's representation of the female body in this novel, as viewed from Robbie's perspective. Robbie's views on masculinity are entrenched as well. He describes the relationships between the boys in his circle of friends in terms of aggression and mutual contempt.

Whatever held us together, it was not love. Or trust.  
Or faithfulness. I think we rather hated each other.<sup>24</sup>

There is little solidarity here, but rather a pervading sense of competition and mutual suspicion. Robbie does feel a genuine sense of emotional attachment towards his friend Jack Dowson, which he describes as 'mocked, unrequited love [...] [t]he kind that Watson felt for Sherlock Holmes', but for the most part his masculine world is a hard place.<sup>25</sup> His experiences with Emma Harris are so appealing in part because they constitute forays into a world of open emotions, which has been previously alien to him. That said, his behaviour towards both Emma and Joyce remains somewhat manipulative and predatory. Such a view of adolescent masculinity is intentional on Westall's part, as evinced by both marginal annotations in the typescript copy of the novel, and in the accompanying correspondence with Westall's then editor. When Miriam Hodgson suggests cutting what she sees as Robbie's cruder comments, Westall over-annotates with the response of 'No, I want the crudeness', then later 'No, I want this crudity too'.<sup>26</sup> A few pages later, Hodgson's annotation suggests another cut, which again Westall resists with the response, 'No, this builds up chauvinist atmosphere'.<sup>27</sup> Westall does make concessions to Hodgson's judgement, in particular regarding a change to the ending of the book. In the

typescript draft, Westall has Robbie marry his ‘wise faithful quiet Joyce’ who tolerates his chauvinistic behaviour and ‘just shakes her head ruefully, and says “Men”’.<sup>28</sup> In his response to Hodgson’s suggestions, Westall agrees to cut the ending, and explains his representation of the character of Joyce in more detail.

Joyce. First, I have given you the big thing you want – I have cut the end. He does not marry her. At least, it is not said. I do really want the reader to see her through Robbie’s eyes (and he derives his view partly from the ‘group-view’ of the boys, which is inordinately cruel.) I want this cruelty. It is how boys were – and perhaps even now, how boys are. I do not want in any way to lessen the cruelty, vulgarity, cheapness and crudity of the boys. (Girls need to know the truth.) Robbie is, in the beginning, perhaps even at the end, a horror. But I want to say that even horrors can fall in love, get hurt, have soft feelings. Robbie is a baddy and a goody both. But he learns, he learns.<sup>29</sup>

Westall comments earlier in the correspondence on how autobiographical the novel is, and how the act of writing it has been traumatic for him as he relived the experience of his own troubled adolescence. Westall’s representation of masculinity in this novel can be seen as an attempt to confront his own concerns over his attitudes towards women as he was growing up. This anxiety on Westall’s part may be a response to the rising profile of a liberal agenda regarding gender politics, one effect of which had been the critical treatment of Westall’s work as embodying ‘macho’ attitudes.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the trigger, the intention in this novel is clear. It is worth remembering that this was one of Westall’s final pieces of writing. Although he could not of course anticipate that this would be the case, it must nevertheless be treated as one of his late works. Later in the same letter, Westall makes suggestions for the publicity blurb. His comments are telling, particularly the direct reference to gender politics in the times of the novel’s writing and publication.

I do not want to cut sexist phrases. You can start your blurb, “Robbie Atkinson lives in male chauvinist 1950, and is the supreme male chauvinist pig. But he learns... Are men today so very different, or have they just learnt to make the right noises.”<sup>31</sup>

Another novel in which North-East masculinity is manifested as an exertion of dominance is *The Watch House*. Although the novel is focalised through the experiences of an adolescent girl, Anne, the emotional landscape that she attempts to navigate is constrained and shaped by masculine forces. Displaced from her family by the breakdown of her parents’ marriage (again an indication of Westall’s interest in the shifting domestic landscape of 1970s Britain), Anne lives temporarily with her former Nanny and her brother, Arthur. Arthur bears some resemblance to the Geordie man as found in *The Machine Gunners* and other Garmouth novels, combining a no-nonsense approach to facing hardship with his self-appointed role as head of household. When he first appears in the novel, he is seen shaving outdoors in his vest, swearing and dripping blood.<sup>32</sup> He joins the women inside with a request to his sister to, “Give us a spot o’ tea, wumman”, and his relationship with Anne’s young male friend Timmo serves to reinforce both of these male characters’ associations with the rational and practical, as they share the task of mowing the clifftop grass.<sup>33</sup> Timmo himself embodies the rational particularly strongly, with his presence in the Watch House described as ‘cynical, searching Timmo, waiting to tear the guts out of anything that moved and hold it up for scientific inspection.’<sup>34</sup> The conflict between the rational and the irrational which sits at the centre of the novel reveals itself through a conflict between the masculine and the feminine, a division which is reflected in the North-East landscape itself. The Watch House



is full of artefacts ‘that’s beyond a mere *woman’s* understanding’ (italics in original), including the dangerous supernatural presence which threatens to destroy Anne and her friends.<sup>35</sup> Although Anne is the point of contact through which such forces are channelled, ultimately it is Father da Souza who must grapple with the creature, and who comes to understand its roots and purpose. Whatever the spirit may have been, it is clear that it emerges as a result of male aggression and violence, and its advances towards Anne are malevolent and predatory.

### *The feminine North East*

I suggested earlier that Westall’s representation of gender in the North East is inflected by his interest in changing gender roles during the period of his writing. Such concerns are reflected in many of his fictional works, and also in archival evidence. Two pieces written by Westall in the early 1990s touch upon the issue of modern gender politics, and reveal both Westall’s concern with such ideas, and his attempts to engage with them in his fiction. In 1991, writing in *In Brief* magazine produced by Elizabeth Hammill at Waterstones Booksellers in Newcastle upon Tyne, Westall likens the formation of individual identity to the work of the playwright, suggesting that ‘we make up our lives in our heads as we go along, rather as if we were writing a play.’<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates an awareness on Westall’s part of postmodern views of the textual nature of subjectivity, and perhaps even nascent ideas of the performativity of gender. His intention in this piece is not flippant; his main concern is with offering guidance to his young readers regarding the ways in which their identities are shaped by both their own perceptions and the narratives constructed for them by others. He touches on

current political issues by making reference to the ways that the roles in which one individual casts another can result in serious consequences, citing the example of ‘Bush and Saddam Hussein in the Gulf’ as evidence of this, before tackling the question of gender roles, and in particular the ways in which girls might find themselves positioned into inhabiting certain roles by the expectations of others.<sup>37</sup>

Girls especially should be careful of the parts that boys try to push on them. We most of us know that Sex Object is undesirable. But what about Girl Friday (“Look Karen, you’re the only one that can save my life by doing my French homework?”) Or Soul Mate (“I knew the moment we met that you were the only person who would ever truly understand me”). The trouble with Girl Friday is that it can turn into a Doormat pretty quick. And Soul Mate gives the boy licence to do nearly all the talking; the state of the girl’s soul never seems to interest him. And both Girl Fridays and Soul Mates can suddenly get the push if Sex Object comes along... [...] So watch out for the plays running inside other people’s heads and make sure you don’t get too badly miscast.<sup>38</sup>

Westall’s intention here is clearly to offer advice to young female readers regarding the ways they may be viewed and positioned by boys; this concern can also be seen in correspondence with Miriam Hodgson, in which Westall states that ‘Girls need to know the truth’ about boys’ ‘cruelty, vulgarity, cheapness and crudity’.<sup>39</sup> What is revealing in both these examples is the way in which, despite the best of intentions, Westall himself inadvertently positions his female readers within a limited sphere. The roles which might be thrust upon them are entirely passive, (i.e. ‘Sex Object’, ‘Soul Mate’ and ‘Girl Friday’), dependent upon their relation to the boys who will apparently attempt to instigate them. Although warning against accepting such passivity, Westall does not offer any more emancipated alternatives; the thrust here is towards how best to cope with rather

than avoid such limitations. In a speech written in 1992 for a conference on fantasy literature at Keble College, Oxford, the author demonstrates a similar wish to engage with ideas of gender roles, and in particular the development of representations of gender within his fiction. Commenting on the ‘little bits of my real life’ that make up his fiction, Westall describes how, as he grows older, he grows ‘less afraid to dig out discreditable chunks of myself [...] that’s what’s worth offering’; one outcome of such an approach is, in Westall’s opinion, a growing emotional honesty in his work, with the result that ‘my heroes get steadily less heroic, though, perversely, my heroines get more heroic, as I become more and more impressed by the goodness and caring in women.’<sup>40</sup> The roots of such comments lie in an anxiety on Westall’s part to understand changes being wrought in the public sphere regarding gender roles, and in particular the new female voices asserting their right to be heard. Admittedly, writing in the early 1990s Westall might be seen as lagging a little behind the cultural agenda here, but nevertheless his comments stem from a genuine concern to engage with the climate. Later in the speech, Westall makes a parallel between the writer’s use of fantasy worlds, and his imagined view of the futuristic social landscape.

Anyway, I don’t think I shall go in for any more magic cats who could conquer the Universe. I have found the race that is truly going to conquer the Universe. [...] a race that already controls a language as great as men’s language [...]

That race is woman. [...]

So now I am brooding about a world run by women. [...] What will it be like? Some things I can see. I see cars that will not be allowed to do more than fifty miles an hour, cars that do not pollute, cars so padded inside and out with safety devices that it will be impossible to kill yourself in one. If you are being foolish, it will simply take the controls away from you. If you are drunk, it will simply refuse to start. They will be cars equipped for babies to travel and be fed in comfort.

Above all, cars that communicate with other cars.  
Mummy-cars.<sup>41</sup>

Women are here described as racially different to men, even more akin to ‘magic cats’ than the men who presently rule the world. Again here, Westall’s intention seems to be to emphasise those characteristics that he sees as peculiarly female, as positive alternatives to previous masculine folly; in the process, he reveals the roles into which his world view positions women. The achievements he imagines in this future ‘world run by women’ are first and foremost about emphasising the maternal and protective, manifested most acutely in the ‘Mummy-cars’, which seem effectively to be motorised surrogate wombs.

Of course, Westall is not here referring specifically to aspects of North-East femininity, but some of the central ideas are reflected in gender representations within his North-East fiction. To return to *The Watch House*, here femininity in the region is characterised as predominantly domestic, emotional (and therefore irrational), or sexual. Anne is returned to Garmouth because her mother is unable to fulfil her maternal responsibilities (and is therefore characterised throughout as recklessly irresponsible), and she finds in the figure of Prudie the model of domestic caregiver that she needs. Prudie is described as ‘Good old Nanny’, and rather than hankering after her own pleasure in the form of a cigarette as Anne’s mother does, she provides nourishment through a bountiful supply of jam tarts and, later in the novel, endless cups of tea.<sup>42</sup> In an early piece of preparatory material, Westall sketches out an image of Prudie which clearly informs her appearance in the novel, as she ‘wiped her hands on her flowered pinafore’ before tackling the task of tea-making.<sup>43</sup> Such domestic aspirations are shared to some extent by Anne, who dreams of a future when she

can ‘do English, Needlework and Domestic Science at ‘A’ level, and marry a scientist, and live in a dustfree house [and] use the Hoover every day’.<sup>44</sup> Such portrayals can be seen as drawing upon existing images of North-East female life, as outlined in Chapter One.

Both of the young girls in this novel are strongly sexualised. When Pat introduces herself to Anne, both her comments and Anne’s focus on her physical appearance; she describes herself as ‘Fat Pat’, and the narrative voice (focalised through Anne) describes how her ‘thighs and bosom were generous’, though ‘she didn’t bulge over her bra-strap’; in short, she is ‘Nice as a pint of milk.’<sup>45</sup> Again in the draft materials, she is described as ‘a series of broad, satisfying tee-shirt and jean-filling shapes’ which ‘some boys rather like [and] can’t keep their hands off’, and who ‘had nothing to worry about really [and] would probably be super and slim by the time she was twenty.’<sup>46</sup> Anne too is asked by Mr McGill (the grown up Chas from *The Machine Gunners*, who has become a lawyer in Garmouth) whether she has a ‘young man’ yet, and she reveals later that she has been the target of her mother’s new boyfriend’s “‘ [...] wet open-mouth kisses.’”<sup>47</sup> Tellingly, no such details are offered in relation to male characters in the novel, such as Timmo for instance.

Most striking, however, is the way in which being female is linked to the emotional and spiritual world, and therefore associated with the supernatural in opposition to male rationality and science. The plot hinges upon Anne’s ability to connect with the ghostly forces reaching out from the town’s past, and her sex is central to this. Rational Timmo claims that so-called poltergeist activity ‘is associated with unbalanced adolescents – usually female’, and Anne herself worries about telling him of her experiences in case he thinks her “‘ [...] a crazy

female.’”<sup>48</sup> Later, Timmo makes the disturbing suggestion that the ghostly power of the Old Feller increased ““because you listened to him, Anne. [...] you came, and you were lonely, and soft-hearted...and *cared* [...]”” (emphasis in original).<sup>49</sup> At the novel’s climax, Father da Souza explains the supernatural events, and there is little doubt that Anne’s femininity is seen as complicit in the haunting and threatening events surrounding it.

‘What was feeding it?’

‘You people were. While it only had old men for company...old men who treated it as a joke...it was harmless. Then Anne came and she was lonely, missing her father. Wanting something to love and protect...’

‘You mean it lured her in and *used* her?’

‘Or was she using it...You can never tell with disturbed adolescent girls; a number have been the centres of poltergeist activity. When two people fall in love, who is using who?’<sup>50</sup>

Both Anne’s sexuality and her supposed natural maternal instinct are culpable here, with the suggestion being that “[...] disturbed adolescent girls [...]” are so love-crazed as to seek affection even with monstrous creatures from beyond the grave. Somewhat preposterously, the priest goes on to suggest that all will be well now that Anne’s father has returned as she “[...] will have a full-time job looking after *him* now [...]” (emphasis in original).<sup>51</sup> The implication seems to be that femininity, unconstrained by appropriate domesticity, is a dangerous and disturbing force.

*The Wind Eye* also explores adolescent female sexuality, primarily through the relationships between central character Beth, St Cuthbert and her father Bertrand. Beth feels caught between the stubbornness of both of these men, who she describes as two heartless masculine millstones grinding together, with her trapped between.<sup>52</sup> This is one of Westall’s novels where he does

attempt to focus on the female experience, and although Beth is not a North-Eastern girl the transformative experience she has in the novel could only have occurred in the region which brings her into contact with Cuddy, a figure so important to the dominant aesthetic of the region. Tellingly, one of the revelations that Beth experiences is the realisation that in order to truly be herself she must acknowledge that she is “[...] quite sexy, really.”<sup>53</sup> The adolescent boy in the novel, Michael, is never sexualised in the same way as Beth. Although on one level, the story exposes and challenges entrenched sexism as practised by St Cuthbert, through Beth’s demonstration that she is “*Femina bona* [...] a virtuous woman [...]”, nevertheless the over-riding image of North-East gender relations presented in the novel is one in which St Cuthbert’s patriarchal dominance acts to subdue and disempower women, for instance through the transformative shrew-taming he performs upon the virago Madeleine.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly polarised images can be seen in *The Machine Gunners*. Lone female gang member Audrey Parton is clearly constrained by her sex. Her initial acceptance into the group is able to occur because her ‘chest was quite flat, and [...] she was as good climbing trees and drainpipes as any boy’, in contrast with other girls who had ‘deserted her for sheer lisle stockings, ringlets, and mother’s powder-puff’; in other words, Audrey’s lack of such typical feminine characteristics renders her sufficiently un-feminine to be accepted by the boys.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, Audrey’s behaviour ultimately works to reinforce stereotypical sexualised and domestic characteristics. As the group first approach the scene of the crashed German bomber through the grounds of West Chirton Wood, Audrey’s first thought is to protest that she will not “do any *dirty* things with you two”, though she is prepared for “kissing, but no more.” As they reach the

site of the crash, Audrey's fear and excitement make her appear 'all eyes and woman for once', and she shows maternal concern for the dead airman "a long way from home." Chas teases her that girls cannot bear the sight of the dead body, then tries to frighten her with tales of ghostly airman waiting in the woods, all of which has the desired effect as Audrey decides she wants to go home and 'gave a little scream.' Even Audrey Parton, it seems, is not above such feminine weaknesses.<sup>56</sup>

In relation to the life the children create within the Fortress itself, again Audrey quickly fulfils stereotypical expectations. During initial preparations for building the fortress, she curses as she splits a fingernail. Once the Fortress is established, with machine gun *in situ*, Audrey protests against the boys' aggression and fascination with the weapon, refusing to go "[...] back into the camp to make tea until you put that nasty great thing away."<sup>57</sup> Further evidence of her maternal and domestic instincts comes as she leads in comforting the crying Nicky following the death of his mother, and then later feeds and nurses the wounded German Rudi.<sup>58</sup> In replacing Nicky's mother, Audrey takes on those domestic responsibilities which had previously been neglected by the sexually active (and therefore discredited) widow Nichol. The character of Audrey Parton reappears in *Fathom Five*, which is considered below. Prior to writing *Fathom Five*, Westall attempted an earlier sequel to the novel, the typescript draft of which bears the working title of *Sequel to The Machine Gunners*. In this text, too, Chas comments to another girl seeking membership of the gang on how Audrey's success was down to her knowing her proper place as a maternal figure.<sup>59</sup>



In *Fathom Five*, the characters have reached young adulthood, and Audrey is seen now working as a reporter on the local newspaper. From the novel's outset, her sex and gender are again foregrounded by Westall. Frustrated with her assignment of producing a culinary article on recipes with whalemeat, Audrey's thoughts turn once again to the excitement of Chas's gang, partly as a distraction from the advances of 'married reporters who asked you out for a drink.' In Chas's mother's eyes, Audrey is suspect on account of having been seen "[...] drinking with *men*, in the Rex Hotel at Whitley Bay", and she is concerned by "[...] what she's learned since she left school [...]".<sup>60</sup> A key theme in this novel is the teenagers' exploration of morality, in particular the ways in which reputation and appearance can mask realities of moral behaviour. Part of the function of Audrey's character, along with other women in the novel, is to explore femininity in the North East, and in particular female sexuality. All of the major female characters (Audrey, Sheila and Nelly Stagg) serve primarily to educate Chas in his experience of the feminine. The character of Sheila Smythson, Chas's girlfriend, in particular highlights tensions between masculine and feminine lives in the region.

Sheila's first appearance in the novel comes on one of Chas's visits to Fish Quay Sands. He has idolised Sheila from afar, and constructs various masculine fantasies throughout the novel about rescuing her from a range of enemies, including 'being raped by a platoon of sex-crazed Japs.'<sup>61</sup> When the two first meet, Sheila tells Chas that she is tired of men trying to impress her and 'stare up my skirt in buses', and therefore wears 'slacks' to avoid such attentions.<sup>62</sup> Chas does not behave in such a manner, and this is what attracts Sheila to him. Nevertheless, Chas's interest in Sheila is both physically sensual

and sexual. He hopes to ‘have a long last look at the fascinating way her bottom moved inside her slacks’; later, Chas notices a ‘faint nice smell’ as she leans towards him, and on another occasion he feels how ‘Sheila’s fingers were warm and smooth against the rough wet wood.’<sup>63</sup> All of these emphasise how much Chas is drawn to Sheila’s physicality, and as Westall comments elsewhere they are to be read as Chas statements rather than authorial intent. Nevertheless, it is not only Chas’s perspective which is drawn to focus on such characteristics, as Sheila herself somewhat worryingly parodies her mother’s voice and announces she has defied her prohibitions and come to meet Chas “‘ [...] to be *raped!*’” [emphasis in original].<sup>64</sup> Similarly, as the gang visits Low Street in pursuit of the spy, Cem suggests that the girls disguise themselves as prostitutes, and their reaction is surprising as, after initial mild protestation, ‘slowly, the idea of dressing up as tarts took the girls’ fancy’ and they ‘began working out what clothes to wear with increasing enthusiasm.’<sup>65</sup> However, it seems reasonable to assert that Westall is in part responding to criticisms of *The Machine Gunners*’ dominant male focus, and that the inclusion of a wider range of female characters here attempts to address such comments. The fact that their physical and sexual characteristics dominate their roles in the novel is revealing in terms of Westall’s portrayal of women in the North East. Although Westall may have started out intending to write for boy readers in *The Machine Gunners*, by this stage he was certainly aware of his female readership, as evidenced by his correspondence with readers.

Part of Chas’s struggle in *Fathom Five* is with his growing feelings towards girls, and the aspect he finds most troubling is the way in which femininity threatens to overwhelm and smother his masculine freedom. After his

dangerous near-miss on the river, Chas returns to dry land to find Sheila waiting anxiously for him with ‘a face ugly with tears’. He approaches, and places his hand on her shoulder, which is described as ‘like touching a loaded mousetrap’ as she ‘grabbed him so hard he could scarcely breathe’.<sup>66</sup> Such images of suffocation do not end there.

He aimed for her cheek again, but she twisted round so he was kissing her mouth instead. She wouldn’t let his mouth go. He breathed in hard through his nose, feeling he was drowning for the second time that afternoon. He felt she was sucking something out of him. What ... life? ... freedom? He felt he was going down into some prison.<sup>67</sup>

This episode ends with a description of Sheila’s ‘wide-eyed fanatical look’, which ‘scared Chas even more than the Maltese.’<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in *The Promise*, Bob Bickerstaffe must struggle to evade the vampirism of Valerie Monkton, whose tongue darts into his mouth ‘like a small hot deadly snake’, and who embodies the threat of deadening domesticity.<sup>69</sup> Femininity equates with entrapment, a fear reflected in Westall’s autobiographical writings of his youth published posthumously as *The Making of Me*.

In an early autobiographical piece, he describes his memories of the highly gendered North East of his childhood, in particular his relationship with his mother, who once told him his birth had nearly cost her life.

The debt I could never even hope to repay. Did she hope to bind me closer to her, telling me that? It drove me a million miles away, made a gulf she could never again repair. [...] You were the first who made me a liar, Mother. [...]

But I can forgive you now, Mother. You were only a child of your time, one of the ranks of the Geordie matriarchy [...] getting a grip on her male. The debt would only increase. [...] Geordie men, whether drunks, wife-beaters or merely chronically late for meals, were to

be babied from the cradle to the grave. [...] I was guilty of the original sin of being male.

I sometimes wonder, did women learn the trick of original sin from the Church, or the Church from women? After all, women have been around longer than any Church. [...] <sup>70</sup>

Elsewhere, Westall describes how, on the occasion of his mother's death, he "[...] felt sorrow but also a certain relief that the danger was past – at 55! – of being swallowed back into her womb."<sup>71</sup> This fear of entrapment is reflected in the experiences of several of Westall's North-East protagonists, from Robbie in *Falling into Glory* to Bob in *The Promise*, many of whom similarly seek refuge from the suffocating influence of North-East women and girls.

In the character of Nelly Stagg, Westall creates a figure who embodies contradictory elements of femininity in the North East. Nelly is the self-styled 'foul-mouthed queen' of Low Street, who struts her sexuality openly as the owner of her own brothel. Chas befriends her, and discovers that she 'was two women [and] [a]lone with Chas, she was different.' This difference turns out to be maternal respectability, as Nelly 'asked about his schoolwork; advised him not to marry too early, and always wear wool next to his skin.'<sup>72</sup> Sheila finds a common ground in Nelly's description of men as "' [...] great lost lonely babbies [...]'" in need of care, much in the way she grows to view Chas.<sup>73</sup> Nelly Stagg too conforms to entrenched ideas of femininity in the North East, and she is so appealing to the teenage Chas because she is both highly sexualised and exotic in appearance, yet reveals her inner maternal domesticity to him in their emotionally intimate meetings together. Although initially seeming to flout convention, Nelly Stagg in fact serves to reaffirm conventional representations of North East femininity.

Similar images are found in *Falling into Glory*. The character of Emma Harris is the most sexualised example of North-East femininity featured in any of Westall's fiction, even at one point referring to herself as 'a bitch on heat.'<sup>74</sup> Her relationship with the central adolescent boy too has a maternal dimension, signified by Robbie initially referring to her as Ma Harris but also evident in the moments when they transgress the boundaries of their relationship and engage sexually with each other, as Robbie narrates how 'she was like a mother, pulling down my head between her breasts, stroking my hair, murmuring soothing things as to a little child.'<sup>75</sup> From the outset, Robbie's interest in Emma is rooted in the physical and sexual. Early in the novel, he describes his earliest memory of her and, despite being only ten at the time, noting how '[h]er breasts stuck out magnificently and, when the wind blew, it pressed her light summer frock against shapely thighs.'<sup>76</sup> Although Emma represents sophistication and induction into adulthood for Robbie, for instance in the way she educates his sensibilities through experiences such as the classical music she plays to him, she is first and foremost a physical presence.

I explored earlier how Robbie compares Emma's body to a landscape he can explore, dominate and ultimately appropriate. Her femininity is also construed as an object for consumption. On the school visit to Vindobala, Emma plays the part of a human sacrifice, and her 'magnificently prominent breasts' seem to run the risk of inciting the boys to devour her; in an early sexual encounter between the two lovers, Robbie is tempted to act by the sight of her 'left breast [which] hung like a ripe lovely apple'; at the novel's denouement, he recalls how 'Emma was like a dark wine that made you drunk'.<sup>77</sup> All female characters in the novel exist only insofar as they sate Robbie's desire to consume

them, and any maturity he has gained by the end of the novel is less an adjustment of his perspective on women than a growing realisation of the need to temper his appetite and settle for plainer dishes, so to speak.

Other female characters in this novel are developed in similarly superficial ways. Joyce's mother, for instance, also attempts to seduce Robbie, albeit in order to test his fidelity towards her daughter.<sup>78</sup> The girls at school too conform to stereotypical behaviour, variously employing their culinary skills on the school trip to 'cut a bloke out of the pack', or 'squealing' with excitement at the sight of Miss Harris's engagement ring.<sup>79</sup> Westall comments on his portrayal of minor female characters, in marginal annotations within the publisher's typescript. After Miriam Hodgson picks up on a reference to girls as not having an original thought in their head, the author responds by saying '[t]his was a provincial grammar school 1950' and that '[i]t was still true of our Sixth Form college in 1985.'<sup>80</sup> The limited depth of such minor female characters in the novel seems intentional, and can be ascribed to two key factors. Firstly, the narrative viewpoint of Robbie is accentuated in order to expose his inherent chauvinism and limited perspective, and this is naturally reflected in the way in which he perceives the girls around him. Furthermore, Westall confessed to being uncomfortable with attempting to plumb feminine emotional depths. In response to editorial requests to develop his representations of the 'inner Emma', Westall responds by saying 'I simply can't do it [...] I have never been a woman – simply observed them', and later 'I can't cope with inner Emma'.<sup>81</sup> It seems almost as if the idea of engaging with the feminine is threatening to Westall. In this novel, as in *Fathom Five*, femininity equates to entrapment for the central North-Eastern male character. Robbie too fears that he might meet the same fate

as his 'poor old friend who got caught' in the trap of pregnancy and therefore domesticity.<sup>82</sup>

### **Social Class**

In Chapter 1, I illustrated the extent to which images of the North East have tended to coalesce around ideas of social class, and in particular the centrality of working-class culture to the identity of the region. Social class is certainly important in Westall's fiction, as touched upon in Chapter 4 in relation to the social and urban landscape of Westall's fictional North East. Social class, and the importance of work in shaping identity, are key concerns for Westall, as can be seen reflected in early archival material. Westall's own perceptions of the region can be seen to be shaped by such concerns, impacting upon the way he images the region in his fictional writing.

Early notebook drafts within the Robert Westall Collection outline clearly Westall's interest in social class, and in particular the way in which he saw the North East as typifying the shifting social landscape of the late twentieth century. A series of notebooks from the late 1950s and 1960s include various journalistic pieces describing his encounters with numerous villages on the Northumbrian coast and these pen portraits are characterised by references to class structure, often indicative of Westall's concerns regarding the impact of late modernity on the traditional social landscape of the North East. Writing about North Sunderland Seahouses (commonly referred to as simply Seahouses), Westall focuses on the influence of outside wealth on the local community, beginning by considering the architecture of the town. He notes how 'wealthy weekenders are

starting to move in [and the] derelict Georgian houses are being bought up block by block'; although this influx of money is acknowledged as having 'obviously saved the buildings from demolition', the author asks 'where are the fishermen going to live – in semis half a mile inland?'<sup>83</sup> Similar concerns feature in his portrayal of nearby Beadnell, where again the architectural impact of incoming wealth upon the traditional appearance and culture of the town is explored, described as a kind of encroaching 'urban unreality.'<sup>84</sup>

On the north shore, above the rocky ribs where the cormorants dry their wings [...] are rows of modern semis. Fishermen spread their nets on the grass in front of the modernistic grocery shop. [...] The effect is shapeless and ghastly. I asked the fishermen what they thought; they hated it.<sup>85</sup>

It is interesting to note the extent to which the perceived erosion of the traditional is linked directly to issues of wealth and social class. It is the contrast between the working-class tradition of fishermen drying their nets, and the backdrop of the 'modernistic' grocery shop, which is so galling to the author's eye. The 'shapeless and ghastly' modern semis are posited as a result of the abandonment of traditional forms of employment, or rather transformation of such into a form of tourist spectacle or heritage attraction, leading Westall to ponder what will become of the town when 'the last fishermen is seduced into buying an ice-cream van or a supermarket, and [tourists] are left with nothing to stare at.'<sup>86</sup> This image of the parasitical nature of such wealth, in contrast to the natural and nourishing nature of traditional earned income, finds a striking illustration in an earlier draft of the same piece, where it is described as 'this shoddy new urban child, feeding at the tiny stone nipple of reality which it is already destroying', which he sees as culminating in a time when 'Beadnell loses its meaning but



keeps its bleakness.’<sup>87</sup> This is not to suggest that Westall yearns simplistically for some kind of pre-modern, working-class idyll, but rather that he sees the erosion of working-class centrality as problematic for the future of the community, an idea captured in his observation that ‘defilement by the poor [...] lasts for a season, but [...] defilement by the rich can last for a century.’<sup>88</sup>

Writing for a local newspaper (probably *The Shields Gazette*) in the 1960s, Westall produced a journalistic piece which took just such a stance towards what he perceived as an attempt by North Shields to distance itself from its working-class roots.

Isn't this town, like the Dolly, losing its way and its luck, because it is turning prim and respectable, and trying to forget the river and the sea. While rows of new housing eat up the last green fields on the borders of the borough, the town centre rots. The distance you live from the river has become a status symbol, in this town.

[...]

The architects must have known, too, that these flats were meant for robust seafaring families, with lots of clothes to wash, and many children. Why then build flats appropriate for childless middle-class clerks?<sup>89</sup>

In contrast to the pen portraits of rural coastal villages found in the notebooks, this location is notably urban, but the central concern remains similar: the region is in a state of transition, away from its roots in traditional industries and towards a more middle-class populace, and as he sees it, such a shift is to be lamented. For Westall to take this stance is ironic, given that just such a distancing had occurred in his own personal and professional lives, as he left behind the working-class world of his youth in North Shields, both in terms of geographical location and occupation. At the time of writing both this newspaper article and the earlier notebook entries, Westall was no longer living in the North East, but

was working as a grammar school teacher in Yorkshire, and then later in Cheshire.<sup>90</sup>

Westall wrote and spoke often of his own experiences navigating the crossing of social class boundaries, and the ways in which this spilled over into his fiction. In 1979, in an article written for *The Use of English* magazine Autumn edition, Westall comments on how, in his adolescence, ‘grammar-school holidays were lonely for a working-class kid in those days’, and he therefore ‘began to write novels to pass the time.’<sup>91</sup> This experience, of feeling somewhat isolated as a working-class child at grammar school, would seem to inform the politics of much of Westall’s North-East fiction which he describes as writing in opposition to insidious ‘establishment politics’, which seemed to Westall to characterise much of children’s fiction. In the typescript draft of a speech given in 1978, Westall comments on how such class-based politics can be seen as informing his writing, and the work of other high profile writers.

‘The Owl Service is a highly-political book. [...] There is savage in-fighting between working, middle and upper-middle class. [...]

Nothing unfair, mind. Only, if I’d got my tiny hands on the end of that excellent book, the end would have gone the other way....

There is politics in ‘Machine-gunners’. [...] I am proud of creating [Mr McGill], because so often in children’s books, the workers are either baddies (Jed Stowe the village no-good and poacher, with no job and seven filthy kids) or entirely establishment-loving goodies, often a bit comic (like Gowther Mossock and his wife). The idea of the intelligent working-man, who is honest, but honestly bitter and critical of our society is a comparative rarity...I can’t think of one in English children’s books – can you?

Yet in reality they do exist; and in realism they should.<sup>92</sup>

The main thrust of this speech concerns the question of realism in children's fiction, and Westall argues strongly the case for honest writing for young people (though he acknowledges the complexities of such an endeavour, and explores the difference between truthfulness and realism); in this particular section, Westall is keen to address what he sees as an omitted, overlooked and voiceless perspective, that of the 'intelligent working-man'. Such a desire can be traced to Westall's own experience, and that of his father. Having been effectively educated out of his social class, an event which contributed towards his leaving the North East, Westall is here and within his fiction confronting a personal anxiety and need to address and pay due homage to the working-class background he had left behind, and in particular to demonstrate a link between his adult self and that of men like his father. This urge can be seen as symptomatic of an underlying desire to ground his own identity in the traditional culture of his childhood, despite his adult life actually finding him distanced from his beginnings. It is linked to another recurring impulse in Westall's fiction, to anchor the identity of the North East in stability and tradition at a time when both were rapidly changing.

In contrast with the dismay he registers in the notebook pieces explored above, Westall's fiction in fact always sets out to celebrate the working-class traditions and background of the region, and to suggest its essentialism within the identity of the North East. It is an affirmation of continuity in the face of change, much like the author's desire to trace the roots of his adult experiences in the life of his North-East childhood. As I explore below, the social class dimension of the North East that Westall so exalts in his fiction is focussed on a very particular segment of the working class, mainly centred on the nobility of

the 'intelligent working-man' who is '[a]rtisan working-class' as he describes it elsewhere.<sup>93</sup> I would suggest that such an image particularly appealed to Westall in part because it suggested a kind of synergy between the roots of the past, and his present day circumstances. He was acutely aware of the distance he had travelled, both geographically and metaphorically, from his working-class origins in the North East, describing himself as “[...] one of the bright workers who was brought into the middle class and given enough to make me want to hold on to it [...]” as part of a strategy by which the “[...] ruling classes [...] skim off the top 20 per cent of bright children. [...]”<sup>94</sup> By viewing his social mobility in this way and casting himself as a force for change, Westall attempts to assuage his own anxiety over the transition, and reconcile his middle-class adult life with his working-class childhood roots.

Certainly, Westall's writings abound with conflicting images arising from his adolescent aspirations, and his working-class home background. I commented earlier on images of the home and family as stifling influences within *Falling into Glory*, along with Westall's acknowledgement of the autobiographical nature of such images of home life. Such conflicts, as portrayed within the novel, are rooted in the fact that Robbie's horizons and aspirations are broadening immensely, far beyond the experience of his parents. One of the results is a breakdown in their ability to communicate with each other, and this represents a conflict between differing sets of social class values and outlooks. Some of Westall's writing on social class can be read as an attempt to resolve such conflict, and reaffirm his connections with the working-class culture of his childhood. In 1986, Westall produced an autobiographical piece for a *Something About the Author*, in which he described learning to read in early childhood.

After saying he was 'always a word-child', he describes how his father, 'being a board-school boy who left school at twelve [and] used to run his finger along the words as he read aloud' taught him to read 'by accident'; thus, Westall's bookishness is attributed in part to the influence of his non-bookish father.<sup>95</sup> His father's work as 'foreman-fitter at the local gasworks' is celebrated and elevated to the role of an 'Oily Wizard' who 'smelt of strange and terrible magic', and he recounts with glee his forays into 'his magic kingdom' where he 'wandered, sometimes for half an hour, entranced, until a real man with blackened face and shining white teeth asked me what I wanted.'<sup>96</sup> Such a close affiliation with his father's working-class world, very different from the professional and social world in which the adult Westall worked and lived, is often asserted in his prose. Writing in 1993, he recounts his own experience of reading to his own son, and discovering, in contrast with his childhood self as 'a working-class lad [who] never read a children's book' that he was 'thirty-four, a teacher, and had wandered almost by accident into the middle class.'<sup>97</sup>

These concerns over the place of working-class culture within the region's identity are driven by a wider concern over changes in work practices, in particular the move away from traditional methods of physical labour and production in favour of mechanisation, a phenomenon Westall sees as characteristic of twentieth-century economics; of course, such changes pre-date the twentieth century, but the rate of their impact was accelerating during the time Westall was writing. Speaking in public at around the same time as the above article was written, Westall explores the influence of such changes upon culture.

[...] I am not just a writer; I am also a teacher of the young, and, God help me, a teacher of careers; and my teacher infects my writer, and both writer and teacher can feel the ground beginning to move under them, as if before some dreadful earthquake. [...]

The earth moves, with us all on it, like a giant escalator. Carrying us all, sooner or later, to unemployment. Those of us who have jobs that demand love, caring, touching, warmth, will last rather longer than the others. The machines that are destroying jobs at a terrifying rate are not very good at loving and caring. [...]

[...] We are reaching an end, an end to man's thought being relevant, an end to man's work being relevant.<sup>98</sup>

Westall here is tapping into more widely held doom-laden prophecies over the shape and outlook of twentieth-century British society.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, his observations regarding the role of work in shaping identity seem apposite in relation to the changes that the North East was undergoing at this time, with the decline in major staple industries of coal mining and shipbuilding contributing to images of a region and people themselves in decline. Images which re-assert the dominance of traditional forms of labour run like a seam of coal through Westall's writing. A notebook from the 1960s includes a fragment of a poem which juxtaposes the natural landscape of Newbiggin with its industrial counterparts at Blyth and Ashington. Similar images pervade Westall's thinking on the act of writing itself, further indication of his desire to re-affirm the links between his adult occupation and the physical labours of his forebears. Explaining the process of immersion in the writing process, and subsequently re-emerging from such absorption, Westall chooses a mining analogy as he describes how '[c]limbing out of a book you're writing is like climbing sweaty and dirty out of the dark and heat of the lonely coal-pit of your mind.'<sup>100</sup> In a letter to Miriam Hodgson in 1989, he comments on how investing his own

memories in his fiction has left him feeling ‘a bit like a half-worked-out coalmine’ having ‘mined the shallower seams up to the age of 27’.<sup>101</sup> Even despite the fact that he did not come from a mining family, such images attract Westall as writer and artist because of the profound influence such industry exerted upon the region of his youth, the North East. Images of decline recur in Westall’s writing too, in particular images of ‘unemployed men squatting at every corner’ which are recalled from his memory of his early childhood in depression-era Tyneside, and are featured vividly in both *The Christmas Cat* and *The Christmas Ghost*.<sup>102</sup> As with a writer like Seamus Heaney, who counters his discomfort at having ‘no spade to follow men like them’ (that is, his father and grandfather) by equating the movement of his ‘squat pen’ with the rhythm of peat-cutting, so Westall similarly displays a keenness to trace the lineage of his literary activity back to the labours which shaped the lives of previous generations of North-East men.<sup>103</sup>

### ***Working-class North East***

In Robert Westall’s fiction, working-class families and lives occupy a central position in relation to the identity of the North East. In *The Machine Gunners*, the McGill family are, from the outset, drawn as respectable working class, emphasised in particular by the appearance and behaviour of Chas’s father. Mr McGill is ‘sooty and oily’ from his work at the gasworks, and the practical nature of his job is shown as being substantial and wholesome; when he builds the machine gun stand for Chas and the others, his craftsmanship is indicated by the way he ‘made things to last [...] solidly welded together’.<sup>104</sup> Importantly, Mr McGill is shown to be a skilled worker rather than simply a labourer, and one

who takes pride in executing his duties professionally. Towards the novel's conclusion, Mr McGill is shown applying the same standards in his work as air-raid warden, even to the extent of placing his professional responsibilities before his wife's pleas to search for Chas.<sup>105</sup> Remaining resolute in the face of hardship, he represents the stalwart nobility of the respectable working man.

The character of Chas is keen to emphasise such nobility in *Fathom Five* too, a novel which much more acutely foregrounds questions of social class. As he discusses parental occupations and background with Sheila, Chas underlines the honesty of his dad's physical work, and is quick to counter Sheila's response suggesting the relative importance of non-physical work.

‘My father works just as hard as yours. Brains are just as important as hands. Look how brainy you are at school.’

Chas's voice rose to a squeak. ‘My dad's *cleverer* than me. He can mend anything. I'm hopeless at mending things.’<sup>106</sup>

Chas, like Harry in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, and Robbie in *Falling into Glory*, displays the same anxieties experienced by Westall as a grammar school boy with working-class roots. Through the course of *Fathom Five*, Chas comes to understand more clearly the part played by class in shaping people's lives, and reconciles his own future prospects with the working-class culture of his background. The process causes his mother some concern, as she worries over her son's relationship with the socially superior councillor's daughter, Sheila Smythson. She urges him to “[...] Bring some girl home – one of our own sort. [...]”’, and Chas wonders whether ‘Sheila's father qualifies as ‘one of our sort’’.<sup>107</sup> The working-class backdrop of Chas's world is emphasised throughout the novel, for instance in the ‘dripping sandwiches’ he makes, and the environment of the Fish Quay where he and Cem are stared at by ‘old men with



check caps and mongrels' as they 'edged between the towering rusty riveted hulls' of nearby ships.<sup>108</sup> Early in the novel, the family's respectable working-class credentials are established as Chas's mother refuses to patch his trousers because 'patches meant poverty, and they hadn't come to that yet.'<sup>109</sup> This is a family proud of its roots.

A similar backdrop pervades the novel *A Time of Fire*. At the novel's opening, Sonny's dad returns 'fresh from Armstrong Siddeley's'<sup>110</sup> and still black in the face', and the young boy is mesmerised by '[w]atching Dad's clever engineer's fingers'.<sup>111</sup> The landscape itself is saturated with the sounds of heavy industry; Sonny hears a riveter working upriver 'far off as a summer insect', an image which suggests this is a natural habitat for such forms of work, and when Sonny's Nana fears she can hear the sound of approaching machine gun fire, his Granda reassures her by saying 'them's riveters [...] You've been hearing riveters aall yer life'.<sup>112</sup> Working-class attributes are also reassuring to Sonny's Nana when they visit the RAF base near Kent where Sonny's father has been killed, when she manages to ascertain that the parents of a female colleague 'came from Gateshead and were a very respectable family, the father being a plumber by trade'.<sup>113</sup> The character of Sonny's Granda reinforces an important characteristic of Westall's portrayal of North-East working-class identity. The working-class families featured as central in Westall's North East fiction are always rooted in a background of skilled labour, usually having a male figure who is a foreman or skilled engineer by trade. This is as true for Sonny's Granda as it is for his dad.

Work is important in *The Watch House*, too. The novel sees Anne returned to her roots in Garmouth, her affiliation linked to her grandfather's

occupation as a fishing boat operator on the River Gar. Part of Anne's journey in the novel is a reaffirmation of her closeness to the working-class characters of Prudie and Arthur, who do not meet with her mother's full approval; she tolerates Prudie's presence because she "' [...] knows her place [...]"', but despairs of Arthur who "' [...] [n]ever made anything of himself, even by *their* standards. [...]"'<sup>114</sup> Anne's mother is decidedly middle-class, and it is this that marks her out as unpleasant. At the novel's end, Anne's father turns up in Garmouth, and is reunited with his daughter. A letter he sends to Anne earlier in the novel arrives with 'oily fingerprints all over it', and Anne remembers how he 'even tasted of oil when you kissed him.' His describes how he has decided to leave the boardroom behind, in favour of getting his hands oily again with manual work, and comments on the relief this return to physical labour brings in contrast to the constricting '*[e]xpense account lunches*' where he '*can't think when I'm all dressed up and half tight.*'<sup>115</sup> [italics in original]

In *Falling into Glory*, the question of social class comes to the fore acutely. Emma represents Robbie's intellectual ladder out of the stifling working-class world of his family. As with *Fathom Five*, a key theme in *Falling into Glory* is the central protagonist's growing awareness of his own class-based prejudices, although in contrast with Chas's inverted snobbery, Robbie's is from the outset discrimination of a much more conventional kind. Robbie fears being swallowed 'into a world of smoke' by the 'black iron men', and seeks to distance himself from those working-class boys who attend the grammar school.<sup>116</sup> Despite the fact that his own father is 'a working man and a Socialist', Robbie is comfortable with the class segregation he sees at the school, manifested in the

distinction between those boys like him who play rugby, and the soccer-playing working classes.<sup>117</sup>

I gaped. I gabbled. 'Well...they're all...working class...I mean...the sort that leave school at sixteen...and go into the shipyards...they're the bottom classes...not our *sort*...rude lot...always spitting on the ground during a match...and the swearing...'<sup>118</sup>

This is a prejudice shared by the rugby coach at the school, who views soccer players as 'not as bad as murderers, but a lot worse than rapists.'<sup>119</sup> Their working-class status is reinforced in the landscape, as they practise soccer on 'a half-pitch carved out with great labour many years ago, from the shallow lower slopes of our local pit heap.'<sup>120</sup> This prejudice also extends to the distinction between Rugby Union and Rugby League, with the latter described as 'not a gentleman's game' as it is 'played in front of massive crowds of the workers in cloth caps' by men who 'said things like 'eeh by gum' [and] were beneath contempt.'<sup>121</sup> Ultimately, it is by swallowing his pride and including soccer players in the rugby team, that Robbie is able to lead his side to victory, but they remain nevertheless a class apart.

Robbie has a recurrent fear in the novel of being trapped within the suffocating confines of this working-class world, which is featured particularly strongly in two key episodes. Firstly, Robbie describes the fate of a friend of his, Benny Jobling, whose 'rather ill-bred' obsessions with sex lead to his getting caught in the trap of pregnancy, and therefore consigned to the limitations of a working-class existence.

No university for Benny. No more school, even. Down the shipyards at sixteen, apprentice riveter, having what was left of his brains hammered out by the noise inside a ship's hull when fifty riveters are going full out. And when he came home, it was to one room in his mother-

in-law's house, and a kid that never stopped bawling, and a wife who had gone to bits with having the baby, and went about in curlers, nearly as fat and slovenly at seventeen as her mam was at fifty. [...] And that was for the rest of his life [...]<sup>122</sup>

Later, when Emma suggests they consummate their relationship fully, Robbie fears a similar fate for himself, imagining a potential pregnancy standing in the way of 'university...teaching...all my chances to get out of this crummy town.'<sup>123</sup> Of course, such a fate does not befall Robbie, and he manages to fulfil his aspirations, which take him beyond the geographical and social boundaries of his youth as he escapes into the middle-class world of university, teaching and beyond.

Images such as these originate both in the particularities of Robert Westall's own experiences of growing beyond the working-class boundaries of his youth, and the changes that he saw and imagined happening within the region itself. The North East during the 1980s and early 1990s was struggling to adapt to a profoundly reconfigured economic climate, which was being reshaped primarily by Thatcherite policies insistent upon free market approaches towards industry and employment. One of the most striking effects of such policies for the North East was a sharp rise in unemployment, largely as a consequence of the decline of the staple heavy industries such as coal mining and shipbuilding. Whilst it is too simplistic to attribute the economic decline felt by the region solely to the approaches of this government (given that by this time images of decline and regeneration were already established as recurrent motifs in the region's identity), nevertheless it is true to say that Margaret Thatcher's government made few friends in the North East, a legacy which continues to this day.<sup>124</sup> Certainly, the 1980s saw the beginning of a lasting shift in the socio-

economic profile of the North East, and consequently images of the region's identity began to be re-calibrated to reflect this. Whilst the setting of Westall's fictionalised North East always pre-dates these changes, his North-East novels are written at points either on the cusp of such shifts or in the midst of their after-effects, and this goes some way to explain why these novels both celebrate the centrality of working-class culture to the region's identity, whilst simultaneously showing how the North-East landscape within which its young people were coming of age would be shaped by different economic forces. As Westall himself had outgrown the region's working-class culture in the 1950s, so the North East itself would need to reconfigure itself in the 1980s and beyond. Westall saw this, and his fiction anticipates attempts to narrate such changes in the work of writers such as David Almond.

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Knights describes Westall's *The Wind Eye* as a narrative which 'dramatize[s] crises of adult masculinity in the late 1970s and 1980s'; see Knights, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> Most of Westall's fiction can be seen as featuring what Maria Nikolajeva defines as '[t]he male chronotope'; see Nikolajeva, p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> 'Review of *The Machine Gunners*', *Manchester Evening News*, 8 July 1976; accessible at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/03/01.

<sup>4</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>7</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 137; p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> 'Class 1 JR', (1988), *Letter to Robert Westall, 17.2.88*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/14/05/01.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Westall, (1988), *Letter to Class 1 JR, 25 February 1988*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/14/05/01.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Westall, (1988), *Letter to Class 1 JR, 25 February 1988*, Robert Westall MSS, RW/14/05/01.

<sup>13</sup> *The Machine Gunners* was first published 1975; *Falling into Glory* posthumously in 1993, *A Time of Fire* in 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> The reference is taken from *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II.

<sup>17</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 247.

<sup>18</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 247.

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- <sup>19</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 100.
- <sup>20</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 101; p. 162.
- <sup>21</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 164.
- <sup>22</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 171.
- <sup>23</sup> *Fathom Five*, pp. 228-229.
- <sup>24</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 44.
- <sup>25</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 46.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Westall, (1993), *Falling into Glory: publisher's typescript*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/07/02, f11r.
- <sup>27</sup> Robert Westall, (1993), Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/07/02, f15r.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Westall, (1993), *Falling into Glory: typescript*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/07/01, f260.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson, 11 July 1992*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/29, f5r.
- <sup>30</sup> See for instance Margaret Meek's review in *Signal Review of Children's Books (2)*, ed. by Nancy Chambers (Stroud: Thimble Press, 1983), p. 45, which describes Westall as 'the most macho [...] of tough writers'; accessible at Seven Stories: the Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS.
- <sup>31</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/29, f5r.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Watch House*, pp. 6-7.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 8; p. 112.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 110.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 45.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert Westall, (1991), '*All the world's a stage*': *press cutting*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/01, f3v.
- <sup>37</sup> Robert Westall, (1991), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/01, f3v.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Westall, (1991), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/01, f3v.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson, 11 July 1992*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/29, f5r.
- <sup>40</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), '*Worlds Apart*' *conference speech*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/26, f4r.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert Westall, (1992), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/26, ff 12-13.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Watch House*, pp. 9-10; p. 213.
- <sup>43</sup> Robert Westall (1977), '*Brigade Station*' *notebook*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/01/01, f3v.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 158.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 77.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Westall (1977), Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/01/01, f4v.
- <sup>47</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 88; p. 190.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 10; p. 153.
- <sup>49</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 193.
- <sup>50</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 242.
- <sup>51</sup> *The Watch House*, pp. 243-244.
- <sup>52</sup> *The Wind Eye*, p. 146.
- <sup>53</sup> *The Wind Eye*, p. 173.
- <sup>54</sup> *The Wind Eye*, pp. 100-101.
- <sup>55</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 17.
- <sup>56</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp.18-20.
- <sup>57</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 78; p. 112.
- <sup>58</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, pp. 101-102; p. 135.
- <sup>59</sup> Robert Westall (c. 1980), '*Sequel to Machine Gunners*' *unpublished novel*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/111.
- <sup>60</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 22; pp. 25-26.
- <sup>61</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 42.

<sup>63</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 38; p. 59; p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 81.

<sup>65</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 143.

<sup>66</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 106.

<sup>67</sup> *Fathom Five*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>68</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 108.

<sup>69</sup> *The Promise*, p. 39.

<sup>70</sup> *The Making of Me*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Stephanie Nettell, 'The ruler of the kingdom of the imagination', *The Guardian*, 28 March 1991, p. 32; accessible at Seven Stories: the Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/05.

<sup>72</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 199.

<sup>73</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 177.

<sup>74</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 141.

<sup>76</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 35-36; p. 140; p. 295.

<sup>78</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 207-208.

<sup>79</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 56; p. 294.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Westall, (1993), *Falling into Glory: publisher's typescript*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/07/02, f25.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Westall, (1993), Robert Westall MSS, RW/01/07/02, f11r.

<sup>82</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 232.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Westall (c1960s), *Notebook: various notes and sketches*, Seven Stories: the Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f5r; f18r.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Westall (c1960s), Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f8r.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Westall (c1960s), Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f8v.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Westall (c1960s), Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f9v.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Westall (c1960-1970), *Notebook: North East articles*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/05, f18r.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Westall (c1960s), Robert Westall MSS, RW/08/07, f18r.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Westall (c1960s), 'Artist-Architect looks at his native town: He thinks Shields is 'bitty' (and losing its old character)': *press cutting*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/19.

<sup>90</sup> Westall held three teaching posts, firstly at Erdington Hall Secondary School, Birmingham (1957-58), Keighley Boys Grammar School, Yorkshire (1958-60) and then Sir John Deane's College in Northwich, Cheshire (1960-85; Westall was Head of Art and Careers here).

<sup>91</sup> Robert Westall (1979), 'The Author in the Classroom': *typescript draft*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/09/19; subsequently published as Robert Westall, 'The Author in the Classroom', *The Use of English*, 31.1 (Autumn 1979), 5-13.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Westall (1978), 'Reading the Entrails of Realism': *speech*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/12, ff10-11.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Stephanie Nettell, 'The ruler of the kingdom of the imagination', *The Guardian*, 28 March 1991, p. 32; accessible at Seven Stories: the Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/05.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Westall, (1983), quoted in 'Authorgraph No. 18: Robert Westall', *Books for Keeps*, 18 (January 1983), 12-13; accessible at Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/02.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Westall (1986), 'Something About the Author: Robert Westall': *proof copy*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/30, f1v.;

subsequently published as 'Robert (Atkinson) Westall' in *Something About the Author*, Vol. 23, ed. by Anne Commire (Detroit: Gale Research, 1981), pp. 235-236.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Westall (1986), Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/30, f2r-v.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Westall (1986), 'Jack London's White Fang' article: typescript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/30, f1v.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Westall (1983-85), 'I rise to address you today': speech, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/06, ff1-3.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (London: Macmillan, 2007), pp. 379-474.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Westall, (c1977-1993), 'Racism and Sexism in Children's Literature': typescript draft, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/05/11, f5.

<sup>101</sup> Robert Westall, (1989), *Letter to Miriam Hodgson, 5 August 1989*, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children's Books, Miriam Hodgson MSS, MH/01/07, f3r.

<sup>102</sup> *The Making of Me*, p. 69; Robert Westall, *The Christmas Cat* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 50; *The Christmas Ghost*, p. 13.

<sup>103</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Digging' in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1998 [originally published in *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966]).

<sup>104</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 53; pp. 115-116.

<sup>105</sup> *The Machine Gunners*, p. 183.

<sup>106</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 41.

<sup>107</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 85.

<sup>108</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 85; p. 91.

<sup>109</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> The title of the engineering plant where he works as foreman is presumably an adaptation of the famous Vickers-Armstrongs yard which operated at High Walker in Newcastle until 1960, and was one of the most important wartime shipbuilders and artillery manufacturers in the country, as a nationalised operation. It was privatised in 1986, and absorbed into BAE Systems.

<sup>111</sup> *A Time of Fire*, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 49; p. 56..

<sup>113</sup> *Fathom Five*, p. 111.

<sup>114</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> *The Watch House*, p. 82.

<sup>116</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 51.

<sup>117</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 97.

<sup>118</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 97.

<sup>119</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 107.

<sup>120</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 183.

<sup>121</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 251-52.

<sup>122</sup> *Falling into Glory*, pp. 158-59.

<sup>123</sup> *Falling into Glory*, p. 233.

<sup>124</sup> Dave Russell suggests that, along with other factors, 'the election of Margaret Thatcher's free market Conservative government in 1979, ushered in economic changes which were to accelerate and intensify the divide between North and South.'; see Russell, p. 29.



## Chapter 8: Almond's Landscape Part 1

### **David Almond**

David Almond (1951-) is one of the most critically and commercially successful contemporary British writers of fiction for children and young adults. Almond was born in Felling, Gateshead, and attended school in the region; like Westall, he achieved a place at grammar school. After leaving the region to attend university in East Anglia, and working in a variety of jobs including teaching children with special educational needs, Almond returned to the North East both geographically and within his work. Two collections of fiction for adults, *Sleepless Nights* (1985) and *A Kind of Heaven* (1997), were published by a small North-East publisher, Iron Press, but it was not until the publication of his first children's novel, *Skellig*, in 1998 that Almond achieved real commercial and critical success. *Skellig* was awarded the Carnegie Medal for an outstanding children's book, and Almond was widely praised as a new and distinctive voice in the field of children's and Young Adult fiction.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Stories from the middle of the world***

The North East achieves a centrality in Almond's work, both in the extent to which it sits at the centre of his fiction as the dominant, recurrent place (all of Almond's fiction is set in the region), and also in the way that the region's own claim to centrality is asserted in work which reaffirms the validity of such a region as a centre within wider culture. Almond has spoken often of the importance of the North East to his writing, and in particular the way in which

deciding to locate his fiction within the region was profoundly formative in his development as a children's writer. The two factors, becoming both a children's writer and a North-East writer, occurred at the same time for Almond, and constituted a double epiphany for him as an artist, becoming a constant pairing in his work from that point onwards. Just as Almond describes the realisation that the novel *Skellig* (1998) would be a children's book as allowing him to feel 'free and liberated'<sup>2</sup>, so in interview, Almond describes how the act of setting his work in the North East impacted upon the kinds of narratives he felt able to produce:

When I began to write about the North East I found that using the characters and the language and the landscape just allowed me to suddenly write what I felt I should have been writing all the time. And it really was like finding a place and a voice. [...] And it was that sense of freedom as a writer, I thought, 'Oh yes,' and I began to write just with more fluidity and gained more confidence and could deal with anything I wanted to deal with, within the space of a landscape and a language which was the North East.<sup>3</sup>

Almond suggests that his decision to set his fiction within the region was less of a conscious move than a natural progression, a kind of 'coming home, but also like finding something entirely new, all at the same time.'<sup>4</sup> However it came about, use of the setting proved transformative for Almond's writing, contributing to the commercial and critical success of his first novel for children, *Skellig* (1998), which features a North-East child who discovers a mystical, angel-like being in the garage of his new family home. *Skellig* won both the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award and the Carnegie Medal in 1998, an unprecedented success for a first children's novel, and established Almond's presence as a major new British children's writer.

Almond's ability to stage thematically wide-ranging stories within the topographical boundaries of the North East has been key to his success, not least in his own assessment of his work. He describes how it was while writing the stories that would come to comprise the short story collection *Counting Stars*, published in 2000 but written before the publication of *Skellig*, that he came to accept the need for his work to be framed within a North-East landscape.

Lots of stuff in *Counting Stars* I had excluded from my work and hadn't wanted to deal with. But when I found I was writing about Felling in particular, Tyneside, I found that automatically my own history, my own background, just blended naturally with the place, and I found I could write in a Northern voice without it being a hackneyed Northern voice.<sup>5</sup>

Adopting the landscape of the North East as the backdrop for his fiction, alongside its language and voice, was clearly integral to Almond's developing sense of his own identity as a writer, a process influenced by the work of the American writer, Flannery O'Connor:

I learned a lot about writing about the North East by reading American writers, and specifically writers from the southern states of America like Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor made this great statement, that the imagination is not free, that it is bound, that you only find your own imagination when you realise that it has certain limits. She talked about her limits as being to do with geography, and language, and at the time I was going through all the stuff about trying to re-adjust and trying to find a way to write, and accepting my Northern-ness, and I thought, well that's perfectly true, that my imagination became free when I recognised the boundaries that were automatically placed on it.<sup>6</sup>

The North East is a space which Almond feels endows his writing with authenticity, through the seeming paradox of the way its boundaries act to free his imagination; accepting the 'certain limits' of his imaginary landscape, allows

him to create freely within such a space. Key to Almond's use of the North-East landscape is the idea of centrality and, in particular, the idea that a region he perceives as marginalised can be written about in such a way as to assert its validity as a central place.

Almond's fiction is thematically and stylistically rich, often dealing with spiritual and emotional questions of some complexity, and one of the effects of setting such stories in the North East is to reaffirm the region as a place where important events can occur. His use of the region as imaginary landscape does, therefore, have a political dimension, particularly in the way that many of his stories are concerned with refocusing the reader's perspective onto those places and people typically considered to be marginal, and asserting their validity.

“In some ways the north east is an undiscovered country in literary terms; you might think it's a place that's not very interesting, excluded from mainstream culture. Part of my purpose has been to use ordinary places, to emphasise that in very ordinary places extraordinary things can happen.”<sup>7</sup>

In terms of the North East, this adjustment was partly a response to the difficulty Almond found in convincing literary agents to take his work seriously. This was, he believes, largely due to his being a North-East writer.

I didn't feel particularly English in lots of ways, often because of some of the comments that were made by agents that I tried. I had this sense of launching appeals to London with my work, and actually never getting anywhere until in the end I just [thought], ah bugger it, this is where I am. This is what I write about, and this is how I write, and I'm going to show you how good it can be. It was that dogged, cussed thing of saying, 'I'm not coming to you, I'll just stay here.' That makes me feel quite marginalised sometimes.<sup>8</sup>

These ideas find potent expression across a wide range of Almond's fiction, but perhaps most immediately in the sequence of stories that comprise *Counting*

*Stars*. Almond feels he continues to augment this collection in his later work, and his concern to centralise the region is reflected in his comments that ‘the overall title of that sequence which I’m still writing is ‘Stories from the Middle of the World’, and it was saying, ‘Look, this seems like the margin but actually, this is actually the middle of the world.’’<sup>9</sup>

The first story in the collection is titled, ‘The Middle of the World’, and it opens with a description of the narrator’s sister trying to delineate and define her own personal space, and place within the universe.

She started with The Universe. Then she wrote The Galaxy, The Solar System, The Earth, Europe, England, Felling, Our House, The Kitchen, The White Chair With A Hundred Holes Like Stars, then her name, Margaret, and she paused.

‘What’s in the middle of me?’ she asked.<sup>10</sup>

This may well describe an experience shared by child readers from outside the North East as strongly as those from within the region, with a simple substitution of appropriate place names. Nevertheless, throughout the collection, Almond draws the reader’s attention to the possibility that Tyneside, and specifically the industrialised area of Gateshead known as Felling, is valid as a central site for his characters’ identities. In another story in the collection, ‘Jonadab’, the narrator describes the profound transformation of his perspective as his newly arrived teacher, Miss Lynch, shifts the focus of the class’s geography lessons away from ‘the remnants of the empire [and] the fringes of civilisation’ and urges them to look closer to home.<sup>11</sup>

She told us that we were the centre of all geography and the focus of all history. She said we were growing at the most privileged of times. We’d have been crawling through Felling Pit less than a century ago. We had a duty to understand our place in time, to keep history moving forward.

She spread maps on her desk and invited us to stand around her. We gasped to see the names of our streets in print. We stabbed our fingers on to our own houses and gardens, we traced familiar streets and parks and playing fields.<sup>12</sup>

This episode is one of many within the collection that show North-East children realising that their home territory deserves as much of a claim on their imaginations as seemingly more exotic realms, echoing Almond's own realisation that the Felling of his childhood 'was a place that had everything necessary for the imagination.'<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many of the stories feature links between Felling and far away places, whether such distance be geographical or imaginative. In 'Jonadab' the narrator discovers that the titular location, rather than being 'a place more impossible and distant than Timbuctoo [...] an invented place', is in fact located 'just beyond Felling's boundary' in 'a small empty space on the banks of the Tyne.'<sup>14</sup> 'The Subtle Body' describes the narrator discovering the books of T. Lobsang Rampa, an author who purports to be 'a Tibetan monk forced into exile by the barbaric Chinese', described by the narrator as 'my exotic counterpart, my guide'; just as Rampa turns out to be "[...] a Kerry man that's not set foot outside Ireland [...]", so the exotic landscapes he describes are presented as an extension of the narrator's everyday surroundings.<sup>15</sup>

His map of Lhasa in *The Third Eye* was an exalted version of Felling. I imagined walking past the Potala Palace as I walked past Felling Square, loitering in Norbu Linga as I loitered in Felling Park, gazing down towards the Kyi Chu River as I gazed towards the Tyne.<sup>16</sup>

In much the same way the narrator of 'Loosa Fine' describes how the Catholic pilgrimage destination Lourdes 'seemed to be both out of the world and a simple extension of our parish, some warmer and brighter suburb of Tyneside'; rather

than somewhere distant and exotic, the young boy views it as ‘a place of miracles populated by people like ourselves and filled with familiar landmarks.’<sup>17</sup>

These examples comprise a thematic concern in Almond’s work: imbuing the ordinary with heightened significance. Almond’s fiction has often been described as magic realist, and he acknowledges the influence upon his work of writers such as Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.<sup>18</sup> Juxtaposition of the extraordinary and the mundane is of course a typical concern of magic realist fiction, and Almond can be seen as operating within an established stylistic framework. In his fiction, such juxtapositions are primarily brought to bear upon the representation of place in order to transport the ordinary and overlooked into the realm of the extraordinary and significant. Don Latham points to the way that ‘[in] employing magical realism to write about a marginalized place and people, Almond is joining a long tradition’, and that ‘it could be argued that Almond’s focus on adolescent characters is a concern with yet another kind of marginalization.’<sup>19</sup> Similarly, lecturer and critic Rachel Falconer suggests that Almond’s work, ‘written from a position outside the cultural mainstream of London and south-east Britain’ is able to employ the perspective of a ‘“[...] view from underneath”’.<sup>20</sup> His fiction repeatedly works to move Tyneside from the margins of significance into the centre ground. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Clay* (2005). The novel tells the story of narrator Davie’s 1960s adolescence in Felling, and in particular his involvement with the extraordinary Stephen Rose. Stephen has recently been expelled from seminary school, and comes to live with his Aunt. He is a gifted sculptor, and appears able to invoke supernatural powers in order to bring clay, the material in which he works, to life. In one episode, local priest Father O’Mahoney has brought examples of

Stephen's sculptures to the art teacher at Davie's school, who uses them to illustrate examples of artistic achievement to Davie's class.

‘And yet they’re so ordinary,’ he said. ‘Look at these faces. These aren’t idealised heavenly beings. You could almost imagine them walking the streets of Felling. And they have an inner grace, an inner ... light. Can you see this?’<sup>21</sup>

What seems remarkable is the combination of ordinariness (the figures might be seen in Felling) bound to the extraordinarily beautiful sense of ‘inner grace’ they embody. At the heart of the novel is the striking contiguity of ordinary Felling and the extraordinary events which Davie witnesses there. As Stephen Rose continues to convince Davie and his friend Geordie of his supernatural powers, he describes being visited by an angel on the beach at Whitley Bay, and being commanded to use his artistic talents in the service of God. Seeing that Davie remains unconvinced, Stephen asks how he would react “[...] if you saw the power of the Lord himself at work here in Felling?”<sup>22</sup> Setting events in the novel against the backdrop of such an ordinary place allows Almond to emphasise their extraordinary nature, in ways that suggest that Felling itself is as capable of bringing forth miracles as Lourdes. In this way, a little known North-East town is transfigured from a place of apparent insignificance into a site of marvels and miracles.

Towards the end of the novel, Davie takes the creature called Clay that he and Stephen Rose have apparently brought to life, and walks with him in a dreamlike state around the streets of Felling. The episode sets the straightforward, even banal, description of the town against the strange creature’s disconcerting appearance and the hypnotic refrain of his appeals to Davie.



‘This is Felling,’ I say as we start to pass the houses and their gardens, as I lead him through my world. ‘This is the town I come from. This is where I live.’

[...]

‘Where did *you* come from, Clay?’  
*I am here, Master. Command me.*<sup>23</sup>

Whilst the backdrop of such a seemingly insignificant place as host to such other-worldly events on the one hand serves to emphasise their mystical nature, it also speaks of the profundity that can be found within such overlooked locations.

A parallel can be drawn between the author’s focus on characters who exist on the margins of society, and the North East as a marginalised place. In particular, the child characters in Almond’s fiction set in the region often include those who are in some way marginalised, over and above the ubiquitous cultural marginalisation of childhood more generally. Almond points to the link between marginalised existence and powerful experience.

[Feeling marginalised as a North East writer] has maybe got something to do with why I write about fringe characters, but I think it's also to do with the thought that people on the fringes of society might have quite a lot to offer, and that they go there because they're having some kind of more profound experience than the rest of us are. [...] Maybe it's to do with being very grounded in a place that, if you feel very grounded then you're happy to contemplate what it's like not to be so grounded. To be out in the dangerous places.<sup>24</sup>

This sense of marginalisation and of attempting to re-centre narratives on such marginalised places and peoples links Almond’s work thematically with post-colonial narratives which foreground ideas of resistance to dominant cultural positions. As a writer he feels an affinity with Irish writers who have traditionally written from a position at the periphery of Britain, both geographically and ideologically.<sup>25</sup>

One novel where the marginality of the North-East landscape is reassessed is *The Fire-Eaters* (2003). Set in the latter half of October, 1962, this novel sees young protagonist, Bobby Burns, navigate a difficult transition to a corrupt high school amidst fears over his father's failing health, all in the shadow of the Cuban missile crisis. Bobby's family live in Keely Bay, a small town on the Northumbrian coast. The struggles faced by the adolescents in the novel illuminate the tensions occurring in the wider political context, and this is paralleled in the novel's setting in a Northumbrian coastal community, at the land's border with the North Sea. Both serve to illustrate the universal impact of the international political crisis, and to suggest the importance of such a seemingly insignificant place by requiring that the threat of its potential destruction be accorded equal and even heightened concern on the part of the reader. At one point, Bobby and his friend Ailsa attempt to ask God's help for Bobby's father. They stand side by side on the beach, and send their request into the 'endless sky.'<sup>26</sup>

I tried to imagine God looking down at us from somewhere past the stars. What would he look like? And why would he look down on this place, this coaly beach by a coaly sea, when there was all the universe to look at? Why would he hear us, a pair of kids? Why should he listen to us?<sup>27</sup>

The novel also sees Bobby questioning his belief in God, and in particular his belief in the miraculous. It is this seemingly insignificant place that responds to his crisis, producing the miraculous fawn that appears to Bobby and Ailsa, and the appearance of the fire-eater, McNulty, whose self-sacrifice heralds the salvation of the whole community, events which reinstate Bobby's sense of wonder. As the novel approaches its denouement, Bobby comes to realise the

importance of his home town, and he again pleads with God to intervene. On pages ripped from his notebook he composes his request:

*Keely Bay. It's a tiny corner of the world. It's nothing to the universe. A tatty place, a coaly beach by a coaly sea. I know that we don't matter. Maybe nothing matters. [...] But it's where I live and where the people I love live and where the things I love live. [...] I can't name everything, but save them. If these things can be saved, then maybe everything can be saved.*<sup>28</sup>

Eventually, of course, the feared nuclear cataclysm is averted. That Keely Bay is shown to have weathered the crisis is just as important as that anywhere else in the world has survived; indeed, everywhere else is compared to this Northumbrian village, as Bobby describes how ‘[a]ll over the world, people behaved like we did in little tattered Keely Bay.’<sup>29</sup> The effect of this is twofold, portraying both a juvenile tendency towards solipsism, whilst encouraging the reader to view events in Keely Bay as symbolic of the impact of political actions and posturing upon ordinary, vulnerable people.

Almond's fiction, then, paradoxically often affirms the North East's centrality, in spite of its marginalisation. Just as both *Skellig* and *Clay* portray the region as a kind of fulcrum for miraculous events, so Almond's 2007 book for younger children, *My Dad's a Birdman*, also places the region at the centre of things, as contestants flock from across the globe to compete in “‘The Great Human Bird Competition [...]’”.<sup>30</sup> In common with the sequence of stories begun in *Counting Stars*, Almond's novels unashamedly present North-East narratives as stories from the middle of the world.

*That semi-urban, semi-rural thing*

As in the work of many of the other writers considered earlier, the North-East landscape portrayed in David Almond's fiction contains both rural and urban elements. In Chapter 4, I explored the way Robert Westall depicts the contrast between the urban and rural North East, and in particular the ways in which Westall's characters are driven to escape urban and industrial spaces, at least temporarily, in favour of the pastoral landscape. Almond's characters too seek refuge in rural places, but whereas in Westall's work the rural is usually associated with the pre-industrial, in Almond's fiction the urban and rural dimensions of the North East landscape usually exist in contiguity.<sup>31</sup> One reason for this is the fact that Almond is writing within a very different economic period for the region. Tyneside in particular has enjoyed extensive investment and regeneration since Westall's death, and the advent of such a phase of rejuvenation for the region cements the previous phase of decline as part of a cycle of decline and rebirth.<sup>32</sup> In short, the industrial landscape of the North East as perceived by Almond is conceptually different from that envisaged by Westall; industry, and its subsequent decline, are more firmly bedded down in images of the region, and this is one of the reasons why images of the urban are more ubiquitous in Almond's writing, and set cheek-by-jowl with the rural. The recollected landscape of Almond's childhood in Felling is typified by this meeting of rural and urban.

One of the things I remember about growing up in Felling was that it really was right on the edge of the urban and the rural landscape. The rural landscape was quite a rough rural landscape, it was damaged by coal mining, it was scarred by industry. It wasn't Gloucestershire. A lot of my growing up that I think about imaginatively as a writer was to do with things like being in an allotment with my grandfather when I

was very little. [...] So it was definitely about that semi-urban, semi-rural thing. [...] I find it incredibly touching, that blend of the rural and the urban.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most evocative and characteristic fusing of rural and urban in Almond's books are his wildernesses and wastelands.

Urban settings almost invariably contain areas of untamed wilderness, alongside spaces of wasteland: the legacy of industrial decline. Frequently, such wastelands function like a portal for Almond's child characters, ushering them forth into the unspoilt wilderness beyond. Natural spaces, such as his grandfather's allotment, are central to Almond's imaginative reworking of his own childhood memories, and he writes of the 'freedom in walking away from the centre, in climbing closer to the lark-filled sky.'<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Almond describes the act of writing itself as a desire to 'explore the gardens of the mind, crawl through wilderness, emerge with scratched skin and muddied knees'.<sup>35</sup> The metaphors he employs here draw upon typically Romantic images associating creativity with the natural landscape and other wild spaces. Just such a space is found in *Skellig*, in the garden which adjoins Michael's family's new house. This wild space, in the heart of urban Tyneside, becomes a kind of haven for the young boy, as troubling events unfold around him.

Early in the novel, Michael resents the garden, as he resents almost everything related to the move which he associates with the arrival of the new baby and the attendant shift in his role within the family. The novel is focalized through Michael who describes, with his new friend, Mina, going 'back to the wilderness we called a garden and she [his mother] went back to the flaming baby.'<sup>36</sup> The garden is 'another place that was supposed to be wonderful', but in fact comprises 'just nettles and thistles and weeds and half-bricks and lumps of

stone.’<sup>37</sup> However, once he has discovered the mystical figure of Skellig, also closely allied to the natural world, Michael begins to seek refuge in the wilderness of the garden. He and Mina visit the owls that inhabit the decaying shell of Mina’s grandfather’s house, then run ‘through the lanes to our wilderness.’<sup>38</sup> In an effort to distract Michael from worries about the health of his baby sister, Michael’s father sets him to working on ‘‘ [...] getting some of that jungle cleared,’’ cautioning him to ‘‘ [...] watch out for the tigers.’’<sup>39</sup> After Michael has introduced Mina to Skellig, the two children stand in ‘the wilderness’ and contemplate his extraordinary nature; later, after a bitter argument with Mina, Michael heads ‘straight through into the wilderness’ where he squats and tries to hold back his tears.<sup>40</sup>

The wild landscape of the garden plays an important part in Michael’s growing affiliation with the wildness of Skellig, and his desire to share the creature’s ‘oblivious heart.’<sup>41</sup> Although ultimately the wilderness of the garden is tamed, for a time it provides a necessary space where Michael can face some metaphorical tigers, and lose himself in the natural world. Almond’s gardens, here and in *Clay*, contrast with the gardens found in Westall’s North East, which are functional, tamed places, and also depart from typical images which tend to portray a binary opposition of wild and civilised aspects of the region’s landscape. Almond’s gardens epitomise his celebration of wilderness as lying at the heart of the North East, and at the heart of both childhood and children’s fiction.<sup>42</sup>

Almond’s second children’s novel, *Kit’s Wilderness* (1999), also features a wild space at the centre of the children’s world, as suggested by the novel’s title. Its significance is foregrounded from the opening of the first chapter.

In Stoneygate there was a wilderness. It was an empty space between the houses and the river, where the ancient pit had been. That's where we played Askew's game, the game called Death.<sup>43</sup>

Again, this is no pre-industrial arcadia, but rather a wilderness which has reclaimed a formerly industrial site. This opening sentence was finely honed by Almond during the writing process, as he describes in interview.<sup>44</sup> The emphatic declarative sentence clearly places the wilderness at the centre of Kit's world; when combined with the novel's title, it suggests affiliation with the wild landscape. Key events of transformation for the children of Stoneygate occur in the wilderness. After Askew's game of Death, the group 'strolled back together through the wilderness with the dead one in our midst'; it is also 'alone at the edge of the wilderness' that Askew first attempts to recruit Kit into his inner circle, and following the meeting, though full of trepidation, Kit 'dreamed I followed him through the night across the wilderness.'<sup>45</sup> Later, after Askew has been expelled from school for leading others into his dangerous games, Kit is warned by the headmaster not to, "[...] follow him into the wilderness."<sup>46</sup> This, however, is exactly what Kit must do in order to connect with his Grandfather and his heritage.

For the children of the town, life in Stoneygate is lived in close proximity to the natural landscape. The house that Kit's family buy is located 'at Stoneygate's edge, one of a long line that faced the wilderness and the river', and the local girl who becomes his closest friend, Allie Keenan, lives 'behind us in one of the houses by the green at Stoneygate's heart.'<sup>47</sup> When Kit's grandfather takes him to see the house where Askew lives 'towards the fringes of

Stoneygate', the confluence of the urban and rural landscapes within Stoneygate is made even more clear.<sup>48</sup>

Grandpa cast his eyes across the steepening landscape, pointed to where the disappeared pits once were.

'Now it's proper countryside again,' he said. 'A great place for you to live and grow. Great place for young life to flourish.'

And he closed his eyes and smiled and listened to the larks, dark tiny specks that belted out their songs from high up in the sky.

The Askews lived in the final street, a potholed cul-de-sac of old pit cottages before the hills started.<sup>49</sup>

I explore Almond's treatment of the post-industrial landscape in more detail in the following section; here it is important to note that the natural wilderness so central to Stoneygate is located in the midst of, rather than simply adjacent to, the urban and industrial landscape, unlike, say, the site of Robbie and Emma's rural retreat in Westall's *Falling into Glory*.

For Kit, like Michael in *Skellig*, the wilderness provides refuge and solace. As he discusses the game of Death with Allie and loses patience with her frivolity, he feels tears running from his eyes as he proclaims that "[p]eople *do* die", and hears how 'the words were carried away across the wilderness on the breeze.'<sup>50</sup> It also provides an unlikely solace for Askew's violent father, who Kit hears "[...] howling across the wilderness [...]"<sup>51</sup> The wilderness at the heart of the novel is a primal place, seeming almost prehistoric later in the book where Kit describes an evening scene where '[a]ll across the wilderness the fires glowed and hunched figures leaned towards them.'<sup>52</sup> It is also deep within this wilderness that Kit encounters the physical manifestation of Lak's mother, a member of the Neanderthal family featured in the story he writes for school. Importantly,



however, this figure emerges within the drift mine, which reminds the reader of the powerful intersection of the industrial within the natural landscape. Though ancient, the wilderness is not pre-industrial, suggesting both the eternal presence of industry within the region, and also the propensity of the wild North East to reconcile both modern and ancient influences in the wake of post-industrialisation.

In *Heaven Eyes* (2000), the two children, Erin Law and January Carr, dream of escaping their derelict, urban neighbourhood to live within the natural landscape. Early in the novel, Erin describes one of the pair's numerous attempts at running away from Whitegates, the children's hostel where they live, into the nearby moors.

Another time we wandered right up the riverbank towards the moors and slept on the heather beneath the glittering sky. We saw shooting stars and talked about the universe going on for ever and ever. We talked about wandering for years like this, two vagabonds, free as the beasts and birds, keeping away from the city, drinking from streams, feeding on rabbits and berries.<sup>53</sup>

Much of the novel concerns a further attempt by the children, along with a third companion, to escape again from the oppressive Whitegates, 'a three-storied place with a garden laid to concrete and a metal fence around it', and the urban dereliction surrounding them, but the place into which they escape and seek refuge is itself a product of industrial decay.<sup>54</sup> As they leave, they move 'into the waste ground [...] where all the warehouses and terraced streets had been knocked down' and 'over great piles of rubble, all that was left of the warehouses and workplaces', before embarking down river in search of the freedom of the sea; however, they end up landing on the mud of the Black Middens in a landscape of 'teetering warehouses, collapsed, walls, dark alleyways.'<sup>55</sup> Though

offering some temporary respite to the children, this place, inhabited by the mystical girl, Heaven Eyes, and her threatening Grampa, also contains dangers resulting from its industrial heritage. Heaven Eyes warns of “[...] places to tumble out the world and not get found again [...]”, and Erin herself is almost lost amongst ‘the dilapidated quays, the broken buildings, the ruins of the past’.<sup>56</sup> She looks back over the journey that has brought them here.

I remembered walking down to the raft again for the first time with January when we felt so light and free. We spun out on to the river and hugged each other. Freedom. Freedom. A new beginning. So how had we come so quickly to this dark dilapidated dangerous place?<sup>57</sup>

Eventually, the group returns to Whitegates, ‘uphill, away from the river through the wasteland’, only to discover that their odyssey in fact occurred within sight of the home.<sup>58</sup>

In this episode, the existence of the marvellous and surprising within the everyday landscape serves to transform the children’s perspectives on their ordinary world, and to inspire them to reassess the value of their urban North-East home. Erin comes to see that ‘the most marvellous things could be found [...] a river’s-width away’ and ‘[t]he most extraordinary things existed in our ordinary world and just waited for us to find them.’<sup>59</sup> Importantly, such extraordinary things are to be found within the urban landscape. In her study of fear in Almond’s fiction Geraldine Brennan points to the appropriateness of this landscape for the writer of adolescent fiction, noting how ‘[c]hildren on the brink of puberty play among remnants of the past in wastelands which are poised between one useful life and, perhaps, another as yet unspecified.’<sup>60</sup>

Towards the novel's close, January and Erin head to 'the waste land', and look across to the city's 'brick and steel and stone' with its 'scents of petrol, seaweed, sea, fish, rot, flowers, dust.'<sup>61</sup> Although they still dream of escaping into the natural landscape of the moors, of 'striding through bracken, skipping over little streams, lying beneath the sun on soft green turf, surrounded by the calls of curlews and the scent of peat', they also come to a realisation of the value of their urban lives.<sup>62</sup>

'Might be awful,' I said. 'But I love it just the same.'  
 'Love what?'  
 'Being alive, being me, in this world, here and now.'  
 He grinned.  
 'It's bloody great, eh?' he said. 'Bloody great.'  
 We stood up and wandered across the waste land  
 towards the estate.<sup>63</sup>

The boundary between urban and rural landscapes also features prominently in *Secret Heart* (2001), a novel in which numerous settings emphasise the intersection of the two. Joe, the novel's young protagonist, lives in Helmouth, a place with more than merely a name in common with images of desolation.

Helmouth. It was called a village, but was just a place at the city's edge, before the wasteland started. A mess of new houses and old houses and cracked pavements and roads. [...] They kept saying there'd be great things coming – a swimming-pool, a leisure centre, a shopping centre, a new estate. But it was like Helmouth had been left behind, like it had been forgotten about. [...] In Helmouth, everything just came to nothing.<sup>64</sup>

The landscape of Helmouth and its environs is an archetypal Almond landscape; the village is a marginal place, on the fringes of the industrial city, and is bordered by an area of wasteland which adjoins a place of wilderness beyond. It is the wasteland and wilderness which attract Joe, firstly through the appearance of a circus which sets up its tent on the waste ground, and later by the experiences

which lead him into the wild places beyond. Like the children in *Heaven Eyes*, Joe clambers ‘through the ruins of old terraced houses.’<sup>65</sup> Importantly, both the wasteland and wilderness are located within sight of ‘the motorway where the traffic droned in a haze of fumes and sunlight.’<sup>66</sup> These two landscapes, urban and rural, exist in a symbiotic relationship. The circus brings a force of nature in the form of a tiger into this derelict industrial space, in order that those who live there may remember their relationship with the wild and natural landscape. It is an act that seeks to enrich the urban world. The ‘wise woman’ Nanty Solo speaks of this to Joe, describing how, ‘[i]n the beginning [...] the tent was raised in a green field outside a great city [...] And people left the city and walked out into the green field [...]’.<sup>67</sup> Later, she relates it specifically to Joe and Helmouth.

‘We brought the tiger out, Joe Maloney. We carried it out of the darkness into the light. We carried it across the earth. [...] We brought it to the open spaces beside great cities, to tiny villages beyond high hills, we brought it to places like Helmouth. And how they rushed to see this wonder! [...]’

[...]

‘Don’t worry,’ she whispered. ‘Yours is the bravest soul of all. The tiger has chosen you to carry it out of the glowing blue tent and into the forest again.’<sup>68</sup>

Although it does carry Joe into the forest again, and he is able there to commune with the natural world and become, for a time, a wild part of a wild place, the tiger’s significance lies in the way that it remains within him, as part of his secret heart, on his return home.

The wilderness in this novel is always linked to the urban. When Joe and the circus girl Corinna hear the scream of the slaughtered panther, they notice how the sound ‘echoed across the slopes, across the motorway, across the ruined

fringes of Helmouth [...] echoed into their hearts and beyond their hearts.’<sup>69</sup> This wilderness also attracts Joe’s friend, Stanny, and the older man Joff. At the start of the novel, Stanny tries to persuade Joe to join them on an expedition into the wilderness that lies beyond the boundary of the motorway.

‘We’ll walk all day,’ Stanny said. ‘Way past all this. We’ll walk to where it’s wild, really really wild. We’ll have our combats on. Knives and catapults and snares in our pockets. We’ll kill something for lunch. We’ll strip a tree to make the shelter. We’ll light a fire. Joff’ll drink and talk about his army days and we’ll listen to the night. There’s nowt like it, Joe.’<sup>70</sup>

This planned pilgrimage into the wild landscape really constitutes an act of aggression against the natural world, culminating in the brutal slaughter of the wild panther by Joff. It is pure ‘boy’s own adventure’ material, in contrast with Joe’s engagement with the wild which sees him become at one with the spirit of the tiger and the natural landscape of ‘ancient scorching grasslands and ancient forests’ which it carries ‘deep into the heart of this English wood.’<sup>71</sup> In this novel, as elsewhere in Almond’s fiction, North-East children develop very close affiliations with wild animals and birds; indeed Joe transforms into the tiger at points. Such intense anthropomorphism features as a common trope in twentieth-century British children’s literature, and is not unique to either Almond’s work or North-East fiction more generally.<sup>72</sup> What is distinctive here, however, is the way that children in Almond’s North East always develop a deep sense of the wildness within them in order to shed new light on the landscapes in which they live.

The landscape in *The Fire-Eaters* similarly fuses the natural and urban. The natural landscape here is often wild, outlined against the ‘bleak grey sky.’<sup>73</sup> Like Michael in *Skellig*, Bobby is seeking solace and escape in nature, manifested in his desire ‘to be the sea, the sky, [...] to be out there in the gathering darkness,

to be nothing, unconscious, wild and free.’<sup>74</sup> At the same time, it is very much a landscape which speaks of its industrial heritage. Early in the novel, narrator Bobby describes the scene as he returns to Keely Bay with his mother after a visit to Newcastle.

She said the sky was beautiful, the way its blueness faded into countless shades of purple and orange and pink. She praised the fields, the hedgerows, the allotments, the pigeon lofts, the silhouettes of pitheads to the north. She gasped at the first sight of the distant glistening sea, at the rooftops of our Keely Bay.

‘It’s like...’ she said. ‘But who could catch such beauty?’<sup>75</sup>

Again, there is little division between the natural and the industrial. Urban imagery is embedded within the vista, inseparable from the natural scenery. Unlike Westall’s landscapes, in which the industrial landscape is situated upon a bedrock of the natural, so to speak, here as elsewhere in Almond’s work the presence of the urban exists at the very same moment and in the very same place as the pastoral. The blend of industrial and natural which permeates Almond’s fiction, founded on a balance that Almond describes as finding ‘incredibly touching’, in this way transforms the typically dichotomous representation of such elements.<sup>76</sup> In interview he describes his experience of showing visitors around his home town, and suggests that such an aesthetic sensibility is particular to those who share a North-Eastern heritage.

The roughness of the landscape. I take people to Felling and I say, ‘It’s just beautiful,’ I take them up the hill in Felling and I say, ‘Look, isn’t this beautiful?’ and of course they don’t get it because they haven’t got my kind of experience.<sup>77</sup>

Although this is in part attributable to the writer’s sense of attachment to his personal history, and arguably not simply a North-Eastern sensibility, it is notable

that Almond stresses the way in which his experience is rooted in a North-East landscape that appears beautifully rough only to the native viewer.

Almond is concerned to address what he sees as the effects of industrial decline upon the region's consciousness, as he outlines in interview.

[...] the industrial decline, the effect that had on the landscape and on people's consciousness. Especially the changes on the River Tyne, the river itself, the closing down of all the shipyards, the disappearance of the coalmines, all of that was very important to me, and still is. I keep getting drawn back to that, my landscapes are filled with that, my landscapes are all about industrial decline I guess.<sup>78</sup>

I explore Almond's use of mining imagery later in this chapter, but clearly, Almond sees the industrial decline experienced in the North East - particularly in the 1970s and 1980s - as engrained both in people's consciousness and the landscape itself. *The Fire-Eaters* returns to one of the North East's periods of industrial activity, and it emphasises the place of industry within the landscape. This is a different industrial backdrop from that found in *Heaven Eyes* and particularly *Secret Heart*, which Almond describes as an obsession.

I'm obsessed by the landscapes of post-industrial north-eastern England, particularly the few square miles around where I grew up: abandoned coal mines, disused railways, ancient stone cottages, pony paddocks, newt ponds, new housing developments, turfed-over pitheads. It's all being cleaned up, landscaped, tamed now, of course, but the blend of the ancient and the new and the derelict, the reminders of the past and the yearnings for the future can never be totally swept away.<sup>79</sup>

Though the temporal setting of *The Fire-Eaters*, as with *Clay*, is the early 1960s, a period in which heavy industry was active in Tyneside, nevertheless the effect is similar in the way it emphasises the industrial as intrinsic and essential to the North East landscape. *The Fire-Eaters* is a novel which speaks of imminent change for the region. Keely Bay is a place in the grip of dereliction, as Bobby

observes when he looks back over his childhood and remembers the place ‘hardly changing apart from getting more tattered and worn.’<sup>80</sup> Earlier, he and his friend Joseph discuss the arrival of the family of outsiders who have recently moved to the area, and their reasons for doing so.

‘Aye, but why come here. Keely Bay! It’s nowt but coaly beaches and coaly sea and nowt going on. It’s bliddy derelict man. It’s had its day.’

I looked around: the dunes, the beach, the patch of pine trees to the north, the ancient timber holiday shacks, the rooftops of the scruffy village. Further inland, the pitheads with their winding gear, the distant moors.

‘Mebbe they think it’s beautiful or something.’<sup>81</sup>

The suggestion is that the newcomers are tourists, come to admire the dereliction from an amused distance, and in a sense this is what Daniel Gower’s father does as he photographs the local landscape and appropriates its imagery through his observational art photography. In the novel’s closing scenes, however, as both incomers and locals alike gather on the beach united in the face of what they believe to be imminent destruction, Bobby’s mother questions Paul Gower and receives in response an assurance that the new family do indeed appreciate the beauty of the place; significantly, as they come together and share wine, he leaves his camera at home.<sup>82</sup> Finally, the local children too marvel at the beauty of the landscape, in the entirety of its rural and urban dimensions, as they look in wonder at the arrival of the stag and deer, surely symbols of the innocence and beauty of the natural landscape, which return to collect their young fawn, emerging out of ‘the fields that led towards the pitheads and ancient woodlands.’<sup>83</sup>

Wild things emerge from the heart of the urban landscape in *Clay*, too.

Braddock’s Garden is the central location in the novel, the place where Davie and



his friends congregate and also the site of Stephen Rose's mystical ceremonies involving the creature, Clay. The garden is a wild place, in the midst of the industrial landscape of Felling. Stephen Rose is closely associated with the wild from the outset, as his grandfather Rocky is rumoured to have “ [...] ended up living in a tent in Plessey Woods, all horrible and hairy and running away if anybody come near.”<sup>84</sup> A similar fate is imagined by Davie for Stephen himself, who he imagines ‘hiding out, practising his arts in Plessey Woods, or in Kielder Forest or the Cheviots, or in some distant empty wild place that has no name.’<sup>85</sup> Stephen associates himself with a primal, mystical tradition, linked to the wild landscape.

‘Saints used to live in caves like this,’ he said. ‘In the desert. In the wilderness. They tested themselves.’

[...]

‘At Bennett [seminary school],’ he said, ‘a priest once said that mebbe I was more suited to the wilderness than to the civilised world.’

‘Felling’s the right place for you, then,’ said Geordie.<sup>86</sup>

Although Geordie’s comment is jovial, it contains a truth about the wilderness at the heart of Almond’s fictionalised Felling. This space, Braddock’s Garden, is important to the adolescents in the novel, particularly Davie. Yet again Almond uses the wild setting to provide a place of refuge, and Davie’s girlfriend Maria bemoans the proposed redevelopment of the area in order to build a new housing estate, which will destroy “ [...] a bit of Paradise.”<sup>87</sup> Typically, Braddock’s Garden is no unspoiled wilderness, but an overgrown quarry. In this novel again, the natural landscape exists side by side with the urban. The creature Clay is himself constituted of earth and various plant materials, and he comes to symbolise the wilderness itself given life to walk out into the town. As Rachel

Falconer notes, central to the novel is the fact that the boys' creation, Clay, is 'a natural monster [...] rather than sewn from corpses or animated by electricity.'<sup>88</sup>

Before we finish the man's chest Stephen presses a wizened rose hip there to make a heart. [...] We put a conker inside the skull for a brain. [...] Sycamore seeds make eyes, ash keys make the ears, dried-out hawthorn berries make nostrils, twigs and grass stems make his hair.

'We plant him like a garden,' Stephen says.<sup>89</sup>

Just as the wilderness of Braddock's Garden has reclaimed the former industrial site of the quarry, so too this walking embodiment of the natural landscape is in turn subsumed within Davie's father's town garden as he is slowly 'washed into the sandy border, and earth returns to earth.'<sup>90</sup> There is a cyclical unity in this, which reaffirms the interdependence of the rural and the urban within the landscape of Almond's fictionalised North East.

The wild landscape also comes to life and walks through the town in Almond's latest work, *The Savage* (2008), a collaboration with artist Dave McKean. This remarkable text, a blend of prose and graphic novel forms, tells the story of Blue Baker, a young boy struggling to come to terms with both his father's sudden death and the bullying he is experiencing at school. He finds the act of writing therapeutic, and produces the story of 'The Savage', which tells the tale of a wild boy living in the woods near his home town. In magic realist style, the boundary between the two stories of Blue and the savage begins to blur, confounding the reader's expectations. It seems that Blue's writing is able to call the savage into the real world, where he intervenes on Blue's behalf with the bully Hopper, and visits Blue's home. The book is rich in interpretative possibilities for both reader and critic, inviting questions about the power of storytelling, and suggesting a psychoanalytical reading of the savage's function

for the character of Blue. Through the figure of the savage, Blue is able to regress into a wild state, and vicariously confront both internal and external conflicts.

Although the savage is associated with the wilderness of Burgess Woods, his existence is sustained by forays into the urban landscape. Blue describes how ‘he lived on berries [sic] and roots and rabbits and stuff like old pies that he pinched from the bins at the back of Greenacres Rest Home’, and that his ‘wepons [sic] were old kitchen nives [sic] and forks and an ax [sic] that he nicked from Franky Finnigin’s alotment [sic]’, tools gleaned from the town.<sup>91</sup> He inhabits a place of dereliction, ‘under the ruined chapel in Burgess Woods’, a place linked to the industrial heritage of the area by Blue’s description of how he ‘chucked [his victims’] bones down an aynshent [sic] pit shaft.’<sup>92</sup> Despite being, in Blue’s eyes, ‘truely [sic] wild’, and feasting on raw chicken with ‘blud [...] triklng down over his chin [sic]’, his ‘delishus brekfast [sic]’ is washed down with ‘a bottle of Fanta that heed pinched from the back of The Grey Horse [sic].’<sup>93</sup> Through the character of the savage, Blue attempts to reassert the presence of the wild world within his home town. People in Blue’s fictionalised version of Almond’s fictionalised North-East town, Saltwell, seem to have lost touch with the wild landscape to the extent that they are unable to believe in the savage’s existence even when they experience it first hand.<sup>94</sup>

The savage was mainly active at night. [...] Sometimes people coming back from late-night parties or lock-ins at The Grey Horse came across the savage, but nobody ever really believed what they had seen. They told themselves they were mistaken. They thought they were dreaming or drunk. How could there be a savage like that living in an ordinary sleepy little town like ours?<sup>95</sup>

As the story of the savage and the frame narrative of Blue’s experiences both progress, Blue finds himself regressing and attuning to his inner primal nature,

just as the savage evolves emotionally. While engrossed in creating the story, Blue reports that he is ‘grunting and growling as I wrote’, eventually baring his teeth and snarling at his teacher before running off to commune directly with the savage in his cave.<sup>96</sup> Boy and savage meet, symbolic of the civilised and primal aspects of Blue’s psyche vying for dominance as suggested by Blue’s description of the wild boy as appearing ‘like a reflection, and he was just like me, only weirder and wilder and closer to some magic and some darkness and some dreams.’<sup>97</sup> The culmination of both narratives comes as the savage acknowledges Blue as a kindred spirit, and places chicken feathers in his hair. Together they grunt and stamp the earth, and Blue experiences ‘how it felt to be the savage, to be truly wild.’<sup>98</sup> At this point, Blue hears his father’s voice comforting him, before he returns to his home. Having regressed into savagery, Blue is able to return to the civilised world, carrying elements of the wilderness with him, his new-found fortitude now firmly rooted within him, just as ‘the chicken feathers were in my hair and the savage was in my heart and my dad was in my soul.’<sup>99</sup> Blue joins other North-East children from Almond’s fiction, such as Michael in *Skellig*, Joe in *Secret Heart*, and Davie in *Clay*, all of whom discover their deep affinity with the wilderness at the heart of Almond’s North-East landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> See Don Latham, *David Almond: Memory and Magic* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), and David Almond, ‘Biography’, <http://www.davidalmond.com/author/bio.html> [accessed 10 September 2008].

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Lindsey Fraser, ‘Interview with David Almond at Edinburgh International Book Festival, 17 August 2005’, [www.edbookfest.co.uk/downloads/05\\_08\\_17\\_david\\_almond.doc](http://www.edbookfest.co.uk/downloads/05_08_17_david_almond.doc) [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>3</sup> David Almond, *Personal Interview with Nolan Dalrymple* (Humshaugh: Northumberland, 31 January 2008; see Appendix).

<sup>4</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>5</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>6</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>7</sup> Benedicte Page, ‘David Almond: Frankenstein goes to Tyneside’, *Independent*, 6 November 2005, accessible at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts->

[entertainment/books/features/david-almond-frankenstein-goes-to-tyneside-514322.html](http://entertainment/books/features/david-almond-frankenstein-goes-to-tyneside-514322.html)] > [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>8</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>9</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>10</sup> David Almond, *Counting Stars* (London: Hodder, 2000; 2008), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> 'David Almond (1951-) – Sidelights Biography', <<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/1309/Almond-David-1951-Sidelights.html>> [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>14</sup> *Counting Stars*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> David Almond himself has described being fascinated as a teenager by the work of T. Lobsang Rampa, in particular *The Third Eye*; see 'David Almond in conversation with Kim Reynolds', (20 November 2007), <http://www.northernwriterscentre.com/film-audio/2007/11/20/david-almond-in-conversation-with-kim-reynolds> [accessed 29 October 2009]; *Counting Stars*, p. 91; p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Rachel Falconer, 'The Search For Roots: David Almond's *Clay*', in *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Literature and its Adult Readership* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 229-274; Don Latham, *David Almond: Memory and Magic* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006); also *Interview*.

<sup>19</sup> Latham, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Falconer, p. 240; the phrase 'view from underneath' is cited from Salman Rushdie, *The Jaguar Smile: a Nicaraguan Journey* (Oxford: ISIS, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> David Almond, *Clay*, (London: Hodder, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> *Clay*, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> *Clay*, pp. 244-45.

<sup>24</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>25</sup> See for instance *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>26</sup> David Almond, *The Fire-Eaters*, (London: Hodder, 2003), p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, pp. 221-22.

<sup>29</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 244.

<sup>30</sup> *My Dad's a Birdman*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Clare Bradford *et al* [individual chapter authors are not differentiated] comment on an example of the tendency for children's literature to default to 'clichéd pastoral idyll, both in components described and the language of description'; see Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 81. Arguably, the North-East dimension of Almond's fictional landscape helps him to resist such a move.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Colls, 'Born-again Geordies', in Colls and Lancaster, pp. 1-34 (p. 8).

<sup>33</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>34</sup> David Almond, *Wild Girl, Wild Boy: a play* (London: Hodder, 2002), 'Afterword', p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> *Wild Girl, Wild Boy: a play*, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> David Almond, *Skellig* (London: Hodder, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Skellig*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Skellig*, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Skellig*, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> *Skellig*, p. 76; p. 103.

<sup>41</sup> *Skellig*, p. 132.

<sup>42</sup> 'Any good story [...] is not a tame, trapped thing. It still has wildness in it [...]; *Wild Girl, Wild Boy: a play*, p. 88; also, 'All children have a wildness about them.'; quoted in Kit Spring, 'A hit from a myth', *Observer*, 23 November 2003, accessible at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/nov/23/booksforchildrenandteenagers.features> > [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>43</sup> David Almond, *Kit's Wilderness*, (London: Hodder, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>45</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, pp. 8-9; p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 17; p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>50</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>51</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 188.

<sup>52</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 101.

<sup>53</sup> David Almond, *Heaven Eyes*, (London: Hodder, 2000), pp. 10-11.

<sup>54</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, pp. 29-32; p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 89; p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 98.

<sup>58</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 181.

<sup>60</sup> Geraldine Brennan, 'The Game Called Death: Frightening Fictions by David Almond, Philip Gross and Lesley Howarth', in Kimberley Reynolds, Geraldine Brennan and Kevin McCarron, *Frightening Fiction* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 92-127 (p. 95).

<sup>61</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 207.

<sup>62</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p.208.

<sup>63</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>64</sup> David Almond, *Secret Heart*, (London: Hodder, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 14.

<sup>67</sup> *Secret Heart*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>68</sup> *Secret Heart*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>69</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 141.

<sup>70</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 156.

<sup>72</sup> Cultural critic Marina Warner, writing of Philip Pullman, notes how he 'is not the only children's writer who is generating new metamorphoses for our time; and [...] many of the most successful fiction writers for adults also operate in this metamorphic and supernatural territory.' See Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 208.

<sup>73</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 167.

<sup>74</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 125.

<sup>75</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 13.

<sup>76</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>77</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>78</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>79</sup> David Almond, 'Secret Heart', *Original Essays*, <http://www.powells.com/essays/almond.html> > [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>80</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>81</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 37.

<sup>82</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*. pp. 239-240; p. 248.

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<sup>84</sup> *Clay*, p. 20.

<sup>85</sup> *Clay*, p. 293.

<sup>86</sup> *Clay*, p. 53.

<sup>87</sup> *Clay*, p. 112.

<sup>88</sup> Falconer, p. 255.

<sup>89</sup> *Clay*, p. 176.

<sup>90</sup> *Clay*, p. 293.

<sup>91</sup> David Almond, *The Savage*, (London: Walker Books, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> *The Savage*, p. 7; p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> *The Savage*, p. 11; p. 20.

<sup>94</sup> In interview, Almond describes the location as follows: 'It's unspoken. It is the North East, but it's not a named place. It's a bit more rural than a lot of the stuff, a bit more like here I suppose.' Almond currently lives in rural Northumberland (see *Personal Interview* (see Appendix)).

<sup>95</sup> *The Savage*, p. 30.

<sup>96</sup> *The Savage*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>97</sup> *The Savage*, p. 73.

<sup>98</sup> *The Savage*, p. 75.

<sup>99</sup> *The Savage*, p. 76.

## Chapter 9: Almond's Landscape Part 2

*[...] the never-ending rumble of the sea.*

Perhaps one of the most potent manifestations of the natural landscape of Almond's North East is to be found in his portrayal of the North Sea and its associated rivers and waterways. I suggested earlier that proximity to the North Sea can be seen as a defining characteristic of the region, given that much of the populated area of the region lies close to the coast. Certainly, I have explored how in Westall's North-East fiction, much of which is located in and around the Tyne estuary, the sea functions in a variety of ways to underpin images of the natural world as both nourishing yet threatening, and to claim such qualities as intrinsic to the North-East landscape. Westall's North East is salt-soaked to the extent that the landscape inhabited by his young characters exists in dialogue with the North Sea, and its tributary River Tyne; the sea eats away at the landscape of *The Watch House*, it both threatens and shelters Harry in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, and it provides a portal into the time of Cuddy in *The Wind Eye*, to name just a few examples. Typically, the sea and rivers are unavoidable in Westall's texts, frequently impacting upon the land of the North East.

These bodies of water are very important in some of Almond's fiction too, though their presence is less ubiquitous across the range of his work. The North Sea clearly functions as a powerful presence, as Almond outlines in interview.

I think the presence of the sea was always a huge thing, growing up here. And I've thought about that, when I go to other Northern cities, and I've thought, 'Well, could I work here, could I write about this place in the same way?' I think I couldn't, and I think a lot of it is to do with the fact that the sea was always very close, you could always see the sea. [...] [...] [I]t was always there



as just this huge element. [...] and I think that's definitely part of the uniqueness of the North East.<sup>1</sup>

Given his comments regarding the impact of writing about the North East on his creative output, the presence of the sea becomes doubly significant: as well as finding his voice by writing about the North-East landscape, the proximity of the sea empowers him to write in a way he would not find possible in other Northern cities.<sup>2</sup> He goes on to underline the significance of the sea within his work, as he describes how it functions to bind him to a distinguished literary tradition.

The presence of the sea was massive, and that again was one of the things I remember growing up in Felling. You grew up on this hillside, you had the city, you had the moors, and you had the sea. You had everything, the whole elemental world was all around you. It was all there, and the sea was there as a kind of boundary, this lovely, shining thing, a sense of distance and horizon, and I suppose as a Catholic boy I guess it symbolised something about eternity, death, time, all of these things which the sea always does, from Homer onwards. And if you write about Felling, you're doing the same thing that Homer did. You're bound to, as soon as you mention the sea.<sup>3</sup>

The North Sea defines the region, acting as 'a kind of boundary' and providing 'a sense of distance and horizon'. At the same time as being closely tied to the specificity of the region for Almond, it also serves to connect the fiction he sets in Felling with wider concerns, and demonstrates the lineage of such imagery in what are arguably the most significant pre-texts in the Western literary tradition, namely Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Such functions are stronger in his work than in Westall's fiction or elsewhere within the tradition of North-East children's fiction. They reflect Almond's continued attempts to re-position the North East at 'the middle of the world.'<sup>4</sup>

A link between the North Sea and death features in a short story in *Counting Stars*. 'The Kitchen' describes an imaginary scene where the narrator's whole family (Almond acknowledges these stories are among the most autobiographical of his work) are magically reunited, around the kitchen table of their home. This includes the return of one of the children, Barbara, whose death at a young age overshadows many of the stories in the collection. As the family reminisce, they recall an outing to the coast at South Shields. Here, Barbara's presence is described by her sister Catherine, and associated with the sea.

'It was me that saw her, ' says Catherine. 'The little girl standing in the fret, pale as the mist, knee-deep in the sea. [...] I ran down to the sea, pointing. There! The fret went back, the sea was empty, just water, little waves. Not a soul in there. Dreamed it night after night. Little girl in the water. The missing one, the one who seemed always to be somewhere in the fringes. Catch her in the corner of your eye, then turn your head and she'd be gone.'

We turn to Barbara. She turns her eyes to each of us, eyes shining like the sea, complexion pale as sea fret.<sup>5</sup>

This excerpt encapsulates Almond's representation of the North Sea, embodying as it does the two qualities of providing and taking away. I considered these features of the sea in Westall's work in Chapter 4, and such images can be seen as enduring (see also, for instance, Aidan Chambers, *Marle* (1968) and Sylvia Sherry, *The Loss of the Night Wind* (1970), for similar images), and contributing to a wider aesthetic which emphasises both the nourishing and dangerous dimensions of the North-East landscape. What is characteristic about Almond's representation is the way in which such conflicting qualities are reconciled within the same image. In the case of Barbara, she is swathed in the sea and sea-fret as she appears, both in memory and in the imagined kitchen, as a figure of life-in-death. In both appearances, she is simultaneously offered forth into the family's

presence, and cast away from their reach, by the North Sea. The extract cited above follows closely on from the narrator's mother's recollection of the near loss of her young boys in the sea-fret, and their rediscovery by their father; in the same way as the boys are at once both concealed and revealed by the sea, so too the father, whose death has also taken so much from the family, is evoked, and his miraculous presence in the room is emphasised.

A similar image sits at the centre of *Heaven Eyes*, where it is extended to include the River Tyne as well as the North Sea. As the children embark on their journey away from Whitegates and in search of the freedom of the sea, their raft sets sail down the river on a journey that at once both offers them wondrous experiences and threatens to take their lives. As January outlines his plan for escape, Erin laughs and imagines the 'dark deep river, the powerful currents, the danger [...] running underneath me, pulling me away.'<sup>6</sup> Once aboard the raft, the threatening aspect of the water comes to the fore.

We seemed to catch the main current and it drew us relentlessly away from the lights, away from the voices, towards the mist towards the night. [...] The river stank of oil and something rotten. There was the scent of salt and seaweed. [...] Soon there was nothing but us, the raft, the churning water and the mist. Our voices boomed and echoed back to us. We stared at each other, held each other, in terror that one of us might be lost to the others, in terror that we'd all be lost, in terror that this journey was nothing but a journey into death.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, for all of the North-East children in the novel, and especially for *Heaven Eyes*, this is the beginning of a journey into new life, and the water ends up providing much more than it threatens to take away. In this way, the Tyne signifies rebirth for the children, despite reeking of rot and decay. Just as it has taken the life of the man who will become the saint, who in turn takes away the

spirit of Grampa, so the water spares the life of Heaven Eyes, and delivers the children safely back to the urban world.

The river carried us above its deep dark bed and below the endless sky. It carried our stories home with us. It carried our sister home with us. Heaven Eyes. Heaven Eyes. This girl who should have drowned at sea, this girl rescued from the mud, this fishy froggy girl who stared and smiled and saw Heaven at the heart of everything.<sup>8</sup>

It is the river's connection with the urban landscape that renders it such a life-affirming presence, and this is rooted in Tyneside's industrial heritage. It is not accidental, given that shipbuilding stands alongside coalmining as one of the key industries at the heart of the North East's nineteenth-century expansion, that January joins a tradition of shipbuilders in creating his own raft with which to navigate the waters of the Tyne. I demonstrated in Chapter 1 the centrality of such industrial images to the identity of the region. In Almond's fiction, the very essence of the river bears witness to its industrial potential; just before January reveals his creation, the water is described as appearing 'like hammered metal, gleaming', and elsewhere this image is repeated in refrains of 'like running molten metal', 'like polished metal', and 'glowing like beaten metal [...] heaving through the city', all of which evoke images of hard physical labour being brought to bear on the water, and recall the ways in which the processes of heavy industry act to transform raw materials through physical acts of smelting, hammering, beating and polishing.<sup>9</sup> Though there are parallels with Westall's 'oily bosom of the all-providing Gar', there is also a crucial difference; while Westall's river is undoubtedly saturated with traces of its industrial past as it casts up its spoils into the hands of local children, Almond's river is itself conceptualised by his North-East child narrator as being of the very essence of

such industry.<sup>10</sup> The full force of such industrial images, and their ability to transform the North-East landscape in popular consciousness, is felt here.

Almond has spoken of his interest in the effect of the region's industrial decline 'on people's consciousness', and '[e]specially the changes on the River Tyne, the river itself, the closing down of all the shipyards, the disappearance of the coalmines' as being 'very important' to him.<sup>11</sup> Such concerns are manifested in the imagery he uses, in which both the industrialisation of the natural waterscape and the naturalisation of the river's industrial legacy are reconciled. Here, Almond's River Tyne has become an embodiment of those raw materials at the heart of the shipbuilding industry which once sat with such buoyancy at the heart of the region's *raison d'être*. Although as I have shown, the images he employs are similes, the relationship between the river and its industrial past, as elsewhere in reference to the natural landscape of the region, is more akin to synecdoche in the way that one element from its output has come to define its very essence.

The presence of the sea is perhaps most prominent in *The Fire-Eaters*. Most of the key events in the novel occur against a backdrop of the 'ever-present rumble of the sea', which is described as 'never-ending'.<sup>12</sup> This is an example of the sea as symbolic of the eternal, and its enduring nature forms a reassuring counterpoint to the various changes which threaten to disrupt Bobby's life, including the frightening possibility that his father may be seriously ill, and of course the impending nuclear cataclysm. The sea's presence is so central to life in Keely Bay that Bobby himself is saturated with its essence; when he seeks out the fire-eater with his dad, McNulty comments that he can "[...]smell fish and salt on you, bonny."<sup>13</sup> As in *Heaven Eyes*, here also the sea is associated with the industrial lifeblood of the North East, as even in the derelict Keely Bay, the

family of Bobby's friend, Ailsa Spink, still make their living from harvesting sea coal. Bobby watches the men 'wielding their massive shovels' as 'the silvery sea gleamed all around them.'<sup>14</sup> In an earlier episode, Bobby describes how 'the sea coalers and their ponies dragged carts filled with coal from the sea', which 'stretched like burnished metal to the dark dead-flat horizon.'<sup>15</sup> Once again, the water's metallic appearance can be read as linking it to industrial images of the North East, which stretch outwards from the region as far as the eye can see.

In response to the terrifying prospect of his father dying, Bobby seeks refuge in the sea. He and Ailsa stand 'in the sea beneath the stars' as they pray for his father's health, and Bobby describes how he tries 'to empty my mind of everything but the sea, the night and Ailsa.'<sup>16</sup> Here, the North Sea is an unknowable spiritual presence which effects a communion with God, as Almond draws upon established Catholic iconography of the sea in order to imbue the North East with a sense of the primal and sacred. Other key moments too are framed by the sea's presence, culminating in the novel's denouement which sees the people of the area engage in an act resonant of ancient sacrifice as they build 'a row of fires at the edge of the land and sea.'<sup>17</sup> Just as the North Sea provides for the Spinks, so too the fuel for these fires is scavenged from the flotsam and jetsam washed ashore.

Other key moments in the novel are also linked to the sea. Bobby relates how, as he set off for his first day at the new high school, which turns out to be a corrupt and punishing place, '[s]eagulls squealed and the sea slapped and a foghorn droned from beyond the lost horizon.'<sup>18</sup> Following his expulsion for defying the corrupt staff, Bobby again seeks refuge on the beach. Jubilant at having defied the establishment, he describes how he 'smelt the sea and heard the

sea and saw the summit of the distant lighthouse.’<sup>19</sup> In a similar moment of high tension, after Bobby and Joseph covertly watch McNulty and are then surprised by him, they run from him, ‘slipping and tumbling through the sand [...] and the sky above our heads was a storm of screaming gulls and the sea was roaring in again.’<sup>20</sup>

Many of these instances are similar to Westall’s use of the sea to signify the force of nature working in close proximity to the landscape of the North East, and in particular the way in which the sea seems to empathise with adolescent characters’ concerns. In Almond’s work, however, such images take on a further dimension. Where Westall’s *The Watch House* sees the supernatural creature of Hague returning from the sea to wreak havoc on the young characters’ lives, in *The Fire-Eaters* the sea itself seems to cry out to the young friends, and to McNulty, all of whom hear howls, cries, wailing and weeping coming from the water.<sup>21</sup> The North Sea seems to share the suffering being experienced by the inhabitants of Keely Bay.

One typical feature of the coastal landscape employed for figurative effect by Almond is the lighthouse in Keely Bay. It is linked to the figure of McNulty in a straightforwardly symbolic manner; in key moments where his presence or the mention of his name brings hope to Bobby, the light of the lighthouse shines and brings illumination to Bobby’s world; in his darkest moments of hopelessness as the feared war seems to approach inevitably, so ‘for the first time ever, our lighthouse light was dark and still.’<sup>22</sup> This imagery emphasises Keely Bay’s location at the boundaries of the landscape, reminding the reader of the inherent danger of the sea, and contributes to wider representations of the sea as a defining feature in the landscape of Almond’s fictionalised North East.

*Angels, birdmen and tigers*

Almond's North East, in common with many of the writers examined in Chapters 2 and 3, is a place where animals and birds have a strong presence. As with other images he employs, when writing about birds and animals Almond's imagery is often transformative. Through birds and animals, his North-East children are able to commune with the natural landscape, often as a result of mystical and magical experiences.

*Secret Heart* employs such supernatural motifs throughout. Very early in the novel, Joe sees skylarks rising from the ground into the air, and hears them 'singing in the sky and singing in his heart', an image which is recalled later in the text as he talks with the magical figure of the circus owner, Hackenschmidt, and closes his eyes as '[s]kylarks burst out singing deep inside.'<sup>23</sup> The secret heart of the novel's title refers to the affinity with the natural, animal landscape within Joe, a connection he comes to realise as he gradually becomes at one with a mystical tiger-presence which gradually creeps into his world. The connection between boy and beast appears immediately at the novel's opening.

*The tiger padded through the night. Joe Maloney smelt it, the hot, sour breath, the stench of its pelt. The odour crept through the streets, through his open window and into his dreams. He felt the animal wildness on his tongue, in his nostrils.*<sup>24</sup>

In such images, Almond asserts the ubiquitous presence of the wild, natural North-East landscape coterminous with the industrial and urban. Such transformations frequently occur in the derelict wasteland, where Joe is able to evoke the presence of wild animals. At one point, Joe eats a concoction known as "Nature Stew," which has been prepared by his friend, Stanny Mole (a boy who



also takes on characteristics of his animal name); after eating the skylark's egg it contains, Joe feels himself begin to transform into a bird.<sup>25</sup> His ability to shape-shift is elaborated in the following passage.

He knew how the lives of people and beasts could merge out here in the wasteland. He knew what it was to be Joe Maloney but also more than Joe Maloney. Out here by day he could rise into the blue like a skylark. At night he could flicker through the darkness like a bat. He emptied his mind now of being just Joe Maloney. He felt weasel fur growing on the backs of his hands. He felt claws where his fingers were. He hissed and he was a snake slipping through ancient cellars beneath the ancient chapel. He crouched on all fours and his face and teeth sharpened as he took on the shape of a fox. Nobody knew that he knew how to do these things. They were secret, things that grew from his secret heart.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst clearly this can be read as a figurative representation of feelings of instability as the adolescent body morphs towards physical maturity, this 'half-beast, half-human thing, a thing that can sprout horns or fur or feathers', there is also something specifically of the North East in Joe's experience.<sup>27</sup> Not only is he of the North East, but it is also suggested that the ultimate transformation which occurs in the novel could only happen here; the tiger has searched fruitlessly until now - arriving here and finding Joe. As he moves from firstly experiencing simply 'the memory of the tiger [...] running through his blood', through being disguised as the creature by his friend Corinna, on to swallowing the piece of tiger bone given to him by Nanty Solo, and ultimately to becoming the tiger and bringing its presence to life 'here in this Helmouth Garden', so Joe's journey is also a quest affecting the landscape of Helmouth, which is transformed from a place of dereliction at the margins of existence, into the site of a momentous event for the whole world.<sup>28</sup> In this North-East garden, Joe takes on the form of the tiger, an act with which he is able to "[r]efresh the world."<sup>29</sup> Such rebirth can

perhaps be read as symbolic of the regeneration occurring in Tyneside during the time of the novel's composition.

North-East children have an affinity with wild creatures in *Clay* too. As the two youngsters walk through Felling, Davie's girlfriend, Maria, describes how sometimes 'she felt closer to animals than she did to people [...] grown-up people, anyway.'<sup>30</sup> In *The Fire-Eaters*, Bobby and his friends are described by the sadistic Mr Todd as "[...] half civilized [...] wild things. [...]", which he attempts to tame using violence.<sup>31</sup> Such images, of course, draw upon established motifs within children's literature which associate children with nature and the uncivilized. However, they can also be positioned within a larger set of images associated with the North East, which contribute to its construction for younger readers as a wild zone. Significantly, in Almond's work when children commune with wild creatures, they do so through magical acts which evoke ideas of the mystical and transcendent. This is particularly evident in Almond's use of bird imagery.

The novel which features birds most extensively is *Skellig*. Its central figure, Skellig, is a supernatural, winged angel-like creature with a close affiliation with birds. The children, Michael and Mina, take Skellig to the attic of Mina's grandfather's ancient house in order to care for him, a place which is the domain of a family of wild owls. The owls parallel the two children; just as Mina approaches Michael in order to make amends following an argument, so too 'the other owl descended and perched in silence beside its partner.'<sup>32</sup> Similarly, just as the children nurture Skellig back to health, so too the owls bring him offerings from their nightly kills.<sup>33</sup> Mina describes the fledgling owls as "[b]eautiful tender savages", and impresses upon Michael how the adult birds will "[...] defend their

chicks to the death’’, qualities which could equally apply to the children themselves; Michael is wracked with anxiety over his baby sister’s illness and he invokes the beautifully savage Skellig to protect her.<sup>34</sup> The baby’s imperilled existence is also symbolised using bird imagery: the fledgling blackbirds face the dangers of the garden just as the baby’s illness becomes more acute, and just before Skellig intervenes on her behalf. With figures such as Skellig, Almond seeks to rework and expand images of savagery and primitiveness which have so long been associated with the North East, and to recast them as inflected with qualities of beauty and tenderness.

Though not directly acknowledged as such, the figure of Skellig is highly suggestive of angels, and these supernatural creatures also permeate Almond’s North East. In the short story ‘Where Your Wings Were’ in *Counting Stars*, the narrator receives dream-like visitations from an angel, which are sensual and almost erotic experiences for the adolescent boy. One particularly powerful episode seems to anticipate a scene in the later *Skellig*.

One night, after she’d been with me for hours, her wings began to beat more quickly and I felt myself being lifted. I held on tight, gazed into her perfect face as we began to fly through the gentle winds of the dark. [...] I knew she was there only by the continued rhythmic beating of her wings.<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, this angel leads the narrator towards an experience of transcendent, divine truth, as he meets his deceased sister and learns from her that his shoulder blades really do mark the place where his wings were in an earlier incarnation as an angel. This is radical knowledge, Blakean in its evocation of the sacred within the profane, and its revelation proves transformative for the adolescent Catholic

boy who has learnt ‘that God slept, that even angels weren’t always good, that I’d have my wings back one day, and that dreams were only dreams.’<sup>36</sup>

What such birds and bird-like creatures offer to Almond’s North-East children is the possibility of flight. The ability to fly is a common motif in fantasy writing for children, often symbolic of the desire for escape from the constraints of childhood.<sup>37</sup> I have shown how ideas of escape are bound to representations of the North-East landscape in children’s fiction, not least in Westall’s writing. In Almond’s writing, the ability to fly is certainly associated with the breaking of boundaries and the experience of new horizons for his North-East children, but is more associated with the act of soaring within the regional landscape rather than moving beyond it. Typically, Almond seeks to show that the transition from innocence to experience need not equate with the experience of outgrowing the region; indeed, there is nothing limited or limiting about Almond’s North East. In doing this, Almond challenges those established images of the region (see Chapters 1 to 3) which portray the North East as a starting point from which young people’s exit velocity lifts off. Bestowing the children in his fiction with bird-like abilities is one of the ways Almond emphasises their imaginative freedom, particularly as they approach adolescence. As Almond himself describes, speaking about *My Dad’s a Birdman*, “[t]hey’re not trying to fly across the Tyne to reach heaven, they’re trying to have a good time. They’re not trying to transcend this world, they’re trying to leap into the wonderful parts of this world. They’re trying to leap into happiness in this world.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast with many of the children portrayed elsewhere in children’s fiction of the North East who yearn to leave the region behind, when Almond’s characters acquire the

ability to rise and soar above the landscape, the North East is the site of flight itself.

In *Skellig*, Michael begins (as with the narrator of *Counting Stars*) by wondering about the purpose of shoulder blades.

‘They say that shoulder blades are where your wings were, when you were an angel,’ she said. ‘They say they’re where your wings will grow again one day.’

‘It’s just a story, though,’ I said. ‘A fairy tale for little kids. Isn’t it?’

‘Who knows? But maybe one day we all had wings and one day we’ll all have wings again.’

[...]

Before she went away, I held the baby for a while. I touched her skin and her tiny soft bones. I felt the place where her wings had been.<sup>39</sup>

On two occasions later in the novel, *Skellig* affords both Michael and Mina the experience of having their own wings returned, and Michael describes how they ‘turned and turned until the ghostly wings rose from Mina’s back and mine, until we felt ourselves being raised, until we seemed to turn and dance in the empty air.’<sup>40</sup> A similar image occurs at the end of *My Dad’s a Birdman*, when young girl Lizzie and her family become so ebullient in their celebrations that they literally rise above the ground.<sup>41</sup> Although the text here is ambiguous, leaving open the possibility that Lizzie is imagining their flight, the accompanying illustration by Polly Dunbar shows all four figures floating in the air, surrounded by magical-looking stars. Learning to fly is part of Joe’s transformation in *Secret Heart* too as, under the guidance of the appropriately named Corinna Finch, he leaps ‘into the empty air, through memories and dreams’.<sup>42</sup> Michael, Mina, Lizzie and Joe start out as ordinary North-East children, but David Almond’s North East is a place where ordinary children can learn to fly.

Even when Almond's characters cannot actually fly, they dream of doing so. In *My Dad's a Birdman*, the father dreams of becoming "[...] the first one to fly across the River Tyne" in "The Great Human Bird Competition [...]"<sup>43</sup> Again, his flight will not take him outside the region; rather, what is significant is that the competition takes place in Tyneside. In *Heaven Eyes*, birds and flight do represent escape for Erin, who is visited in her bedroom by "[t]he bird of life"; its symbolic message, interpreted by her mum, shows the way to escape from her current situation, not through physically escaping from her place, but rather through altering her perception and heeding the recommendation that "[...] if we're brave enough, we flap our wings and fly."<sup>44</sup> Erin remains in the urban North East, but learns to see her world through different eyes.

*[...] from the deepest darkness, from the depths of the earth [...]*

Often in Almond's fiction, the coterminous existence of the industrial within the natural landscape of the North East is manifested in the relationship between what lies above and below ground. North-East children often move underground, frequently digging or burrowing into the landscape, or entering the sites of previous excavations. Key events for the children in Almond's fiction often occur in dens, caves or abandoned mines. Such images of exploration below the surface of the physical landscape function in various ways: the act of digging itself draws upon iconic images of the area's heritage, so associated with the coalmining industry; often, the children recover formerly industrial sites, and make use of them in their exploration of both the physical and psychological landscape of their adolescence. Sometimes the imagery is inverted, and the act of digging exposes the natural world beneath to the urban landscape above. Always, entering

into the earth leads children to reassess the landscape of the region, in the light of those newly uncovered depths it reveals. Almond's fictional North East comprises what Rob Shields describes as the way 'landscapes [...] reflect different historical uses and projects 'sedimented' in any given site or region.'<sup>45</sup>

In *Kit's Wilderness*, two underground locations feature significantly. In the first part of the novel, Kit is drawn to the underground den of John Askew, where the group of children play the game called Death. The place is cave-like, 'a deep hole dug into the earth with old doors slung across it as an entrance and a roof.'<sup>46</sup> Askew has apparently carved the den out of the earth himself, and it is a terrifying place, redolent of ancient burial chambers and prehistoric dwellings.

The floor was hard-packed clay. Candles burned in niches in the walls. There was a heap of bones in a corner. Askew told us they were human bones, discovered when he'd dug this place. [...] Askew had carved pictures of us all, of animals, of the dogs and cats we owned, of the wild dog, Jax, of imagined monsters and demons, of the gates of Heaven and the snapping jaws of Hell. He wrote into the walls the names of all of us who'd died in there. My friend Allie Keenan sat across the den from me. The blankness in her eyes said: You're on your own down here.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the den's frightening appearance and atmosphere, Kit feels compelled to visit the place. He links this compulsion to the industrial background of the Stoneygate landscape, describing feeling 'driven to it like Grandpa had been driven to the darkness of the pit.'<sup>48</sup> The suggestion is that the desire to explore beneath the surface of the landscape is an irresistible natural urge, felt particularly acutely by those people native to the region. Like Kit and his grandfather, John Askew comes from one of "[...] the old families [...]", and he too is associated with the subterranean landscape; Kit describes the experience of holding Askew's gaze, presumably an insight through the windows of his soul.<sup>49</sup>

I looked into his eyes. It was like looking into a tunnel of endless dark. I felt myself staring deeper, deeper. I felt myself driven to the dark.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, this drive to explore underground leads Kit to join Askew in an old drift mine.

As the novel progresses, Kit becomes more and more aware of the relationship between the town of Stoneygate, and its industrial past. His grandfather shows Kit that the legacy of the town's coalmining past permeates the place, shaping the very physicality of the landscape.

He took me walking and showed me that the evidence of the pit was everywhere – depressions in the gardens, jagged cracks in the roadways and in the house walls. Fragments of coal darkened the soil. [...] He showed me where the entrances to the shafts had been, told me about the dizzying drop in the cage to the tunnels far below. He pointed up to the hills past Stoneygate, told me they were filled with shafts, potholes, ancient drift mines.

'Look at the earth and you think it's solid,' he said. 'But look deeper and you'll see it's riddled with tunnels. A warren. A labyrinth.'<sup>51</sup>

I consider Almond's treatment of the North East's industrial heritage in greater detail shortly; before that, it is useful to consider Almond's recurring theme that what lies beneath the surface is as worthy of exploration as what lies above.

This idea is central to *Kit's Wilderness*. Such explorations are clearly metaphorical, and they enable both Kit and Askew to confront and overcome problems of some emotional depth and complexity, and to connect with the traditions of their forebears: as Geraldine Brennan notes, '[t]oday's Stoneygate children are not sent down the mine', but instead they descend into the earth to play the game called Death.<sup>52</sup> At one point, Kit dreams of following the figure of Silky, an apparition recalled by his grandfather from his days as a coalminer, into



the drift mine. Silky leads Kit further and further ‘into the endless deep dark [...] Far into the earth’, until he eventually discovers his grandfather lost and alone.<sup>53</sup> The dream is symbolic of Kit’s fears for the health of his Grandpa, who is suffering from some kind of degenerative dementia, unspecified but suggestive of Alzheimer’s disease; just as Kit travels back into the underground physical landscape inhabited by generations of his ancestors, so too his grandfather turns to memories of his time below ground in order to re-orient himself.

For Askew, the time he spends with Kit in the drift mine allows him to connect with a much more ancient, prehistoric past, and to recover his own tender humanity. Both boys excavate deep, dark fears from within their own psyches, and re-surface with stronger psychological foundations. Such a metaphorical reading of the significance of the subterranean seems particularly apt in the light of Almond’s own comments on such images. Referring specifically to the writing of *Kit’s Wilderness*, Almond describes how he attempts to expand and develop images of mining in particular.

I remember writing all that stuff in ‘Kit’ and it was just such a huge thrill to realise what I was dealing with. [...] I thought, ‘Oh, it’s coalmines, coalmines, coalmines,’ and then I thought, ‘Well, that’s what people would say you would write about,’ but actually it’s such a bloody huge metaphor for all kinds of stuff that it just came as this huge gift. Because coal mining’s usually just written about in terms of the industrial heritage but it’s got all these other massive implications as well, and it was wonderful to be able to take it and use it in this way.<sup>54</sup>

Almond’s comments here relate to his initial reluctance to find himself labelled as a North-East writer, and therefore his trepidation at employing such iconic imagery when writing about the place. He is attempting to steer readers away from clichéd expectations. Nevertheless, Almond is drawn repeatedly to

images of digging and mining. Just as his landscapes seek to reconcile the industrial with the natural, so his imagery here seeks to reconcile the particular, northern industrial experience, with the transcendent.

In the following passage, John Askew explains to Kit the appeal that the drift mine holds for him.

‘Down here,’ he said. ‘There’s no day, no night. You’re half-awake and half-asleep, half-dead and half-alive. You’re in the earth with bones and ghosts and darkness stretching back a million million years into the past.’<sup>55</sup>

Such sentiments, which could as equally describe the experience of men working the coalface as this young boy seeking oblivion beneath the earth, have the effect of simultaneously evoking and transforming images from the North East’s industrial heritage. Almond here both affirms the young boy’s affiliation with the region’s industrial traditions, and also elevates such traditions by ascribing them a transcendent existence ‘‘[...] stretching back a million million years into the past.’’ It is clear from this image that travelling below the surface of the physical world also frequently initiates travelling back through time, down into the history of the landscape. In this way, derelict urban scenery, as found on the surface, is to be seen as linked, by such features as abandoned mining and quarrying works, with the much older world below ground.

There is a difference with Westall’s evocation of the past, however, which frequently seeks to re-assert ancient dimensions of the North-East landscape *in spite* of its present day industrial decay; Almond’s fiction positions the ruined urban places of the North East as *manifestations* of the region’s history, both through the way in which the urban landscape is frequently presented as crumbling and decaying back into the world that lies beneath (in, for instance,

such places as the deep dark holes explored by the children in *Heaven Eyes*), and also by virtue of its connection via the openings of spaces such as abandoned mines, quarries and the like, which sink into the ground like roots descending from the towns and cities above. As historian Simon Schama notes, '[t]o see the ghostly outline of an old landscape beneath the superficial covering of the contemporary is to be made vividly aware of the endurance of core myths'; in Almond's novels, such myths invest the present-day region with the immanent presence of its industrial tradition.<sup>56</sup>

Digging is also important in *Heaven Eyes*. On arrival at the Middens, the children realise that they and their raft are being 'slowly sucked down into the sodden earth.'<sup>57</sup> Although such an image is frightening, it also holds a strange appeal for the character of Erin, who momentarily desires the oblivion it offers.

I slithered forward. I felt how at any moment I could stop and be taken down The Black Middens. [...] I began to let myself be taken down. I felt the mud gathering around me. I felt the great contentment that might come if I just let go, if I sank here, if I just let myself go down to her, if my mouth was filled with mud, if my eyes and ears were filled with mud, if there was nothing but mud surrounding me, encasing me.<sup>58</sup>

The landscape of The Black Middens exists in a constant state of flux, and life there for Heaven Eyes and her Grampa revolves around digging down into the mud. Grampa remembers how he "[...] dug out Heaven from the Middens one starry night [...]", and Heaven Eyes tells the others of how Grampa has promised he will dig her "[...] treasures [...]" out of the Middens, treasures which do turn up from below the surface of the mud, and hold the key to Heaven's origins and the tragic loss of her family in a boating accident.<sup>59</sup> In *Heaven Eyes*, as in *Kit's Wilderness*, Almond's North-East children are able to recover their roots in the region's ancient traditions, by digging down into the muddy landscape. In this

novel too, the world above ground is nourished by the subterranean world as the mud gives forth its treasures. In a key episode, Mouse discovers what he believes to be the body of a murder victim in the mud, which January and Erin then bring to the surface. In doing so, the children almost become at one with the mud of The Middens, as they sink into the landscape.

We started to dig. We lifted great spadefuls of oily, silty, stinking mud and water. Our shovels slopped and sucked. Within seconds we were filthy. We slithered down into the holes we dug. [...] I looked across at Jan and he whooped and was like a crazed black creature made of the mud itself. [...] I dug and spat and wiped my face and dug deeper, deeper till I was sick of it all and was just about to tell Jan that I was giving up when I saw the tips of the fingers in the black black mud.<sup>60</sup>

The body, which is described by the characters as ‘the saint’, is found with its hand outstretched, ‘as if waiting for a gift, an offering’, which he ultimately receives, in the form of Grampa’s spirit after his death.<sup>61</sup> In this way, as the saint from below ground and from an earlier time takes Grampa away from the urban world, the connection between the subterranean and the landscape above ground is reaffirmed. This episode is yet another example of how explorations beneath the surface of the North East landscape are also explorations of the region’s history, particularly its spiritual tradition.

There is a clear difference between this saintly figure, who comes out of and is also at one with the very matter that makes up the mud of The Middens, and, say, Westall’s St Cuthbert, who, despite his affiliation with the natural world through birds and animal life, nevertheless remains most closely allied to what lies above ground, in particular the wind. Both are forces of nature, but Almond’s is much more *of* the earth. Also, there is a clear difference between such underground forces in Almond’s North East, such as the saint here, or Silky and

the other ghost children in *Kit's Wilderness*, and those spiritual forces which emanate from the landscape in novels such as Peter Dickinson's *Annerton Pit* (1977). Both are manifestations of the enduring presence of the North East's industrial heritage just below the surface (both physically and metaphorically), but whereas Dickinson's supernatural force attests to the way in which such activities have wounded and enraged the landscape, in Almond's work the forces of heavy industrial power and natural spirituality are reconciled and the effect is redemptive rather than injurious. Almond's is a North East in which the landscape is much more at one with its traditions, derelict though they may be.

*Clay* also features the subterranean landscape, in particular through its use of caves and cave-like spaces. The novel's opening sees Davie and Geordie heading 'into the cave' where there 'was writing on the wall again', suggestive of prehistoric cave dwellings similar to those evoked in *Kit's Wilderness*.<sup>62</sup> Such images are compounded when the two boys meet at the cave entrance, and set about fortifying it against attacks from the bully, Mouldy.

We were at the cave. We both had knives. We were sharpening sticks. We were going to set them up at the quarry entrance, stick them in the mud, pointing upwards, like a trap.<sup>63</sup>

When young people move underground in *Clay*, they do so in order to connect with a more primal way of life. Rather than suggesting savagery, such images are employed by Almond to gesture towards a deeply rooted sense of history as permeating the landscape of the region. In striking contrast with all of the other writers whose work I have explored, Almond's imagery of the underground landscape repeatedly evokes the prehistoric world, and indeed the origins of human society and culture. The effect of this is to iterate that ancient culture

underlies the life of the North East today. The sacred, mystical underground places found in Almond's fiction almost always feature writing and artwork on their walls. One such place is the cave at the conclusion of *The Savage*. Here the central character Blue ends up crawling 'through the stones towards the hidden cave beneath' where he finally meets with the savage.<sup>64</sup> He describes how the 'pictures on the cave wall were works of wonder', and is amazed to discover that 'the savage had drawn me long before I ever started writing him.'<sup>65</sup> This revelation awakens Blue to the miraculous, and it is here that he communicates with his dead father. The suggestion is that such magical places, hidden beneath the surface of the everyday world, have always been here in the North East, even to the point that the savage's cave can exist independently and pre-date its own creation in Blue's story. This would be impossible in reality, but what Almond is exploring here is the idea that Blue's imagination does not simply create the savage, miraculous though this would be in itself; rather, the creative act is a kind of conduit through which the essential mysticism of the savage's world, a magical realm just below the surface of the everyday world, can flow into and permeate life above. In Almond's fiction, the North East is the site at which such magical connections occur, as the region's children discover such realms lying below their feet.

Just as the saint in *Heaven Eyes* emerges from beneath the surface of the landscape, so the mystical figure of Clay originates underground. Davie describes how Stephen 'reached down deep [...] and lifted out a dripping handful of pale clay' from Braddock's Garden, which provides the raw material for his creation, and he also chooses the cave as the location for the ritual which will bring Clay to life, commenting on how 'Saints used to live in caves like this [...]'.<sup>66</sup> This

again suggests that the landscape of the North East is particularly well suited to the miraculous and spiritual, and although such qualities are especially potent in the underground landscape of the region, this is seen as permeating the landscape above ground as well. When Davie visits the cave with Maria, again emphasising the sacred nature of the place, he comments on how people from the area have plundered Braddock's and how 'all the gardens in Felling had bits of this garden in them'.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, Clay himself ends up in Davie's father's garden, and along with bringing the natural landscape into the urban as I explored earlier, this also brings the substance gleaned from the earth of Braddock's Garden into the garden of Davie's home, where it once again sinks beneath the ground.

Links between underground spaces and the miraculous occur in *The Fire-Eaters* and *Secret Heart*, too. As the novel approaches its climax, the character of McNulty, himself associated with the mystical and miraculous and described by Almond as 'an old Catholic saint', camps out in one of the abandoned holiday shacks in the dunes at Keely Bay.<sup>68</sup> Bobby and Ailsa visit him there, to persuade him to join the others on the beach in facing what they believe to be their imminent oblivion.

[...] I saw there was another window in the back wall of the room, but the dune had grown over it. Behind the glass were sand and soil and roots. There were seashells and stones and bones. He saw me looking.

'It's deep as the grave in here, bonny,' he said.  
'We're down where the dead live. You want to see the needles and the skewer stuck in?'<sup>69</sup>

This place, sinking below the surface of the landscape, connects with the underground land of the dead, in a similar way to the drift mine in *Kit's Wilderness*. In *Secret Heart* too, the young protagonists enter an underground cave, the walls of which are covered with pictures and hand prints, and which

turns out to be some kind of primal, prehistoric place of ritual. There is a ‘deep dark niche’ in the wall of the chamber, which contains ‘bones, fragments of bones, horns, fragments of horns, fangs and teeth.’<sup>70</sup> Joe reverently places the slaughtered panther’s head here in this ancient underground place, an act which seems to render it timeless as he imagines it remaining there forever. In this episode, Joe is affiliated with those ancient, prehistoric humans who have enacted similar rituals and whose offerings remain in the underground chamber; once again, an underground space holds significance for life on the surface, as Joe finds that following this act, ‘the tiger would prowl in him for ever more.’<sup>71</sup> As with the children in *Kit’s Wilderness*, *Heaven Eyes*, *The Fire-Eaters*, *Clay* and *The Savage*, venturing underground brings forth rewards and treasures, which transform the lives of those people who populate Almond’s North-East landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> David Almond, *Personal Interview with Nolan Dalrymple* (Humshaugh: Northumberland, 31 January 2008; see Appendix).

<sup>2</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>3</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>4</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 11; see also *Interview*.

<sup>5</sup> *Counting Stars*, pp. 154-55.

<sup>6</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 32; p. 40; p. 108; p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Westall, *Fathom Five*, p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>12</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 29; p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 241.

<sup>18</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 204.

<sup>20</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 159.

<sup>21</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 30; p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 15; p. 141; p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> *Secret Heart*, pp. 13-14; pp. 112-113.

<sup>24</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 1.



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- <sup>25</sup> *Secret Heart*, pp. 25-28.
- <sup>26</sup> *Secret Heart*, pp. 65-66.
- <sup>27</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 119.
- <sup>28</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 73; pp. 77-79; p. 91; p. 201.
- <sup>29</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 201.
- <sup>30</sup> *Clay*, p. 108.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 92.
- <sup>32</sup> *Skellig*, p. 106.
- <sup>33</sup> *Skellig*, p. 109.
- <sup>34</sup> *Skellig*, pp. 162-163.
- <sup>35</sup> *Counting Stars*, pp. 177-178.
- <sup>36</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 181.
- <sup>37</sup> For example, E. Nesbit, *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904); J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (1911); Raymond Briggs, *The Snowman* (1978).
- <sup>38</sup> Madelyn Travis, 'Flying Across the Tyne: Madelyn Travis talks to David Almond about the inspiration behind *My Dad's a Birdman*', <<http://www.booktrustchildrensbooks.org.uk/show/feature/Features%20Interviews/Interview-with-David-Almond-07>> [accessed 23 August 2008].
- <sup>39</sup> *Skellig*, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>40</sup> *Skellig*, p. 158.
- <sup>41</sup> *My Dad's a Birdman*, pp. 118-119.
- <sup>42</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 188.
- <sup>43</sup> *My Dad's a Birdman*, p. 10.
- <sup>44</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 23.
- <sup>45</sup> Shields, p. 24.
- <sup>46</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 5.
- <sup>47</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>48</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 48.
- <sup>49</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 10.
- <sup>50</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 49.
- <sup>51</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 18.
- <sup>52</sup> Brennan, p. 103.
- <sup>53</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 96.
- <sup>54</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).
- <sup>55</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 187.
- <sup>56</sup> Schama, p. 16.
- <sup>57</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 47.
- <sup>58</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, pp. 48-49.
- <sup>59</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 69; p. 87.
- <sup>60</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 149.
- <sup>61</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 151.
- <sup>62</sup> *Clay*, p. 2.
- <sup>63</sup> *Clay*, p. 21.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Savage*, p. 72.
- <sup>65</sup> *The Savage*, p. 75.
- <sup>66</sup> *Clay*, p. 34; p. 53.
- <sup>67</sup> *Clay*, p. 112.
- <sup>68</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).
- <sup>69</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, pp. 185-186.
- <sup>70</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 171.
- <sup>71</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 178.

## Chapter 10: Almond's People Part 1

### **Childhood, children and writing**

Children's worlds are now so different. [My daughter] Freya's growing up here [in rural Northumberland] so she sees this as her world, but actually through television and the internet, the world's everywhere, you can travel all over the place.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking here in interview, David Almond outlines some of his views on contemporary childhood, and his reasons for writing for children. Referring specifically to questions of space and place, he comments on the differences he sees as characterising the landscape occupied by children today, in contrast with the landscape he experienced growing up in the North East. Almond acknowledges the impact of new media, and the phenomenon of globalisation, upon the world of the North-East child, and one of the most striking effects he comments upon is what he perceives as a dramatic shift in the level of autonomy experienced by children.

It's one of the things that kids'll often comment on about my work, 'But they just go out!' We had massive freedoms. From the time I was fourteen we used to go for weekends to Seahouses, just me and my friends, we'd just go up and camp in the dunes, and have this huge freedom just to wander. Often writing feels like that, just feels like you're wandering about the countryside, wandering about the landscape. Maybe that's one of the reasons that I write for children, it feels like being a kid again. I've got this landscape in my head and I just walk across it, make stories around it and through it.<sup>2</sup>

This idea of freedom is fundamental to Almond's work, which always creates a space in which his North-East children can explore, and which affords them considerable freedoms geographically, physically and emotionally; as Rachel Falconer notes, they 'inhabit a vastly simpler world than the one familiar to child readers in the millennial decade [...] and they go for rambling, unsupervised walks and play outdoors in secret gardens.'<sup>3</sup> This space is invariably located in a version of the North East; as I explored in the previous chapter, there are facets of this landscape which make it particularly apt at providing such a space. Again, as I have shown happening both in the wider field of children's writing about the locality and Westall's fiction set in the region in particular, Almond's fiction turns to the past in order to find this space; as with Westall, his work is frequently set in the Tyneside of his youth in the 1950s and 1960s, but even those with more contemporary settings still locate their child characters in a world more akin in terms of its boundaries to the landscape of Almond's childhood than to what he sees as the more restricted spaces available to today's children.

It is interesting that Almond links the freedom to explore – 'wandering about the landscape' – with the act of writing for children, by suggesting his creative work 'feels like being a kid again.' This is not uncommon amongst children's writers, who often speak of returning to the world of their own childhood as a result of, or even reason for, writing for children. Nevertheless, in Almond's work such motivations are rooted in the specificities of the North-East experience. Almond may turn to the past for the shape and character of his fictional child's world, but he does so in response to the needs of today's child readers, and in particular as a result of the profoundly altered experience of the present-day children who live in the region. As I have shown in relation to

Almond's landscapes, the North East in which he writes is a very different place to the one invoked by writers such as Frederick Grice or Catherine Cookson, or even Robert Westall. In Chapters 4 to 7, I explored the ways in which Westall's writing can be seen as emerging from a body of writing within which a dominant North-East aesthetic was both well established and routinely employed in portrayals of the region for child readers. If the childhood landscapes of Westall's fiction set in or around Tyneside are shaped by anxieties over the region's future and the implications of its altered status for young people, then Almond's writing emerges from a North East in which many of the changes Westall feared have been realised. Westall's fiction anticipates a North East threatened by fissures in the foundations of its identity, and largely retreats into the past in an attempt to underpin such worrying instabilities; Almond's writing unearths the legacy of earlier, entrenched images of the region and resets these within stories which show how, though shaped by different forces, life in the North East at the turn of the twenty-first century remains founded upon an enduring legacy from the region's past. Whereas Westall's anxieties about the region's future lead him to turn to the past, Almond's anxiety is rather to use elements of the region's past to anchor visions of its new and altered future. This is reflected in Almond's stylistic approach too, which draws upon enduring images and sometimes participates in the established North-East aesthetic, whilst also employing metafictional and magic realist techniques to subvert such entrenched expectations of narratives about the region, and to challenge his young readers.

Most of Almond's North-East fiction features adolescent central characters, and his writing frequently explores concerns common in adolescent fiction, including increased responsibility and independence, developing

sexuality, and the challenge of reconstructing one's identity during the shift from childhood towards adulthood.<sup>4</sup> As with Westall, Almond's decision to stage these fictions in the North East is significant; however, unlike Westall's North-East fictions, in which tensions of belonging and escape are figured through adolescents' troubled relationships with the regional landscape, in Almond's fiction such growing pains are reconciled and contained within the space of his fictionalised North East. While Westall's characters find that growing up takes them, at least for a time, beyond a North East that they experience as restrictive and suffocating (for instance, Chas McGill in *Fathom Five*, Robbie Atkinson in *Falling into Glory*, Anne in *The Watch House* and both Beth And Mike in *The Wind Eye*, all of whom outgrow the region at one point), Almond's characters undergo their adolescent developments within a region that is big enough to accommodate their expansion. Almond's North East is a space into which his characters can grow and "[...] go on changing forever."<sup>5</sup>

The childhoods experienced by Almond's North-East characters are diverse and complex, and this goes some way towards explaining the differences between his portrayals and Westall's. Family, social class, gender roles, and childhood itself are all portrayed from a wider range of perspectives than in Westall's work set in the area, and it is this diversity of perspective that constructs a more accommodating and therefore less limiting image of what it means to grow up in the region. Almond does still draw upon key motifs from within the dominant aesthetic, but his vision expands beyond the constraints of such images and therefore places them within a more pluralist, and less monolithic, representation of the North East.

One example of this can be seen in relation to children's attitudes to the idea of escaping the region. The desire to escape and move beyond the North East is rarely voiced by the children in Almond's fiction. In *Kit's Wilderness*, Kit's friend Allie speaks of her desire to "[...] get out in the world and get going properly", but she later comes to adjust this view, and to re-evaluate Stoneygate.<sup>6</sup>

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' she said. 'The place we live.'

'I thought you just wanted to get out of it.'

'I will. But wherever I go, I'll take it with me.'<sup>7</sup>

This echoes Erin's acceptance of her home landscape in *Heaven Eyes* (see Chapter 8). In *Clay*, Davie's girlfriend Maria makes a passing reference to heading "[...] off into the wild blue yonder!", but this really concerns her resistance to the constraints of marrying young, rather than being tied to the place of Felling.<sup>8</sup> Almond's young characters do not make reference to their homes as constricting, or of desiring to escape into a wider world beyond. Even when children do escape the urban world of their family lives, as Joe does in *Secret Heart*, their journeys merely take them slightly further afield. In Almond's fiction, the prospect of growing up does not require young characters to leave the North East. Even regarding questions of social class, as I explore in greater detail later, Almond's North East is not bound so tightly by the kinds of limitations which preoccupy Westall's adolescents.

Almond's more diverse representation expands upon existing imagery, both by showing the ways in which the region has changed and broadened its horizons, and by redressing existing images and suggesting their partial and limited perspective. His fiction frequently combines the time of his own remembered childhood with the time in which he is writing. In interview, he speaks of growing up in the 1960s, a period of significant changes in attitudes.

[L]ots of changes happened, feminism, gay rights [...] I became a teenager in 1964 [...] so [my] sense of self was very different from the sense of my father's generation's self.<sup>9</sup>

Such changes were not specific to the North East, of course; however, for a region whose identity had tended to be portrayed through images of fierce masculinity, rooted in a sense of community centred on industrial labour, they signalled a reconfiguration of North-East identity. It is exactly these changes that cause Robert Westall so much anxiety; he feared they heralded the arrival of disruptive modernity and the collapse of community identity and therefore stability.<sup>10</sup> The difference is that whereas Westall experienced these changes as an adult concerned for his youthful readership, Almond is twenty two years his junior and therefore engaged with such changes first-hand as an adolescent. What Westall saw as a threat to North-East identity, Almond regards as liberating, resulting in writing which celebrates and reasserts the region's identity. One consequence of Almond's expanded audience, partly a result of his experimentation with writing in different formats and for a diverse readership, is that the developments he brings to images of the region will be experienced by a wide constituency.

Examples of such a shift in images of North-East childhood can be seen in the ways Almond's characters engage with key adolescent concerns. In *The Fire-Eaters*, for instance, Bobby faces the prospect of becoming a "[...] proper little man" as he moves up to the new school, and experiences opportunities not available to his parents.<sup>11</sup> This is similar to the experience of Robbie in Westall's *Falling into Glory*, but the characters' contrasting responses to this change are telling. For Robbie, expanded horizons drive him away from his family, and reveal the limitations of his life in the North East which must be alleviated by

leaving for university. For Bobby, on the other hand, it is the enlightened moral code of his family that expands the horizons of his vision and causes him to reject the corrupt regime he experiences at his new school. He does return to the school in the end of course, and the novel does engage with ideas about the distancing effect of education on parent-child relationships in the North East (Ailsa Spinks, for instance, struggles to reconcile traditional expectations of her with the opportunities suddenly available). In Almond's fiction, such changes are eventually accepted as a liberating influence by both parents and children, rather than as a force which threatens to drive a wedge between adolescents and their families.

## Gender

### *Reconciled North-East masculinity/femininity*

Another development which distinguishes Almond's fiction from preceding narratives that feature children of the region concerns the way in which central adolescent male characters assert their masculinity. Whereas novels such as Catherine Cookson's *Joe and the Gladiator* or Fredrick Grice's *The Bonny Pit Laddie* feature young men engaging with the world of work and proving their physical resilience alongside their resourcefulness, in novels such as *Secret Heart* and *Clay* Almond creates young North East men who must navigate more sensitive, emotional territory. The aggressive and violent Joff advises Joe in *Secret Heart* that he needs a man's guidance in how to face the world.

‘It'd be the making of you. You've seen the change I've wrought in Stanny Mole?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘Aye. I am not an easy master, boy. And I'll lead you into deepest danger. But lads that walk with me become survivors.’<sup>12</sup>



In fact, it is Joe's sensitivity and affinity with animals which will lead him into manhood and make him a survivor. Similarly, in *Clay*, Davie talks of how 'Stephen Rose was something strange and new, [...] something that stood before me as I grew from being a boy into a man.'<sup>13</sup> Stephen is artistic and creative, and his connection with Davie is underscored with homo-erotic desire, suggested in the kiss he places on his cheek.<sup>14</sup> Though his influence is terrifying for Davie, it also awakens him to a more imaginative and awe-inspiring view of the world, one in which 'crazy things can be the truest things of all.'<sup>15</sup> Such a figure would be unimaginable in Westall's North East, where masculine maturity is initiated through rugby, casual violence, and derring-do.

Both Westall and Almond themselves followed creative and artistic routes into manhood; for Westall, this led him away from the North East, while for Almond it allowed him to return. Certainly, the experience of North-East masculine adolescence they portray seems to reflect a shift in the way such identities are constructed. Entrenched images of gender boundaries are acknowledged and challenged in Almond's fiction. For instance, in *Clay*, Davie's friend Geordie bemoans the fact that Davie is interested in a "lass" as "[...] all we bliddy need", yet ultimately it is Davie's friendship with Maria that supports him as he comes to terms with the events of Clay's appearance and the death of Martin Mould.<sup>16</sup> This is common across Almond's novels, which always centre around a close friendship between a pubescent boy and girl. Where such relationships have romantic dimensions, this is secondary to the friendship between the boys and girls, always portrayed as a friendship of equals. I have shown earlier how adolescent girls in Westall's fiction are invariably sexualised

to some degree, along with many of his North-East women characters, and how Westall acknowledged (to some extent) the difficulty he found in adequately portraying female characters (see Chapter 7). Almond traces his very different way of rendering girls and women to the importance of female influences as he grew up on Tyneside.

[W]hen I began to write the books following on from *Counting Stars* up to what I'm doing now, all the way through, the women and the girls were just as important as the boys and the men. Maybe that's something to do, again, with my background. Growing up in a big family, the women were incredibly strong. They were the storytellers and they were the ones who held things together while the guys went out to work, and the women stayed at home. Also I had lots of sisters, I had four sisters, so there was a very feminine background that I grew up in I suppose.<sup>17</sup>

In Chapter 3, I drew upon Elaine Knox's ideas about the elision of the female North East to suggest that portrayals of the region have tended to assign women a negative cultural space which masks the reality of their contribution. Almond's work can be read as a direct attempt to address such concerns for young readers, and to tell a more complete story of North-East childhoods. Almond goes on to outline his approach towards representing North-East masculinity, again highlighting a desire to speak more fully of the reality of life in the region.

The monolithic North East is portrayed as being big strong guys, strong men, and one of the things I remember about some of my uncles who worked in really heavy industry like on the shipyards and down on the river was, yes they were big strong men, but they were also incredibly tender. I think one of the things that's been missed out in so much of the supposed recording of what life was like, was that tenderness. [...] I wanted to emphasise that, and when I was writing *Kit's Wilderness* and writing Kit's grandfather, as he began to talk [...] I thought, through this character I can show that here's a guy who's worked in a tough occupation but he's actually bright, he's clever, and he's also very

tender. So it was too with, on the one hand portraying girls as being, strong and brave and interesting, and the women, but also suggesting that men have got a feminine side as well.<sup>18</sup>

Such a nuanced approach to representing masculinity again expands boundaries, drawing upon some of the tensions and changes acknowledged and partially confronted in Westall's fiction. Such representations continue in Almond's latest work, *The Savage*, in which narrator Blue grapples with his developing masculinity in the face of expectations 'not to cry [...] to put on a real tough front.'<sup>19</sup> He asserts his masculinity through the fictional character of the savage, who functions as a proxy outlet for the kind of aggression and violence Blue himself is unable to exert.

The thing is, I've never really been one of the hard lads. I know how to swagger about when I need to, like most lads do, but like most of us I'm dead soft inside.<sup>20</sup>

It is not that Almond is seeking to construct a form of Geordie 'new man' for his young reader, but rather to demonstrate that older, entrenched images of North-East masculinity have only ever told part of the story, and in doing so have presented a limiting/damaging image of the region to young readers as they approach adolescence. Almond rewrites the code of behaviour which delineates what it means to grow towards manhood in the North East, suggesting that qualities such as tenderness and creativity might be just as important as physical strength and aggression.

### **Moving the margins**

Almond's North-East fiction often features children whose lives are especially marginal and unorthodox. The strongest example of this is *Heaven Eyes*, which

centres on the experiences of a group of self-defined ‘damaged children.’<sup>21</sup> The appearance of Heaven Eyes herself marks her out as bizarre and strange, and her ‘webbed fingers’, ‘moon-pale’ face, and ‘moon-round, watery-blue’ eyes mean she is initially shunned by the children as freakish and frightening.<sup>22</sup> However, just as Almond shows the sensitivity, courage and value of the group of children, and demonstrates their solidarity and powerful sense of communal duty (key concepts in enduring images of the North East), so too their movement from the margins of the reader’s likely experience towards an appreciation of North East life as viewed from a perspective centred on their experience, is mirrored in the way that they rescue Heaven Eyes from the Middens, a place at the fringes of the world. Something similar is at work in *Kit’s Wilderness*, which sees Kit fated to ‘go into the dark’ with the marginalised John Askew in order to fulfil his ‘task to bring him home.’<sup>23</sup> Here, as elsewhere in Almond’s North-East fiction, the experiences of children at the margins are narrated, giving voice to stories previously untold. At the same time, these stories frequently culminate in such children themselves being rescued and brought home to safety, and in this way their marginal nature is annulled as they are absorbed into the centre. Frequently, the outsider status of such children originates in social deprivation and poverty; this is certainly the case with John Askew, the Whitegates children in *Heaven Eyes*, and with both Stephen Rose and Martin Mould in *Clay*. In contrast with Westall’s fiction, where such deprived children are viewed with distaste by central characters (for instance, the ‘slummy kind’ in *The Machine Gunners*), in Almond’s novels the marginal are embraced and returned to the fold.

The short story ‘Jonadab’ in *Counting Stars* also features damaged, wild children, living at the margins of existence; the narrator encounters two savage

children with ‘long sticks in their fists like spears’ and ‘sheath knives in their belts’, ‘[t]angled hair’ and ‘[f]ilthy faces.’<sup>24</sup> Along with their appearance, their speech marks them out as primitive, a state into which they have regressed through suffering neglect.

‘Him bring food,’ said the boy. He beckoned me with his spear. ‘Ungowa! Ungowa!’<sup>25</sup>

Though initially wary of the children, the narrator comes to feel a sense of solidarity with their marginalised existence, and takes a blood oath of brotherhood with them. The meeting affects him deeply, and he feels ‘a great ache of desire to stay in Jonadab this day, and then to disappear, to ride into the unknown places with these gentle children and their beasts.’<sup>26</sup> Such feelings are related to Almond’s belief that ‘people on the fringes of society [...] have quite a lot to offer, and that they go there because they’re having some kind of more profound experience than the rest of us are.’<sup>27</sup> Just as Almond’s fiction seeks to re-position the marginalised landscape of the North East at the centre of his artistic vision, so too he appropriates the experiences of marginalised North-East children and re-centres them.

## **Family**

Families in Almond’s fictional North East are robust, supportive and extensive units. The child’s experience of family life contrasts with those representations characteristic of Westall’s writing; in particular, Almond’s North-East children do not experience family as a stifling presence in their lives, but rather as a source of stability and continuity. If Almond’s fiction engages with a postmodern sense of childhood and the resultant discontinuities and instabilities inherent in such a

concept, then it is in the family that his North-East children find sufficient anchorage to ground their sense of belonging within the region. The future for children in Almond's North East may be varied, uncertain and excitingly open; facing it is made tenable by the influence of the family.

*Heaven Eyes* features children who are largely bereft of family, none more so than the character of Heaven Eyes herself. She craves family, and constantly asks the other children whether they are her brothers and sisters. Erin comments on this, and draws a parallel with the 'Life Story books' the children had been encouraged to keep at Whitegates.

Did she look like me? Was there anything in her that looked like me? Could she be my sister? Could we share a father? I lowered my eyes. I knew that if I had ever written my Life Story book, I would have imagined brothers and sisters for myself. I would have found them in my dreams.<sup>28</sup>

The treasures which Grampa has excavated from the mud of the Middens and kept hidden from Heaven Eyes turn out to be details of her family, lost at sea. Without family, Heaven Eyes has lived a kind of half life in Grampa's care; it is only once the other children have adopted her and agreed to become her "[...] brothers and sisters" that she is able to engage with any real kind of future.<sup>29</sup>

Family gatherings in Almond's North East are common, and appreciated by his child-characters. In *Counting Stars*, they frequently occur in the family kitchen, a locus which symbolises the nourishing effect of the family unit within the life of the North-East child.

Then we all sat at the little table in the bright kitchen. We ate huge slices of the warm bread, sighed at the sweetness of sultanas, caught the melting butter with our tongues, squeezed in tight at the middle of the world.<sup>30</sup>

Such idyllic scenes typify Almond's representations of stable family life, and it is to just such a scene that the narrator turns in the story 'The Kitchen', in response to the profoundly disruptive effect upon the family of two deaths. Magic realist conventions allow the family to appear as undiminished, and even though the deaths of father and daughter are acknowledged and discussed, the family is still able to overcome such tragedy together.

Almond speaks in interview of the link between family and community as he was growing up.

I suppose as a child, growing up in [...] a big family, part of a big community, you always had that sense that people were grounded, people came from Felling and if you had relatives who moved out to Whitley Bay or to Jesmond it was quite a strange thing to do. [...] It felt like Felling was the place where people lived, where they grew up, where they came from. That there was a tradition, that their Mams had been brought up there, their Dads had been brought up there. So there was that sense of a powerful family line. Even though if you went back and looked at it, it'd probably only go back two or three generations.<sup>31</sup>

Such experiences are reflected in his fiction, where family frequently acts to connect present day children with the history of the region. The idea of belonging to 'a powerful family line' permeates *Kit's Wilderness*. It is the reason that John Askew seeks out Kit in the first place, and it is this fact above all others that binds the two boys' stories together so closely.

'My Dad came from here. And my grandfather.'  
I tried to say it proudly, to let him know I had the right to be here in Stoneygate.  
'I know that Kit. [...] You're from the old families. That's good, Kit. You're one of us. [...] There's something to you,' he said. 'Something different to this rabble.'<sup>32</sup>

Such lineage brings both privilege and danger for Kit, as he is permitted to join those children who ‘came from the old families of Stoneygate’ and are therefore ‘the ones to play the game called Death.’<sup>33</sup> It is because the name of his ancestor is carved into the mining disaster monument that shows Kit he is in his “[...] rightful place now: back at home in Stoneygate.”<sup>34</sup> A similar lineage can be claimed by John Askew too, as Kit’s Grandpa explains.

‘A guided tour of the Askews,’ said Grandpa as we walked back home. He laughed. ‘They’re like the Watsons. True Stoneygate folk. Generation after generation of them, going back into the deep dark past. And aye, they’ve always been a queer crew, but when you needed a mate, they was always there.’

It is family above all else that imbues the novel’s central characters with such importance. That the past is described as being deep and dark evokes imagery of coal mines, and of course questions of work and class (which I consider in detail in the following section) are really at the root of such ideas of lineage. True Stoneygate families are those whose ancestors mined the earth. By belonging to such a family line, Kit, Allie and Askew inherit those qualities of nobility, courage and stalwart determination inherent within images of the working class circulating in children’s literature of the North East, and which I have shown to be so central to the region’s identity as portrayed in children’s fiction.

### *Fathers*

Soon afterwards, our father became ill. He stayed in his bed. He had time off work. [...] He lay pale-faced on the white bed and stared astonished at us and our mother. He licked his dried-out lips. His voice faded to a whisper:  
*What the hell’s going on?*<sup>35</sup>



Earlier, I explored Almond's representations of masculinity in his North-East fiction, and in particular the strategies he employs in order to reshape existing images of masculinity. One area where this is particularly evident is in his portrayal of fathers, who are frequently absent figures. When they are present, their representation contrasts with those attributes typically assigned to North-East men in literary renditions of the region.

David Almond's own father died when the author was fifteen, and though it is of course too simplistic to draw direct parallels between the personal and creative lives of a writer, nevertheless Almond's fiction is characterised by its references to absent fathers.<sup>36</sup> In *Counting Stars*, Almond's most autobiographical work, the narrator's father dies on Boxing Day, the same day as Almond's own father, and though his presence is felt during his later visitation in the family kitchen, nevertheless his absence permeates the stories in the collection, and shapes the children's lives. In particular, the narrator and his brother feel a responsibility to fulfil their absent father's role, as they chastise their sister for running away, and imagine '[t]his was what it was like to be fatherly, then.'<sup>37</sup> In *The Fire-Eaters*, although Bobby's father's illness turns out to be minor, the threat of his loss hangs over much of the novel. Elsewhere, fathers choose to abandon their children: all that Erin in *Heaven Eyes* knows of her father is that he was 'some waster from a foreign trawler', and Mouse's father leaves 'because he couldn't care for him', his only contribution a violently administered Paddington-style tattoo inked into the boy's skin which reads 'pLeAse LoOk after mE.'<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Joe Maloney's absent father in *Secret Heart* is a travelling entertainer who '[...]spun the w-waltzer in a fair.'<sup>39</sup> John Askew's father, though technically present for much of the novel, is so emotionally distant from the boy

as to be practically absent from his life; his influence is largely abusive, until the novel's final chapter. All of these absences can be read as confronting Almond's own concerns over losing his father so young, but they also contribute significantly towards a portrayal of North East childhood which breaks away from established and entrenched images of family structures within the region.<sup>40</sup>

One of the effects of this is to tell stories which foreground the influence of women, in particular mothers; but when fathers are present in Almond's fiction, their characters contribute to a more nuanced portrayal North-East masculinity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>2</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>3</sup> Falconer, p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> The central character in Almond's 2004 picture book, *Kate, The Cat and The Moon* is much younger, and so too is Lizzie in his recent illustrated publication with Walker Books, *My Dad's a Birdman* (2007). His latest illustrated Walker Books production, *The Savage* (2008), shows a return to both an adolescent central character and intended reader; see McCallum (1999) and Trites (2000) for considerations of identity in adolescent fiction.

<sup>5</sup> *Skellig*, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> *Clay*, p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 6, in particular Westall's concerns over the erosion of man's work as a defining characteristic of identity.

<sup>11</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Clay*, p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> *Clay*, p. 120.

<sup>15</sup> *Clay*, p. 296.

<sup>16</sup> *Clay*, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>18</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>19</sup> *The Savage*, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> *The Savage*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> *Counting Stars*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>25</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 87.

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<sup>27</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>28</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 159.

<sup>30</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>32</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Latham, p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 20; p.8.

<sup>39</sup> *Secret Heart*, p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> See Almond's comments in the afterword to *Wild Girl, Wild Boy: a Play*, where he acknowledges the impact of his father's death upon his writing (p. 86).

## Chapter 11: Almond's People Part 2

### **Work and Social class**

As with many of the texts considered in Chapters 2 and 3, Almond's North-East fiction sets working-class life and culture at its centre; this too can be seen as an attempt by Almond, in common with other writers who have imaged the region for young readers, to assert the validity of working-class identity as an appropriate subject for literary exploration. While Almond's fiction draws upon established images of working-class life, in particular images of hardship, shared struggles, and hard-won pride, he also seeks to expand such images, both in terms of the range of working-class experiences represented, and in terms of the diversity of responses by characters to such experiences.

Images of hardship and decline are common. Evidence of the danger of industrial times abounds in Almond's North East, from monuments to deadly mining disasters to the dangerous abandoned mine workings themselves. In the story 'Jack Law', the narrator's grandmother alludes to earlier days of "[p]overty you wouldn't credit now [and] Folk going round in rags", reminiscent of the frequent appearances of squatting unemployed men featured in Westall's fiction.<sup>1</sup> It is an industrial accident which deprives Martin Mould of his father in *Clay*, and leads to him "[...] growing wild".<sup>2</sup> The impact of decline and deprivation is felt in *Kit's Wilderness*, too, in Kit's Grandpa's description of Askew's father, reduced to a life of violence and bitterness.

'[...] The father? He's just one of them that's been wasted, son. No proper work for him to do, nothing to control him. Wild as a lad, got wilder as a man. [...]'<sup>3</sup>

Employment is central to masculine identity, and to the cohesion of the Stoneygate community, common ideas in representations of working-class identity and therefore central to images of the North East (see Chapter 1). In ‘The Time Machine’, one of the narrator’s assurances to those gathered around as he returns from his apparent trip into the future is that, ‘[t]here was work for everyone, though many days were spent in leisure.’<sup>4</sup>

Work, and in particular industrial labour, is a palpable presence in the lives of Almond’s North-East child characters. It gives purpose and meaning to the lives of those who are lost, such as Mouse in *Heaven Eyes* as he becomes a kind of apprentice to Grampa.<sup>5</sup> In *The Fire-Eaters*, both Joseph and Ailsa intend to follow their parents into working-class professions, and in Ailsa’s case the desire to remain a ‘[c]oaly scamp [...] Just like her mother was [...]’ threatens to stand in the way of her fulfilling her potential academically. Their working-class background threatens to limit the opportunities available to both Bobby and Ailsa; he is threatened with a life ‘[...] where the only outlook is the yard and places like the yard’, by his sadistic headteacher, and Ailsa struggles to imagine the prospect of breaking the limitations of what she sees as a pre-determined future.<sup>6</sup> Bobby’s response to her is important, and suggests a crucial difference between Almond’s fiction and Westall’s.

‘Me? A sea coaler’s daughter? A Spink at university?’

‘You should be proud of who you are and where you come from.’<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, both children move beyond such limitations; significantly, although Almond’s fiction acknowledges the same tensions surrounding social class and mobility that occupy Westall, in Almond’s fiction North-East children learn that

education and increased opportunity need not divide them from their working-class roots.

*“[...] Go as far as you need. [...] Just don't leave us behind.”<sup>8</sup>*

Growing beyond the boundaries of the previous generation's world does not have to entail abandoning pride or attachment to one's background; this is an important theme in Almond's work, and it relates to the author's wider concerns with expanding and adapting the existing aesthetic in order to portray a more nuanced version of the region. Almond acknowledges such concerns in interview.

When I began to [write about working-class characters], I felt a responsibility to do it properly and to do it to show that the old working class wasn't this monolithic, mono-cultural thing, that actually it was very complex and very complicated and that the people themselves were very complicated, [...] there was a massive richness in them and in their own vocabulary and their own emotional condition. [...] I wanted to stress the complexity of it, and also to stress that people tried to define the working class as being the coalmining tradition or the shipbuilding tradition, but that all those things went together with all kinds of other stuff at the same time. I mean, in my family there were all kinds of people, [...] I had a printer in the family, my Dad was an office manager at an engineering works so my Dad was very aware of lifting himself out of the working class. So those tensions about class were very present in my own family actually.<sup>9</sup>

He challenges such entrenched images by telling the untold stories of industrial life in the North East; for instance, the post-industrial setting of *Heaven Eyes*, rather than taking place in an abandoned shipyard, say, is set in an abandoned printing works, “[...] where books was made”.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the short story ‘Jonadab’ emphasises the diverse industrial heritage of the district of Pelaw, characterised by the sound of the ‘clash of printing machines’ indicative of the

range of industry occurring in the North East.<sup>11</sup> By representing a diverse and complex working-class tradition, Almond recasts a central tenet of dominant imagery of the region.

In contrast with characters such as Harry in Westall's *Kingdom by the Sea*, and Robbie in *Falling into Glory*, both of whom find that expanded horizons take them away from their working-class family backgrounds, Bobby in *The Fire-Eaters* asserts his pride in such roots and avows that his education will not make him "[...] too posh to gan on the cart".<sup>12</sup> In *Counting Stars*, parents welcome the prospect of the narrator sitting the eleven-plus, and the grammar school future it signals, such a divisive event in the world of Westall's North-East child.

It was my eleven-plus year. Dad said that I was carrying the dreams of the past, that I was a pioneer. [...] I passed, and the uniform was grey [...] I stood at the centre of the family and they smiled and giggled. Dad put his arm around me and said who knew what wonders time would bring. He took me around the town in his Austin. He burst in on our relatives and called down their congratulations upon me. They laughed at my shyness and pressed coins in my hand. They poured glasses of beer for Dad. His own father told me he'd seen it in me as soon as I was born.<sup>13</sup>

This recognition of the opportunities open to adolescents is in part a reflection of post-war, 1960s optimism, contrasted with the late 1940s austerity of Westall's adolescence; when the narrator's father describes him as 'a member of the most privileged generation the world had ever seen', it is clear to the present day reader that this is a generation one step removed from the effects of the war, which of course Westall experienced first hand.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it also taps into different ways of thinking about belonging within the region, ideas which permeate Almond's fiction. Almond effects a shift in the portrayal of North-East childhood, evident in the way he ironises the condescension inherent in middle-class views

of such working-class children and their families. When the middle-class incomer Daniel describes Ailsa's family as "[l]ike something from ancient tales [...] Half human", Joseph as "[...] Another throwback", and Bobby and his friend as "[...] like animals", the reader cannot share his viewpoint, given that the 'emotional condition' of such working-class characters has already been portrayed as valid and worthy of expression.<sup>15</sup> A similar effect is achieved in the following passage, where Ailsa tells Bobby of the visit paid to her family by the council in an attempt to enforce her attendance at school.

[...] "Do you not want to pursue your education, little lady?" he says. "No," I say. "You'll be left behind, you know," he says. "This is a time of great opportunities and great improvement for common folk like you. All the other bairns is grabbing their opportunities." "I diven't care," I says. "I'm happy." "See?" says Yak [my brother]. "But it's the law, Mr Spink," says Goggle Eyes. "Then you can take your law," says Losh [my brother], "and stick it up your hairy arse. Now hadaway. We've got work to do."'<sup>16</sup>

Although such protestations do demonstrate a lack of ambition by the family on Ailsa's behalf, the reader is at least open to the idea that the alternative of following in the family tradition is exactly that, a valid alternative. Before this point the reader has witnessed the beauty and skill involved in the family's work as sea-coalers, although admittedly romanticised by Almond. Ultimately, the family acknowledge Ailsa's academic potential, she does attend school, and turns out to be the 'brightest and boldest' of all the children; but her achievements do not constitute or require a rejection of the validity of her working-class heritage.<sup>17</sup>

While ideas of social mobility are much more fully embraced by working-class characters in Almond's fiction than in Westall's, there still remain questions for North-East children over the role played by social class in shaping their



identity. Almond suggests that '[n]orthern writing's filled with all those kinds of tensions', which he describes as fundamentally shaping his writing about the region.<sup>18</sup>

I didn't feel I could write about people without them being able to read it themselves. [...] because one of the things I hate about a lot of English writing is the way that it'll pretend to be about what is seen as the lower classes, the lower orders, but it removes itself from those lower classes, it looks down on them. It effects to describe them, to characterise them, but it's not put in a form that those people could read themselves. [...] I still feel that I have a duty, if I'm going to write about someone then, it should be in a form that they should be able to read themselves. Which is one of the things I suppose which is true about being a children's writer, that you can't write about children and be a children's writer if they can't read it themselves.<sup>19</sup>

This approach mirrors many of the concerns outlined by James Kelman regarding appropriation of the working-class voice in fiction. Almond himself sees an affiliation between his own experience in writing the North East, and the so-called 'Pitmen Painters'.<sup>20</sup> Such commodification of working-class identity is reflected in *The Fire-Eaters*, where a series of disused pitmen's 'ancient holiday shacks' are appropriated by Daniel's middle-class father. Bobby describes how he 'knew that Daniel's dad had been among them with his camera, that they'd look like things of wonder in his book.'<sup>21</sup> Daniel's father is an outsider, a fact marked in terms of his social class. As Bobby and Daniel get to know each other, they discuss parental occupations.

'He's a lecturer,' Daniel said. He does History of Art. My mum does English.' He smiled. 'What do your parents do?'

'Me dad's a fitter in the yard.'

[...]

'And your mum?'

'Me mam?'

'Yes.'

I shrugged.  
 ‘Dunno,’ I said. ‘Looks after us and that.’<sup>22</sup>

Through the course of the novel, Bobby and Daniel overcome their differences of class, as recognised in Daniel’s father’s comments that “[...] they were brought up in similar ways”.<sup>23</sup> Though it takes a near calamity to act as a catalyst, the novel does culminate with both families united in their defiance of the threat of oblivion. Almond’s fiction contrasts with Westall’s in this regard, as the children in Almond’s North East invariably discover that their identity is not so much limited by their social background as shaped by its influence; where Chas McGill discovers seemingly insurmountable class divisions constraining his life at the end of *Fathom Five*, Almond’s North-East children discover that being working-class is not so much a limitation, as a solid grounding.

### ***Remnants and regeneration***

Evidence of the North East’s industrial past permeates the lives and landscapes of Almond’s child characters. This corresponds to existing images of the region circulating in children’s fiction, but Almond’s images differ in that they represent the industrial past not as objectified heritage, but rather as a living presence of the past in the present day North East; in this regard, there is a similarity with Westall. However, whereas Westall is eager to connect the past of the region (whether that be the seventh-century Northumberland of *The Wind Eye* or nineteenth-century Tyneside of *The Watch House*) with the present through timeslip or supernatural intervention – thereby simultaneously emphasising the distance of the past through the supernatural means needed to invoke its presence

– Almond’s fiction situates the legacy of the region’s past as existing within the region today.

Almond’s use of the past focuses on the nineteenth-century industrial expansion, which dominates imagery of the region as outlined in Chapter 1. Rather than reifying the industrial heritage of the region, however, his fiction instead incorporates this key period for North-East identity within a larger schematic which underlines how such a time is both *of the past* and simultaneously *in the present*. The working-class dimension of Almond’s North East is assigned a similarly transcendent quality as evoked elsewhere in children’s fiction of the region, suggesting that the region has always been essentially working-class in origins and outlook, but in Almond’s work this is achieved through a transformation of the very images employed. Rather than representing the industrial moment as the seemingly natural culmination of underlying essential qualities of the region, as is common in many of the texts explored in Chapters 2 and 3 and in much of Westall’s North-East fiction, Almond instead makes strange the reader’s thinking about such central images for conceiving the North East. Such a profound reworking of these images is possible for Almond given the distance between the present-day reality of life in the North East and the time when such industrial forces exerted a palpable influence upon the day to day life of the region. It is precisely because Almond is a children’s writer that such reworked images are particularly apt and potent: for the first time since the nineteenth century, there exists an intended readership in the North East of England for whom the industrial legacy of the region’s past can not be recalled from memory and, importantly, such child readers may very well be growing up with adults for whom it exists only at a distance. This phenomenon mirrors the

‘profound changes in consciousness’ and ‘characteristic amnesias’ described by Benedict Anderson as characteristic of both the transition from childhood to adulthood in the individual, and the growth to maturity of the nation state.<sup>24</sup> Almond is engaged in the act of writing the North East at a crucial point in the region’s existence; the phase of regeneration which has characterised the North East since the 1990s marks a point of departure from previous cycles of decline/rebirth because it is grounded upon a distinct change of direction away from those traditional industries which dominated the region, and its consciousness, for so long. If there exists the kind of gulf of experience between the identity of the present day North-East child, and the industrial bedrock which has underlain North-East identity for so long, then there emerges from this a ‘conception of personhood, *identity* [...] which, because it can not be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated.’<sup>25</sup> Almond writes the North East at a moment of need for both his readership and the region, particularly regarding the concept of the North East’s industrial working-class roots. It is this peculiar moment that presents Almond with the opportunity to so profoundly rework established images of the region, whose very significance and relevance has been called into question by a shift in the consciousness of his child readers.<sup>26</sup>

Images of the industrialised North East are, therefore, themselves regenerated in Almond’s work, and the effect of this is twofold: firstly, the reader sees such images afresh (and particularly so given the gulf of experience detailed above); secondly, such newly reconstructed images re-present the industrial experience in forms which seek to assure its continuity within present and future images of the region. In this way, Almond’s work can be seen as both challenging

and reaffirming the centrality of the industrial experience to North-East identity, within his wider framework of redressing limited and partial images of the region.

Such recasting of the old industrial in the light of regeneration can be seen in *Heaven Eyes*, manifested in the figure of the saint.

‘A working man.’

We looked at the banks of the river, the places where the warehouses and workplaces had gone. The banks opposite were landscaped and turfed. There were footpaths and cycle tracks. Up river there were wastelands, dilapidated quays, all waiting to be cleared, too. There were new pubs and clubs where there used to be great cranes and loading bays. Behind us were more ruined workplaces, the printing works, all waiting to be demolished and swept away. We looked down again at the beautiful young man in the mud, the man from an age that had been wiped away.<sup>27</sup>

The mud of the Middens renders the saint transcendent of time through its preservative qualities; at the same time it raises his everyday existence to the status of a sanctified relic. Though the children initially fear what they have found beneath the surface of the landscape, they come to revere him. Their belief in his importance is powerful enough to regenerate him in a manner which outshines the rebuilding which surrounds the site of their discovery; rather than being ‘wiped away’, he in fact walks back into the water, rejoining a potent symbol of life and continuity.<sup>28</sup> In this image, the young reader meets with the irrepressible presence of the North East’s industrial past, transformed into something mystical and miraculous. This symbol no longer figures industry in terms of decline and hardship, but rather the magical and spiritual. In such ways, Almond recasts a central image of North-East working-class identity, and shifts the focus of the aesthetic away from sentiments of nostalgic attachment to past glories, and towards reverence of the transcendent.

I explored earlier the image of coalmining as time travel; similar ideas are embodied in the image of coal as “[...] blacker than the blackest night holding the heat and light of the ancient sun in it.”<sup>29</sup> Such an image could aptly describe Almond’s representation of the industrial past of the North East, which also seeks to effect a metamorphosis from images of darkness and hardship, towards images of light and promise. Coal, which is a recurring motif within North-East children’s fiction, is transformed in Almond’s work. In *The Fire-Eaters*, the Spinks describe it as “[...] beautiful black gold”, and in *Kit’s Wilderness* coal also takes on a beautiful form as the carved pit pony which Kit receives from his grandfather and which functions throughout as a powerfully protective talisman.<sup>30</sup> Images of the act of mining and miners are also transformed in Almond’s fiction. In *Kit’s Wilderness*, Kit’s Grandpa describes the experience of becoming a coalminer, and its strange conjoining of fear and pride. Though the occupation terrified him, it also brought great joy through its fostering of communal spirit and solidarity.

‘It was very deep, Kit. Very dark. And every one of us was scared of it. As a lad I’d wake up trembling, knowing that as a Watson born in Stonegate I’d soon be following my ancestors into the pit. [...] But there was more than just the fear, Kit. We were also driven to it. We understood our fate. There was the strangest joy in dropping down together into the darkness that we feared. And most of all there was the joy of coming out again together into the lovely world. [...]’<sup>31</sup>

Focalized through the reminiscences of an old miner, Almond here encapsulates a strange ambivalence at the centre of North-East identity; the industrial past of the region, though painful, dangerous, often deadly for those working at the coalface, also brought great wealth, recognition and real power to the North East. Most importantly, unification against common hardship and toil, exemplified in the

miners' solidarity, has become deeply rooted in North-East consciousness as the elemental basis of community identity in the region. I suggested in Chapter 1 that the dominant aesthetic in circulation participates in a 'widely disseminated and commonly held set of images' which '[c]ollectively [...] forms a place-myth' about life in the region.<sup>32</sup> The above passage provides an example of how Almond evokes a mythic sense of North-East identity for his young readers, through a recuperative recognition of the region's industrial tradition. Kit too will experience the simultaneous fear and joy of 'dropping down together into the darkness', firstly during the game of Death, later as he follows Askew into the drift mine, and even subconsciously as he searches for his grandfather below the surface. Even though (and perhaps because) children in the North East no longer face a future of literally 'following their ancestors into the pit', the novel nevertheless suggests that this is a symbolic act that must be repeatedly enacted as part of growing up in the region.

*'[...] the power of ghosts and stories [...] the caves and tunnels in our heads'*<sup>33</sup>

The expanded and regenerated images of North-East childhood employed by David Almond contribute not only to a re-imagining of the region, but also a re-imagining of the North-East children's story. Almond's fiction is saturated with references to texts, stories and storytelling. In *Heaven Eyes*, Erin witnesses her own story being recorded and created by Grampa, 'weaving its way into the tale of Heaven Eyes, into the mysteries contained in his huge book'; the power of language to create reality is acknowledged by Mouse (whose very skin is a text inked deep by his father) as he spells out the children's names using the discarded printers' equipment and comments how "[...] letters make words and words

make us.’’<sup>34</sup> Kit’s acceptance into the gang who play Death is heralded by the moment his name is written into the wall of Askew’s cave, which is similar to the way the narrator’s father in *Counting Stars* draws comfort from the fact that his name remains etched into the woodwork of the Time Machine.<sup>35</sup> Just as Almond’s work over-writes previous narratives of the region, so too his characters often find their presence being written and etched onto what has gone before, in a manner not dissimilar to that found in William Mayne’s *Cuddy* which also portrays present-day North-East childhoods as palimpsests over-written on narratives from the region’s past (see Chapter 2). That Almond’s readers are often self-consciously reminded of their complicity in the act of reading such narratives (through devices such as the narrator’s invitation to the reader to ‘[t]ell yourself it’s just a story, nothing more’) marks his writing out as boldly metafictional, a quality which differentiates his work from much of the fiction considered in Chapters 2 and 3.<sup>36</sup>

In Almond’s fiction, stories have the power to alter reality. Both *Kit’s Wilderness* and *The Savage* feature children who write stories which come to life in the real world. Whilst both can be read as existing within the children’s imaginations, at the same time the characters called into being through their stories leave traces of their existence in the form of brightly-coloured pebbles and chicken feathers, which seem to suggest their material presence.<sup>37</sup> In any case, the suggestion is that the power of story can be truly transformative. As Kit comments, ‘‘[...] [s]tories are living things’’ in Almond’s fiction.<sup>38</sup> Continuity of life in the region is described in terms of stories, which ‘‘[...] move from person to person, get passed down through the generations. [...]’’<sup>39</sup> As Kit fears his Grandpa’s ‘tales were coming to an end’, he also realises ‘the power of ghosts



and stories', which he imagines as 'caves and tunnels in our heads'.<sup>40</sup> Through such images Almond suggests that stories lie beneath the surface of life in the North East, and can, like tunnels and abandoned mine-workings, be reopened and explored by children such as Kit, who find they "[...] take you back deep into the dark and show it lives within us still."<sup>41</sup> This is another example of the way Almond's fiction participates in a process of re-mythicising the region.

In interview, Almond acknowledges the influence of mythic narratives upon his own writing.

It may be a childish thing in itself to believe that a story can change the world, can affect the world, but if you think about the first myths that were told, the first stories that were told, they weren't just told to describe the world, but they were told to actually make the world do what the story said that it would do. Like you know, the crops would grow because certain words were spoken in a certain order. So stories have always [...] been given, some kind of magical significance, words have. And it's just a great thing to use, for me as a writer.<sup>42</sup>

Almond goes on to describe how, when he feels he is writing well, his language 'becomes like an incantation or a ritual', which he links to Catholicism's belief that 'ritualistic uses of language can bring about magical changes.'<sup>43</sup>

### ***Language***

North-East dialect and accent is integral to Almond's work, and he talks of the importance of 'the way Northern, Geordie sentences flow' and 'the nature of the voice', and an attempt to give heightened significance to the seemingly everyday, overlooked language contributes to his attempts to develop representations of the region.<sup>44</sup> He describes how, in one particular passage in *Clay*, he strove to demonstrate the ability of Geordie dialect to convey complex ideas.

[I]t was like some kind of Sartrean thing, 'Being and Nothingness', I'm using 'Being and Nowtness', on the one hand as a kind of playful thing, but also a very serious thing, saying, 'This language, which is marginalised and often being looked down on, actually contains huge poetry and huge power, if it's used in the right way.'<sup>45</sup>

I explored earlier some of the ways that Almond's North-East fiction seeks to reposition the region as central rather than marginal, and similar intentions are clearly at work here in relation to North-East language. The same is true of Almond's use of traditional North-East folk songs, which appear frequently in his novels. In *Kit's Wilderness*, for instance, 'ancient pit songs' and ballads are sung by characters at crucial moments, in order to evoke a sense of community and tradition; a rendition of the North-East dialect song 'The Lambton Worm' connects young and old characters as they 'sang and sang, leaned close together, swayed together, moved in time to the music that joined them one to one.'<sup>46</sup> In *The Fire-Eaters* too, Bobby's mother hums the traditional Geordie songs 'Bobby Shafto' and 'The Keel Row' at key turning points in the narrative, such as when Bobby's father returns from hospital and as the families sit on the beach awaiting their expected annihilation.<sup>47</sup> In both cases, the songs seem to exert healing powers on the lives of both children and adults, suggestive of an incantatory magic inherent in folk songs sung in North-East dialect. Almond acknowledges this intention when writing *The Fire-Eaters*.

[...] [W]hen I wrote the Mum singing in *The Fire-Eaters*, and again I'm doing it in the book I'm doing at the moment with some poetry, it's like trying to get that lyricism, that magical movement in the language [...] in a way that transcends just the ordinary.<sup>48</sup>

In this way, Almond's fiction asserts the power and poetry of North-East language, and brings the region's rich artistic and literary heritage to the attention of his young readers.

Re-shaping attitudes to language, and in particular the language of the region, is an essential part of Almond's artistic project, and this sets him apart from many of the earlier North-East novels explored in Chapter 3 which mostly sidestep the issue of dialect. Almond acknowledges the influence on his own work of 'modern novels that are themselves influenced by ancient storytelling traditions [...] by oral as well as 'literary' modes of expression', and views his own writing as 'drawn from the way people talk [...] an in some ways non-literary tradition [of] storytelling, chants, ballads.'<sup>49</sup> This suggestion underpins the language of Almond's fictional North East by suggesting a seemingly timeless, folk narrative antecedence, rooted in the distinctive oral language of the region, yet capable of narrating the postmodern North-East experience. It is a further example of the way that his work transforms the dominant literary aesthetic of the region, as part of 'an attempt to reassemble what is fragmented, to rediscover what has been lost.'<sup>50</sup> Almond achieves this by mining previously overlooked images and re-positioning them at the centre of his fictional North East, whilst also reconciling such recovered, ancient tradition within North-East stories which speak of transformation, regeneration, and rebirth.

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<sup>1</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 163; see for instance Westall's *The Christmas Cat* (1991), and *The Christmas Ghost* (1992).

<sup>2</sup> *Clay*, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>10</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> *Counting Stars*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> *Counting Stars*, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, pp. 115-117.

<sup>16</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 248.

<sup>18</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>19</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>20</sup> These were a group of miners from the colliery town of Ashington in the North East, who enrolled in art classes and produced work during the 1930s and 1940s. One of the principal hurdles they faced was being taken seriously as artists who produced art from their own working-class perspective, a position which was more readily received as a suitable *subject* for painting rather than as a starting position for artistic vision. Their work was eventually assimilated into mainstream art culture after being rediscovered in the 1970s and internationally exhibited as 'workers' art'. Whether such recognition constitutes an act of appropriation/commodification is open to debate. Certainly, the opening of a gallery dedicated to their work in 2006 in Ashington has been seen locally as rightfully returning their work to the North East. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashington> <accessed 9 May 2008> for introductory details, and Colls and Lancaster, pp. 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 157.

<sup>22</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, pp. 204-205.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> Though this is most pertinent for those readers situated within the region, it is relevant to readers out side the North East as well. Existing images functioned as part of non-North Easterners' understanding of the working-class, industrial character of the region, in part as a result of the impact the North East's industrial contribution made on the life of the United Kingdom. The apparent absurdity of 'carrying coals to Newcastle' was grounded upon a reality that much of the coal received and used all over Britain did originate in the North East. That this is no longer the case is as apparent to those who live outside the region as it is to those inside.

<sup>27</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, p. 154.

<sup>28</sup> Appropriately enough, this scene occurs in the Ouseburn valley which is now the location of the *Seven Stories, the Centre for Children's Books* visitor centre. Almond is a patron of the organisation, which has itself emerged as part of the regeneration of this neglected formerly industrial area.

<sup>29</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Shields, pp. 60-61.

<sup>33</sup> *Kit's Wilderness* p. 215.

<sup>34</sup> *Heaven Eyes*, pp. 70-71; p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 47; *Counting Stars*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> *Clay*, p. 296.

<sup>37</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 208; *The Savage*, p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 154.

<sup>39</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 59; p. 215.

<sup>41</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 15.

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<sup>42</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>43</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>44</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>45</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>46</sup> *Kit's Wilderness*, p. 18; p. 58.

<sup>47</sup> *The Fire-Eaters*, p. 128; p. 213; p. 224; p. 239.

<sup>48</sup> *Personal Interview* (see Appendix).

<sup>49</sup> David Almond, quoted in 'Achuka interview',

<http://www.achuka.co.uk/archive/interviews/daint.php> [accessed 23 August 2008];

David Almond, quoted in 'Interview with David Almond Part 2',

<http://www.misrule.com.au/almond2.html> [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>50</sup> *Counting Stars*, 'Introduction.'

## **Chapter 12: Conclusion**

In Chapter 1, I established the existence of a demonstrable dominant aesthetic operating in representations of the North East of England within fiction for young readers, constituting an internally consistent set of images and strategies for writing about the region. With reference to a wide range of twentieth-century and contemporary children's novels, I outlined the key components of this aesthetic, and the way that these have been employed by a majority of writers in their North-East fiction.

Much of such work has tended to construct the North East as benighted, troubled, savage and primitive – as opposed to predominantly cultured images of the South of England, and in particular the literarily influential London-Oxford nexus. This North-East aesthetic comprises both auto- and hetero-images, that is to say images produced in generating a sense of the region as self, and also as other; the work both of writers who have written about the North East as a homeland and those for whom it exists as an 'other place' has been explored. Similarly, North-East children's novels are read both by young people from within and outside the North East, and contribute to an image of the region which is likely to be experienced at a formative time in readers' lives. As explored in Chapter 1, the central tenets of this aesthetic, in particular those elements which stress the relationship between the region and its industrial heritage, have tended to concur to a large extent across both auto- and hetero-images: the dominant version of the North East in circulation has been of a working-class, masculine and industrialised space. Although these originate in pejorative images from

outside the region, these same defining characteristics have been claimed and adopted by those seeking to celebrate the North East. Regardless of intended outcome, the effect of such entrenched imagery has been to state and re-state a limited and limiting representation of the region for young readers. Such artistic representations exert a significant influence over perceptions of the region, as Dave Russell notes when describing how ‘most people outside [...] and many within it have come to know the region not through personal experience but via the versions they encounter in the field of culture.’<sup>1</sup> By virtue of their place within children’s books, such images contribute towards constructing a version of the North East that is both likely to endure and resistant to being challenged.

This is not to suggest that this dominant aesthetic has remained static throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; indeed, the main focus of this thesis has been on exploring how this aesthetic has been moulded and re-crafted in response to contextual influences by different writers at different times. Nevertheless, key elements have endured, albeit in altered and adapted forms and to varying extents; they continue to shape representations of the North East for young readers. Foremost among these are the presence of industry and work as defining characteristics of the region.

The two children’s writers considered in detail in Chapters 4 to 11 have been particularly important in shaping the dominant aesthetic, for a number of reasons: 1) both have made repeated use of the North East as a primary locus for their fiction; 2) both have had a prolific output, and have been both critically and commercially successful; 3) both writers’ work has, to a greater extent than much of the other North-East fiction considered in Chapters 2 and 3, reached a large, international, readership. The combined result of these factors means that both

Robert Westall and David Almond have produced a body of work for young people which has given images of the North East greater currency than previously existed. In the case of David Almond, this influence is compounded by the reception of his work as so-called crossover fiction, a phenomenon which Rachel Falconer attributes to 'a resistant response to the disorienting aspects of contemporary life', which has further raised the profile of his representation of the region with both adult and child readers.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these writers have reflected anxieties of their time, particularly regarding the world they envisage facing their young readers, and both have turned to the North East as the primary locus for confronting their concerns. In Westall's case, concerns over the shifting relevance of industry and work patterns in the late twentieth century led to his use of the North East as a fictional space in which to explore the impact of such changes upon social class; the North East was particularly apposite for such explorations given its close affiliation - certainly in images of the region - with working-class culture and life styles. Due to his own personal experience of such shifts in social class boundaries and the post-war advent of real social mobility for the grammar school generation of which he was a part, Westall's fiction reflects an anxiety about his desire to move beyond the region on the one hand, coupled with a residual guilt over having done so. Westall's enduring concern for the region, despite his troubled relationship with the North East, is manifested in a compulsion to revisit the place in his fiction, driving him to celebrate the North East's pre-modern roots, as an attempt to re-affirm some kind of anchorage for the region which he saw as threatened in the face of "[...] the future splitting away from the past."<sup>3</sup> At the centre of Westall's fiction is an ambivalence



arising from his continued desire to affiliate with the North East but not to live there; hence, his children's fiction is characterised by images of suffocation and escape.

David Almond's work recasts the role of industry in shaping North-East identity, and is characterised by an attempt to reconcile images of the rural and industrial within an expanded aesthetic of the region. Almond's fictional North East is experienced by a readership, both within and beyond the area, for whom the historical reality of the North East's economic relationship with heavy industry exists at a distance sufficient to require the relationship to be narrated, in the absence of any ongoing presence of industry in their day to day lives. If Westall's fictional North East is rooted in his recollections of the real region in which either living industry or the impact of industrial decline were very present realities for adults and young people, the world upon which Almond's fiction draws is a different place. Whereas Westall's childhood included experiences of the impact of economic depression upon the working-class community of Tyneside, Almond's childhood was characterised by 1950s post-war economic revival and his adolescence in the 1960s saw widespread redevelopment in the region coupled with a liberating shift in sexual politics. Both writers experienced profound upheavals within the region, but with starkly contrasting effects, and although Westall was alive at the same time that Almond was growing up in Felling, by this point Westall had exiled himself from the North East permanently and therefore experienced the region largely from afar. By the time Almond came to write children's fiction set on Tyneside, the region's industry had taken on the role of heritage rather than lifeblood. Certainly Almond's readers have a much more settled relationship with industry; there is little

likelihood that readers from within the region will face a future linked to those working-class occupations which have for so long commanded the centre ground of dominant imagery of the North East. For readers outside the region, Almond is determined to demonstrate the way in which the remnants of the industrial past can be seen anew as both more diverse than has previously been understood, and also as reconciled within a modern North-East landscape.

If Westall can be described as turning to the past in order to shore up what he saw as a much needed stability of identity in the face of unsettling change, Almond reclaims the past through what he sees as a fuller narration of the region's history, and turns these stories towards the present. Because he is writing at a time which necessitates the narration of such a past, due to the distance between his readers' realities and the images at the centre of those entrenched images as outlined above, Almond is presented with the opportunity to reclaim such stories, and through a revelatory approach to augment the elements of a past which he sees as enduring in modern North-East identity. Such an act of reclaiming is constructive in relation to both the past and the present; this is true of both writers' work.

Both writers' corpuses constitute narrative projects which challenge the existing aesthetic and instigate adjusted versions of the region, employing a "[...] view from underneath" identified by Rachel Falconer as common in children's fiction 'written from a position outside the cultural mainstream of London and South-East Britain'.<sup>4</sup> Both have arisen out of key historical moments in the twentieth century, where the dominant aesthetic has appeared inadequate in its existing form at representing North-East identity for young readers; these constitute bifurcation points, and the impact of both writers' fiction has been to

shift the focus and content of such dominant imagery in new directions.<sup>5</sup> Both writers expand the existing aesthetic, and developments can be seen emerging in Westall's fiction and continuing through Almond's work.

Both writers' work can be placed within the existing tradition, whether or not the influences of such pre-texts and intertexts are openly acknowledged: Westall's novels confront and expand upon the fictional North East of writers such as Catherine Cookson and Richard Armstrong, in particular regarding the seeming fixity of industrial labour as an influence upon the region's identity, and also in Westall's attempts to conflate images of the rural and industrial landscapes of the region, suggestive of the redemption of the urban as arising out of an apparently eternal, underlying natural landscape rich in images of purity. The impact of Westall's reconfigured imagery can be seen in late twentieth-century North-East children's novels such as William Mayne's *Cuddy* and Melvin Burgess's novelization of *Billy Elliot*, and, of course, David Almond's fiction.

Almond's central contribution at the turn of the new millennium is to effect a reconciliation of the rural and the urban within a more expansive aesthetic, which both defuses anxieties over social class and mobility so central in Westall's fictional North-East childhoods, and also rehabilitates dominant imagery of the region's industrial past within the post-industrial landscape, in an act that at once preserves and regenerates such images. If Westall's North East is one in which children's regional identities are threatened by profound changes in the local socio-economic profile, driving them towards the past in order to recover a sense of communal anchorage, Almond's fiction offers young readers a vision of the North East as 'a place that had everything for the imagination',

reclaimed and revealed as having always been expansive enough to accommodate such profound change.<sup>6</sup> Though Dave Russell sounds a note of caution over the difficulty of overcoming the ‘troublingly recent past’ of industrial decline, and suggests that ‘it may be some time before it can be used to galvanise the present’, Almond’s work can be seen as successfully addressing just such difficulties.<sup>7</sup> It is no accident that while Westall’s child-characters take time out in the seemingly pre-industrial rural landscape, or even slip back through time in order to commune with saints and spirits from a pre-modern age, Almond’s young protagonists encounter the transcendent presence of angels, saints and supernatural powers, immanent in the post-industrial present-day North East.

Both Westall and Almond profoundly rework the *imageme* or literary blueprint underlying dominant imagery of the region, and effect a shift in the version of the North East circulating within children’s fiction. How such a reconfigured aesthetic continues to develop, in both Almond’s on-going output and elsewhere in twenty first-century children’s fiction, and in particular in the face of present-day economic challenges facing the region, remains to be seen. What can be said with certainty is that the dominant aesthetic bears witness to a legacy of the preceding tradition of writing about the region for young readers, and remains instrumental in shaping images of North-East childhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Falconer, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Valerie Bierman, (1990) ‘Turned on by the world of children’ press cutting, Seven Stories: The Centre for Children’s Books, Robert Westall MSS, RW/12/04/11.

<sup>4</sup> Falconer, p. 240.

<sup>5</sup> See Nikolajeva (1996).

<sup>6</sup> ‘David Almond (1951-) – Sidelights Biography’, <<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/1309/Almond-David-1951-Sidelights.html>> [accessed 23 August 2008].

<sup>7</sup> Russell, p. 269.

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Appendix:

**David Almond – Personal Interview with Nolan Dalrymple: 31 January 2008: Humshaugh, near Hexham, Northumberland.**

ND: My PhD explores North-East identity, regional identity in twentieth-century children's fiction. The main project I've been working on at Seven Stories has been working with the Robert Westall collection and archive there which had previously been partially sorted but not catalogued. I'm particularly interested in how ideas of the North East, and especially childhood in the North East, have developed and changed. What I've been looking at really have been recurrent images and symbols that are used to represent the North East, both the people and the place, and particularly childhood in the North East. Obviously I'm very, very interested in your work, and particularly that North East dimension of it. I didn't really want to come with a set of questions as such, but rather I have some images and ideas and things that seem to me to have leapt out of your work, seem to be recurrent themes key ideas in your work, and I just wanted to ask you a little bit about some of those and whether you thought they were particularly important, and what your ideas were on them, if that would be ok.

DA: That would be grand.

ND: I suppose the starting point I wanted to ask about concerns when you're writing and setting your fiction in the North East. I've read listened to interviews you've given, and you've talked about coming to a point where you found that place, and found that that was a valid place to write about and set your fiction in. Do you, then, have an idea of what characterises the North East, before you come to write about it? Particularly about the people and the place, the physical landscape of it.

DA: It was never that deliberate really, it just kind of happened. When I began to write about the North East I found that using the characters and the language and

the landscape just allowed me to suddenly write what I felt I should have been writing all the time. And it really was like finding a place and a voice, but it wasn't a result of a long thought-out process. The first time that I did it deliberately was when I wrote the stories in *Counting Stars*. Lots of stuff in *Counting Stars* I had excluded from my work and hadn't wanted to deal with. But when I found I was writing about Felling in particular, Tyneside, I found that automatically my own history, my own background, just blended naturally with the place, and I found I could write in a Northern voice without it being a hackneyed Northern voice. Because for years I didn't want to be a Northern writer, you know, I was going to be something else. It just felt like coming home, but also like finding something entirely new, all at the same time - that's how it felt.

ND: So was it almost as if before that, maybe not consciously, but you'd been almost fighting against it in a way? It sounds then almost as if it was with a sense of relief and release that you fell back into writing about it.

DA: It was really, it was accepting certain things. I learned a lot about writing about the North East by reading American writers, and specifically writers from the southern states of America like Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor made this great statement, that the imagination is not free, that it is bound, that you only find your own imagination when you realise that it has certain limits. She talked about her limits as being to do with geography, and language, and at the time I was going through all the stuff about trying to re-adjust and trying to find a way to write, and accepting my Northern-ness, and I thought, well that's perfectly true, that my imagination became free when I recognised the boundaries that were automatically placed on it. And I think that's really true, the imagination isn't something that just goes, goes, goes, goes, goes. It's not constricted but it has boundaries and by recognising those boundaries then you become free. It was that sense of freedom as a writer, I thought, 'Oh yes,' and I began to write with more fluidity and gained more confidence and could deal with anything I wanted to deal with, within the space of a landscape and a language which was the North East.



ND: That's really interesting. It's almost like a paradox - once you tether yourself and root yourself then it allows you to write freely within that.

DA: Absolutely.

ND: I'm very interested in what it is about that particular landscape, what it was that was held within that landscape. I know that on the one hand it was the landscape from your past and so therefore there was a sense of coming home, coming back to something that was familiar. But it seems to me that the landscape is so powerful in your writing that I wonder whether there's something almost essential about the landscape. One image that I was particularly interested in is, and this to me seems almost to be of the essence of the North East, is that there's this tension between the urban world and the rural world, between the urban and more civilised landscape and then the rural and perhaps natural or primal landscape. The children in your fiction often move from living in an urban area or they even move perhaps across a wasteland into some kind of wilderness, and in there they're able to connect and get in touch with something. Is that something you think about the region?

DA: I think that's dead right, and when I began to use it, that's one of the things that I recognised straight away. One of the things I remember about growing up in Felling was that it really was right on the edge of the urban and the rural landscape. The rural landscape was quite a rough rural landscape, it was damaged by coal mining, it was scarred by industry. It wasn't Gloucestershire. A lot of my growing up that I think about imaginatively as a writer was to do with things like being in an allotment with my grandfather when I was very little. There we were, kind of in a garden, and just beyond the allotment was playing fields, and I remember the sound of skylarks and you could see houses at the top of the field. You turned the other way and there was Newcastle, on the other side of the river. So it was definitely that thing about that semi-urban, semi-rural thing. The roughness of the landscape. I take people to Felling and I say, 'It's just beautiful,'; I take them up the hill in Felling and I say 'Look, isn't this beautiful?' and of course they don't get it because they haven't got my kind of experience. I find it incredibly touching, that blend of the rural and the urban.

Because Felling's on a slope, you look out over the river, and when I was a kid you looked down the river and it was just full of ships, it was full of cranes. On the other side it was empty moorland.

ND: So is there something about that, that's perhaps particular to the North East – about the natural landscape that is there? That there's a dangerous, threatening element to it, although it's liberating at the same time? You mentioned there about remembering hearing skylarks, and the children in your fiction often are attached to birds, or animals as well. Is this tapping into the same idea about the natural?

DA: It is, and it's also tapping into what it was like to grow up there. As kids, I suppose when I was ten, eleven, twelve, with my mates, we all went bird-nesting. So everybody had a box of birds' eggs, in sand, and there was lots of laws about bird-nesting, laws among ourselves about what you were allowed to do and what you weren't allowed to do, and you couldn't transgress and spoil the nests and things like that. So, there was always that sense of the presence of birds. The animals were, I suppose, semi-tamed animals, they were pit ponies on the hill, and dogs roaming the streets, half-wild. But birds were a huge thing. And then when I began to write, what you do, you write about your own landscape, your own place, but if you write well, and you release yourself into it, it works for you because somehow it picks up on all those universal things that are going round in all literature. But by focussing it on a particular place you're able to ground it.

ND: Often in your fiction there are these extraordinary magical and mystical events. It seems really important that they happen in this really ordinary place. You talk about that a lot, ordinary people from an ordinary place, insignificant almost, but given this heightened significance. Is that a Blakean idea?

DA: I guess it is, but again if you find an area and a language to write in, then you do find yourself saying things that are similar to other people, like with Blake. When I wrote *Skellig* I thought, 'Oh, god, Blake wrote about all of this,' and it was like stumbling across Blake in a new way for me. Yeah, that sense of insignificance was just hugely important to me. I'd spent a long time trying to

match myself against great writers and saying, 'That's what I'm going to be.' But again it was to do with recognising, not the limitations of your own potential but the limitations of what you can actually build into your work, what you can build your work around. And it was things like, loving writers like Marquez but actually recognising that in many ways Marquez is a very local writer – Marquez's relatives would recognise the people and the places in his work. So it's to do with that and recognising the significance of insignificant things. I was brought up as a Catholic, and that was something I'd always never wanted to write about. But then when I began to write *Counting Stars* I just took a deep breath and said, 'Oh, just do it, just let it in.' So I just let it in. Of course Catholicism, all religion I guess, put huge significance on the ordinary world, and we were going down to church to see miracles, you know. People talked naturally about angels and the fact that people went to heaven, so the landscape anyway was filled with huge significance. Then you grow up and think, you're just drawn to this, it's just such a huge gift to a writer.

ND: You mentioned Marquez there as well, and your writing has been described as magic-realist, or writing in that tradition. That to me seems a really appropriate description - that marriage of the sacred and mystical with the ordinary and the profane I suppose, epitomised in something like *Skellig* where you've got this figure, a mystical figure, but who again is very rooted in the North East, drinks brown ale and all of those things. People think about that as being a post-modern idea and approach, but in fact you're suggesting that it's linked to this Catholic tradition which is a really ancient mystic spiritual tradition.

DA: When I thought about the writers that I really was influenced by, say, twenty years ago, people like Marquez and Calvino, I had this sudden 'Yes, of course', because they're writing inside a Catholic tradition. It doesn't appear to be Catholic but actually it grows out of a Catholic background. Whatever appears to be new, if it's any good, also draws on something ancient I think. Inside the children's books world, I found a huge freedom to do this, I think more freedom than if I'd continued trying to write for adults. There was a kind of liberation in writing for kids who would just automatically accept improbabilities and

impossibilities and just go with it. Also you could do things very simply, use apparently very simple language, and, you hope, achieve big effects.

ND: Talking about these ideas about the text itself as almost being magical, something that does come through is this idea that the text makes the reader aware that it is a text, and questions the nature of storytelling. I wonder whether there's something of that that is linked to a North East tradition – for instance, oral tales that are very self-consciously about that, something like 'The Lambton Worm', where it keeps reminding you, 'I'll tell yuz aal an aaful story.'

DA: When I found myself writing for children, I thought, to write that kind of metafiction appears to be very advanced and post-modern, but actually it's not. You're talking about 'The Lambton Worm' and in things like that there is this awareness of stories being stories. And also, when you're writing for children, kids are potential writers themselves. I really believe that kids are actually interested in the process of telling stories. So you tell them stories and you say, 'Well, actually it's just a story, isn't it?' They say, 'Well, it is, isn't it, but...' It's like the classic Santa Claus thing, they tell all kinds of stories about Father Christmas, even to the point of where they're still telling themselves the story where they don't believe it.

ND: But they do believe it.

DA: But they do believe it, that's right, it's that in-between the two things. So for me it's been the perfect place to explore the nature of storytelling without becoming too self-conscious or trying to overwork it too much. It felt very natural to write about the nature of storytelling when you're telling stories for children.

ND: I think it's something that happens much more in children's fiction, almost seems to happen much more naturally in children's books.

DA: It's there, absolutely. I talk about this a lot when I give talks. I'll talk about the kind of experimentation you're allowed in children's books and a lot of

adults that I say that to just say, 'That can't be true.' But actually, if you go in a children's book department all the playing around with text and the nature of storytelling which I was always really interested in in the sixties and seventies, it's all there. The amazing blends of words and texts, you see people doing amazing things with type styles, people doing amazing things with the nature of storytelling, it's all happening inside the children's book world. I was listening to a piece recently on the radio and they were talking about the influences on current British literature, and one of the statements was, 'What a shame that Borges didn't have more of an influence on English writing.' I thought, hang on, you haven't read many children's books if you think that. I think children's writers respond to that ability to be hugely creative. It's not just to do with the creativity of the lines of storytelling, it's the creativity of everything, text and pictures and the nature of writing itself. Kids are really interested in that.

ND: We talked there about landscape for a while and the physical landscape of the North East. I wonder if we could move on to talking about the people, especially the children, of the North East.

DA: Another thing about the landscape I think is worth mentioning is the sea. I think the presence of the sea was always a huge thing, growing up here. And I've thought about that, when I go to other Northern cities, and I've thought, 'Well, could I work here, could I write about this place in the same way?' I think I couldn't, and I think a lot of it is to do with the fact that the sea was always very close, you could always see the sea.

ND: And is there a sense that there's an importance for the sea in terms of, does it symbolise something in terms of these childhood experiences that these children are having in your fiction?

DA: I think it does in some way which I couldn't quite explain, but I found myself when I was writing, say, *Counting Stars* and *The Fire-Eaters*, of course. The presence of the sea was massive, and that again was one of the things I remember growing up in Felling. You grew up on this hillside, you had the city, you had the moors, and you had the sea. You had everything, the whole

elemental world was all around you. It was all there, and the sea was there as a kind of boundary, this lovely, shining thing, a sense of distance and horizon. I suppose as a Catholic boy, I guess, it symbolised something about eternity, death, time, all of these things which the sea always does, from Homer onwards. And if you write about Felling, you're doing the same thing that Homer did. You're bound to, as soon as you mention the sea. So it was always there as just this huge element. As a teenager, we used to spend lots of time going up the coast, going to camp at Seahouses, Beadnell, and rampaging around the beaches. It was so fantastic to have that, and I think that's definitely part of the uniqueness of the North East.

ND: I wonder as well if it perhaps tunes into that idea of the natural world being both nourishing but at the same time dangerous. In Westall's work, the sea often provides a bounty. I know certainly it does in 'The Fire-Eaters' for instance, it's where the Spinks make their living isn't it, the sea-coal? It also provides this bounty of materials that they burn but also that they scavenge on the beach, but it's dangerous as well, and threatening, and can take away.

DA: Absolutely.

ND: One aspect that seems to be at the centre of a lot of your fiction is this idea of the family, and of course that's often very important in children's fiction. Even when families are absent, they're still conspicuous by their absence. There really seems to be a sense in your fiction that families tend to be tied to this idea of heritage and they're proud old families who are genuine North East families because of that. I'm interested in whether you see the North East as a place where that stability of heritage, of a long bloodline, is something that's characteristic about it, and whether that perhaps now is being disrupted as we see the family unit breaking down. Is that something you're conscious of as you're writing?

DA: I suppose as a child, growing up in a big family, part of a big community, you always had that sense that people were grounded, people came from Felling and if you had relatives who moved out to Whitley Bay or to Jesmond it was

quite a strange thing to do. It felt like Felling was the place where people lived, where they grew up, where they came from. That there was a tradition, that their Mams had been brought up there, their Dads had been brought up there. So there was that sense of a powerful family line. Even though if you went back and looked at it, it'd probably only go back two or three generations.

ND: But the sense of it seems more timeless than that.

DA: Yeah, but as a kid that's how it felt. There were things like, I had an uncle who was a printer and every time I walked up Felling High Street there was a sign saying 'Almond the Printers'. Of course the shop had closed long before, but the sign was still there, so you had that sense of, this is where I'm from.

ND: The extended family and grandparents seem to be important to the children in your fiction – I wonder if it's because it connects children to an earlier time perhaps, people who lived from an earlier time, and are their roots.

DA: I think it was for me, and my experience of growing up. My Dad would go out to work and my Mum would look after the family. And my Grandma was just there and seemed like she always had been there, and the same with my granddad. These were my mother's parents, and they lived just round the street, so there was this massive presence, I mean massive because they were physically very big as well. And I suppose, yes, it was just that sense of they came from a time before – there was just that sense of an ancient presence there all the time, and a monumentality about them, I suppose.

ND: I wondered if we could talk a little bit about social class. One of the things I've been coming up against again and again in a whole range of writers that feature the North East in their work, is this idea of social class and that really the North East that they write about tends to be a working-class North East, or it's very tied to a working-class identity. It seems to me that in your work this idea of coming from a working-class background is important, and the risks that come with that as well. There are a number of families, often on the fringes of your work, but who are really negatively affected by the hard industrial work that they

do. In *Clay* for instance, Mouldy's Dad is killed in an industrial accident. Is that idea of class something you're very conscious of as you're writing about the North East?

DA: I think it wasn't at first, but it automatically became that in some ways, when I began to write about the kind of characters I write about, who are very similar to people I grew up with and parts of my family. When I began to do this, I felt a responsibility to do it properly and to do it to show that the old working class wasn't this monolithic, mono-cultural thing, that actually it was very complex and very complicated and that the people themselves were very complicated, they weren't just tough, or just dour or whatever, that there was a massive richness in them and in their own vocabulary and their own emotional condition. I wanted to stress the complexity of it, and also to stress that people tried to define the working class as being the coalmining tradition or the shipbuilding tradition, but that all those things went together with all kinds of other stuff at the same time. I mean, in my family there were all kinds of people, like I say, I had a printer in the family, my Dad was an office manager at an engineering works. My Dad was very aware of lifting himself out of the working class, so those tensions about class were very present in my own family actually.

ND: And is that something then that faces you as a writer then, because that can be an occupation that can also remove you from that class or change your perspective on that class, or that class's perspective on you.

DA: Northern writing's filled with all those kind of tensions isn't it. You become educated and you begin to write and suddenly you find, oh, I'm separated from it. I was massively influenced by Tony Harrison, the poet, his writing about his family and about his writing in the 'Songs of Eloquence' poems were a big influence on me. But again, when I began to write the stories in *Counting Stars*, I didn't feel I could write about people without them being able to read it themselves. I felt I had a duty to write something, if I was going to write, say, about my Uncle Billy who's a welder, then I felt he should be able to read whatever I wrote about him. It was the same with my sisters and brother, they are all in *Counting Stars*, so they were the first readers of it. I wanted to make sure



that they could read the stuff that I was writing because one of the things I hate about a lot of English writing is the way that it'll pretend to be about what is seen as the lower classes, the lower orders, but it removes itself from those lower classes, it looks down on them. It effects to describe them, to characterise them, but it's not put in a form that those people could read themselves.

ND: I've read an essay about the Ashington painters, who were pitmen painters, about the difficulty that they found in getting their work exhibited. There was this idea that pitmen are all very fine as a subject of a painting, but the pitmen themselves surely can't be painting these? It doesn't have a worth in and of its own culture, it has to be something seen from outside. Is it a conscious attempt to keep it readable by the people you're writing about?

DA: It can't be too conscious or you would just get into all kinds of kinks. But it was certainly something, and I still feel that I have a duty, if I'm going to write about someone then it should be in a form that they should be able to read themselves. Which is one of the things I suppose which is true about being a children's writer, that you can't write about children and be a children's writer if they can't read it themselves. There's a sense that, if I say I'm a writer, in my voice, people who don't know me immediately think they know what I write about, and how I write. You get characterized straight away, as soon as you open your mouth and speak like I do. In order to do what I've done I had to go through all the kind of things that the pitmen painters did. I remember talking to some agents, fifteen years ago, and some of the comments they would come out with were quite breathtaking.

ND: Dismissive?

DA: Dismissive and, 'Oh yeah, I've got a few Northern writers, I don't need another one,' which was literally said to me. It was just breathtaking in the way people typify what you're going to be just from the way that you speak. It still happens in this country, and I know that writers from here still have that battle to fight and to win. One of the things I'm really proud of is that, I've done it using

this language, and using this place and using these characters, and I hope opened it up a little bit.

ND: You mentioned before about a desire on your part to write against this idea that North East identity is monolithic and monochrome. I've noticed in your work that you take some of these, what might be seen as stereotypical images, almost iconic elements of a North East image, but there's a sense that you're almost reworking or re-forging them. For instance, I've noticed in your novels that the children dig down into the ground, and things come out of the ground, and coal recurs as a motif in certain pieces. In a lot of them they find dens and caves, and if they don't go into actual mines they're still digging down and taking things out of there. To me it seems the way you're writing about it there's an extra depth to it. I'm thinking for instance in *Kit's Wilderness* when he's talking to his granddad and his granddad's talking about having been a pitmen. There's this symbol of the coal, the pony, the carved coal, all of that. His granddad's talking about the fact he was a time-traveller, and the place it takes him back to, it's not just about reclaiming that industrial heritage, it's actually about getting back in touch with a prehistoric place, and the stories that come out of that are prehistoric.

DA: I remember writing all that stuff in *Kit* and it was just such a huge thrill to realise what I was dealing with. I thought, 'Oh, it's coalmines, coalmines, coalmines,' and then I thought, 'Well, that's what people would say you would write about.' But actually it's such a bloody huge metaphor for all kinds of stuff that it just came as this huge gift. Coal mining's usually just written about in terms of the industrial heritage but it's got all these other massive implications as well, and it was wonderful to be able to take it and use it in this way.

ND: Of course there's a whole culture which has been, to a lot of people, voiceless really, but it still exists here in the North East, that goes along with coalmining – a fantastic musical and literary culture that goes along with it as well. Another area which I'm interested in where I think your work departs from other work that's gone before is the way that you represent gender. For instance, the children in your novels, almost always the boy has a strong relationship with

a girl. In the work of someone like Westall, it's quite rare for that to happen, or for it to happen on an equal footing. Is that something you're conscious of when you're writing?

DA: When I began to write the books following on from *Counting Stars* up to what I'm doing now, all the way through the women and the girls were just as important as the boys and the men, and maybe that's something to do, again, with my background. Growing up in a big family, the women were incredibly strong. They were the storytellers and they were the ones who held things together while the guys went out to work, and the women stayed at home. Also I had lots of sisters, I had four sisters, so there was a very feminine background that I grew up in I suppose. And also, one of the things I did become conscious of was again to do with that sense of a monolithic North East. The monolithic North East is portrayed as being big strong guys, strong men, and one of the things I remember about some of my uncles who worked in really heavy industry like on the shipyards and down on the river was, yes they were big strong men, but they were also incredibly tender. I think one of the things that's been missed out in so much of the supposed recording of what life was like, was that tenderness. I wanted to emphasise that, and when I was writing *Kit's Wilderness* and writing Kit's grandfather, as he began to talk, I didn't consciously push him to do that, but I thought, through this character I can show that here's a guy who's worked in a tough occupation but he's actually bright, he's clever, and he's also very tender. So it was too with, on the one hand portraying girls as being, strong and brave and interesting, and the women, but also suggesting that men have got a feminine side as well.

ND: I think that comes across in a lot of the male adult figures but again there are moments like that with your male central child figures as well. In *Clay*, for instance, it seemed to me there's that tension between Stephen Rose and Davie that borders on the, perhaps not exactly sexual, but there's an emotional tenderness and closeness there.

DA: That's right.

ND: And there's this idea that Stephen Rose is really reaching out for that. He kisses him at one point I think?

DA: Yes, he does. It's maybe, comparing myself with someone like Westall, it's maybe something to do with growing up in the Sixties. Lots of changes happened, feminism, gay rights, all that has an impact. I became a teenager in 1964 – lots of changes going on, so your sense of your self was very different from the sense of my father's generation's self. And also being post-war, the fact that we grew up without the threat of war, until we realised that there was a huge threat of war, it had a big effect on us, that you didn't need to portray yourself as being tough and hard. Of course, lots of people still did. Also education maybe damped down some of the strongly masculine traits that preceded it, for that generation. But I do think growing up in the Sixties helped. Just simple things like people had long hair, people would touch each other more.

ND: Even in the North East?

DA: Even in the North East. In fact, there's a review by Nick Tucker of *The Fire-Eaters* a very sniffy review. He said, 'I'm sure people didn't say "I love you" quite as much as that in the Sixties in Newcastle.' Ha ha.

ND: I wondered whether maybe we could talk a bit about Westall here again. It's this idea of history and time. One of the things I've noticed in a lot of writers, Westall one of them, is that there seem to be particular moments in time that really shape their writing about the North East. I see it as shaping it in two ways really. Firstly, there are particular periods in time that they see as key moments of becoming for North East identity, so they feel drawn to write about them. Secondly, there are also the moments in time in which they're writing as well, and the impact that has. As an example, I think for Westall, he's drawn to the nineteenth century, or he's drawn to write about the war. Also the fact that he was growing up during the Second World War, and then that he was coming-of-age immediately after that, that sense of a late modern or post-modern world, the fact that stability was breaking down a little bit, I think these really shaped his

writing. Are you conscious of there being particular moments in time that seem to be really important, in terms of the North East?

DA: It's not a moment I guess, it's a process, but the industrial decline, the effect that had on the landscape and on people's consciousness. Especially the changes on the River Tyne, the river itself, the closing down of all the shipyards, the disappearance of the coalmines, all of that was very important to me, and still is. I keep getting drawn back to that, my landscapes are filled with that, my landscapes are all about industrial decline I guess.

ND There's a lot of dereliction.

DA: A lot of dereliction.

ND: And wastelands.

DA: Yes, yes. And fragments of the past, that people keep trying to reassemble but actually it never quite works, it lasts for a moment. For me it's certainly been interesting because you show that actually everything doesn't disappear, that you just scratch around a little bit and it's still there. It's the permanence of the past. A lot of kids now don't realise that there were ever coalmines in the North East. So, it's a way of explaining ourselves to ourselves, that the world now didn't appear out of nothing. It grew from all these fragments of past times and of lots of activity by lots of people.

ND: Is it hard to write about the North East now and not have that sense of bleakness in it?

DA: I find a lot of writing about kids now to be quite bleak and quite cynical really. I mean, the first screenplay that was done for *Skellig* for instance, I just thought was incredibly cynical. It didn't get the fact that my work emphasises that there is hope, and that things do cohere and things do last. It just took a very cynical view of what kids were like, what the attitudes between the generations were like, what the landscape was like. I think one of the ways you get optimistic

is by looking back at the past and saying, we still have bits of this, we still have fragments of it, and it's not an entirely new world. Things can keep on improving, and that people can actually get on together, parents and children and teachers and kids can get on, that the idea of a society still matters and we can still have a society. I'm not nostalgic for what it was like when I was a kid, but also I'm not negative about what the world's like today. I'm very optimistic about kids today – I'm very optimistic about education for instance, where some people are constantly saying how dreadful things are, because also I can see some of the terrible things about the past. So I am quite, I suppose, temperamentally fairly optimistic.

ND: As you were talking about that there, I couldn't help thinking about *Heaven Eyes*, where you've got children coming from a very difficult background, some of which as a result of the culture of the North East breaking down and families breaking down, but going on this fantastic journey down to the Black Middens, and down to a place that itself is drenched in this industrial heritage in the old printing works. They're surrounded by fractured warehouses and all of this, but taking something from that very positive – and also, as they're leaving it, of course all of the regeneration which is going on at the same time. Perhaps that particularly strikes home with me because that's where *Seven Stories* of course is, exactly in that place. I wanted to ask you about regeneration – is that something that informs your work, because you're writing at a time when the North East is in one of its phases of regeneration?

DA: Yes, it's been hugely regenerated. I think so much is fantastic, some of the regeneration has been really well done, and better done than it was in the Sixties in lots of ways. Some of the regeneration that went on in the Sixties was built on sand. Of course some of this will prove to be built on sand as well, some of it won't work out. Newcastle seems to have this ability to keep on changing itself, and to keep on moving forwards. And now being NewcastleGateshead is fantastic for me, coming from Gateshead, we've got the Sage on the Gateshead side. I'm not nostalgic, you know I love the North East but I also have a hatred for lots of the North East as well. The things about Northern chauvinism which I just detest when I think about the Geordie nation – I think so much of it is just

sentimental claptrap. I think it's great that you walk around Newcastle, now even walk around Hexham, and you hear American voices, you hear Eastern European voices. When I was a kid you heard none of that, all you heard was Geordie voices and if anybody spoke that didn't come from round here then everybody turned around and looked at them, and there's still places where that happens. I think sometimes it's cloistered and inward-looking and sometimes really pretty nasty.

ND: Often in your fiction there's a sense that the children can communicate backwards in time, with the dead that have been there. Is that important? Is that simply to do with an idea of the history that lies beneath?

DA: I think it's probably also to do with being brought up as a Catholic. If you grow up in a big family you see quite a lot of death, but the attitude was always, well, they're not actually gone, they're still around and we'll get to see them again some time – so there was always that sense of even when someone was dead that things continued. It was very nice to do that inside this North-Eastern setting, because then you go round the world and it happens everywhere of course – people talk to their ancestors, people talk to the dead. For a writer, what a great gift to be able to use it and to have kids talking to dead people like Kit and John Askew in coalmines talking to dead people. It's that sense of the presence of the dead, it's not believing in ghosts or anything. It's something to do with time, and again the nature of storytelling. What do stories do, they speak to us now but they draw on things from the past, and they speak to the future.

ND: I wondered if we could talk specifically about childhood, and what is particular about North East childhood. The North-East children in your novels often talk about a desire to get out of the place, and escape it. I'm thinking about characters like Ally in *Kit's Wilderness*.

DA: I suppose a lot of that reflects the tension in me. All my generation have gone away now, I see my old friends away from the North East, or we all come from somewhere else to the North East. But when we were growing up, if somebody had said, who'll be the person to move away, they would all say well,

David, David'll be the one that goes away. Maybe thinking about staying and leaving reflects something about me – that in order to write about it, you have this tension, on the one hand you love it and you feel attached to it, and on the other hand you want to break free of it. When I was writing about Ally who says she wants to go, she really represented something about me, the desire to leave, to transcend it.

ND: And you did go, of course, didn't you, for a time?

DA: I did, yes, I went away to university and then went away again. So it reflects something about my life. I certainly needed to go away imaginatively, I needed to be some other kind of writer before I became this kind of writer, and also to go away and then to come back again physically. Flannery O'Connor, the Southern States writer, writes about that as well, the desire to just kick it all off and say, 'It's nothing to do with me,' and the inability to do that, that it just keeps holding you and holding you. When I was writing *Counting Stars*, I put a little bit at the front when I finished it about the fact that in some ways it is to do with reconstructing the past, with putting together things that are fragmented.

ND: I notice you've mentioned quite a few times *Counting Stars*. It seems to be a text that you come back to, and also the most autobiographical. I've seen images and ideas in those stories that seem to germinate in some of the later novels as well. Do you think about it like that? Was it almost like little seedlings put in place there that then have grown?

DA: Certainly that's how it worked. It wasn't something I thought about, but that book was just the crucial book for me, because it allowed me to write about the North East, it allowed me to write about Catholicism, about my family, it allowed me to find a style which I liked which somehow embodied Northern rhythms. Then it led me to the point where I became a children's writer, because it was after writing *Counting Stars* that I became a writer for children. That book was crucial and as I was writing it I knew it was going to really matter to me, but I didn't quite know in what way. Looking back and thinking about the things that I write now, everything is in that book.



ND: We mentioned earlier as well, how many of your characters are marginalised, they're on the margins of society – and we could argue that childhood is often a marginalised state as well. Is there something also about the North East being a marginalised place? Is there a parallel there between these children on the margins of society and the North East on the margin of Britishness?

DA: I do think there is, because if you come from here and you're a writer and you say you're a writer, and you stay here, you're always aware of being marginal. Thinking about crucial moments in history, the thing about St Cuthbert was really crucial to me as well, because Cuthbert and Celtic Christianity was right on the fringes, and for a long time I really associated myself with Cuthbert. I thought of saying prayers in the sea at the furthest flung corner of Christendom. Yes, you have that sense of isolation and of distance from some kind of heartland. Thinking about *Counting Stars*, the overall title of that sequence which I'm still writing is 'Stories from the Middle of the World', and it was saying, 'Look, this seems like the margin but actually, this is actually the middle of the world.'

ND: This is something that a lot of postcolonial writers and postcolonial theorists talk about, moving the centre, changing, moving from the margin into the centre.

DA: I definitely have that feeling of the centre is wherever you write about, especially if it's your home as well, and it's where you grew up. I didn't feel particularly English in lots of ways, often because of some of the comments that were made by agents that I tried. I had this sense of launching appeals to London with my work, and actually never getting anywhere until in the end I just thought, ah bugger it, this is where I am, this is what I write about, and this is how I write – and I'm going to show you how good it can be. So it was that dogged, cussed thing of saying, 'I'm not coming to you, I'll just stay here.' That makes me feel quite marginalised sometimes, which has maybe got something to do with why I write about fringe characters, but I think it's also to do with the thought that people on the fringes of society might have quite a lot to offer, and

that they go there because they're having some kind of more profound experience than the rest of us are. Certainly as a teenager I used to think like that, and admire people who travelled away imaginatively or spiritually and jumped over the edge and then they came back, and said, 'Oh, this was what it was like.' Maybe it's to do with being very grounded in a place that, if you feel very grounded then you're happy to contemplate what it's like not to be so grounded, to be out in the dangerous places.

ND: So are these people like McNulty, and the children in *Heaven Eyes*, for instance?

DA: Yeah, yeah. I suppose it's also to do with Catholicism. When I was writing about McNulty, to me he was a saint, he was an old Catholic saint. If you look at saints' life stories, loads of them were like McNulty.

ND: You mentioned Cuthbert before, and I'm really interested that you mentioned that because Westall was really drawn to write about Cuthbert, and William Mayne as well wrote a book called 'Cuddy.' I know you haven't featured Cuddy explicitly, but saints have come out of the mud and that's a similar kind of image.

DA: That's right. Cuthbert, the saint coming out of the mud in *Heaven Eyes* is Saint Cuthbert, that's where that came from.

ND: And he's a working man, importantly.

DA: A working man, that's right, yes. Actually I think, I can't remember now but some of the exact lines in that description of them pulling him out of the mud in *Heaven Eyes* come straight out of St Bede's 'Life of St Cuthbert'. I've got half a novel next door, that I abandoned just before I started writing *Counting Stars*, which is called 'The Miracles of St Cuthbert'. I was writing, for a year, a novel about St Cuthbert, and Lindisfarne. I was researching Lindisfarne, I was researching the Synod of Whitby, and then went to see the Skelligs, so *Skellig* grew out of all my thinking about islands and about St Cuthbert specifically. It's

not apparent there, but actually, thinking about St Cuthbert had a massive effect on *Skellig*, and then on *Heaven Eyes*, and I think on lots of my work – and I think on my sense of the North East, and the idea that the North East isn't just this failing industrial place, but it's actually got this huge tradition which goes right back to crucial moments in world history.

ND: And a sense of showing, in fact, that industrial pride and the fact that the North East became really the powerhouse for the industrial revolution in the UK. Is there a sense of trying to show that perhaps grew out of the fact that this has always been a magical place, it's always been a spiritual place?

DA: Absolutely. When I was writing things like in *Heaven Eyes* about St Cuthbert, I was also making a point, and I always wish I'd made it a bit more explicitly, that actually one of our first great English writers lived just round the river from where *Heaven Eyes* was taking place, and wrote some of the first great English books. So we're not just this industrial place, we've got this great literary tradition which is to do with St Bede, St Cuthbert. Also, I felt really connected to Irish writing through thinking about Cuthbert and about Lindisfarne. Of course, my work's full of Irish names, and that's to do with my Catholic heritage as well. I was wanting to emphasise that as well, this is England, but actually it's got massive connections with a Celtic, Irish past, which is probably just as important as our connections with supposedly mainstream English culture.

ND: Certainly there's a link there between that and that spiritual sense as well. We've touched on this earlier on when talking about storytelling, but something that comes across again and again in your work is this idea that stories themselves can actually change reality.

DA: Yeah.

ND: They can actually call something into being, and that comes across in, for instance, *Kit's Wilderness*, when he writes the story.

DA: It is something that I keep on using, and actually I'm finishing a book at the moment, and in order to make something happen in the book, the person writes a story about it, to make it happen. The faith in storytelling as a fundamental human act has grown and grown the more I've written, and probably the more I've written for children as well. It may be a childish thing in itself to believe that a story can change the world, can affect the world, but if you think about the first myths that were told, the first stories that were told, they weren't just told to describe the world, they were told to actually make the world do what the story said that it would do. Like, you know, the crops would grow because certain words were spoken in a certain order. So stories have always had, have been given, some kind of magical significance. And it's just a great thing to use, for me as a writer. I think again it's maybe to do with Catholicism, where certain words spoken in certain ways will produce magical results. You know, the whole of the Mass is about that, the whole of going to Confession is about that, saying prayers is about that, so it maybe comes from that as well. Often, I know when I'm writing well and I'm moving towards something that really matters in a story, it almost becomes like an incantation or a ritual, and I can feel myself slipping into an almost ritualistic mode in the words, and I think, 'Oh, something's going to happen here.' So I guess it come from all of those things, the belief in ancient stories, that they were given this power – that stories really matter to all of us, that a story told well to another person can change their consciousness. And also, ritualistic uses of language can bring about magical changes.

ND: You mentioned incantations; in *Secret Heart* he goes to that place and he calls out that incantation to try to make things come into being. Also I think there's a resonance of it in songs that are sung; in *Kit's Wilderness*, his Granddad sings 'When I was young and in me prime', and then in *The Fire-Eaters*, the mother sings about 'The Keel Row'. Is there a sense, I wonder, that you're almost writing a new sort of mythic North East, that you're mythicising the place?

DA The thing about songs and stuff, like when I wrote the Mum singing in *The Fire-Eaters*, it's like trying to get that lyricism, that magical movement in the

language, and using Geordie-speak, using Northern language, but using it in a way that transcends just the ordinary - but it is ordinary.

ND: Is that something that you see as almost essential about Geordie – that it's a very, lyrical, poetic language, a very musical dialect. You say writing in that voice frees you. Is it perhaps because there's a poetry in there that you can tap into?

DA: I think there is, I do, and it's to do with the way Northern, Geordie sentences flow, the syntax. But it's also to do with the nature of the voice, and also some of the words. When I wrote *Clay*, I did huge riffs on 'nowt', and I thought, 'Gosh, how lovely to be just using 'nowt.' And people will often say, 'Well, why did you write a particular thing in *Clay*?' and I say, 'Well, because I wanted to write 'nowt' lots of times.'

ND: Is that where he says, 'Nowt, nowt, bliddy nowt nowt'?

DA: That's right, yeah, and it was like some kind of Sartrean thing, 'Being and Nothingness' – but I'm using 'Being and Nowtness', on the one hand as a kind of playful thing, but also a very serious thing, saying, 'This language, which is marginalised and often being looked down on, actually contains huge poetry and huge power, if it's used in the right way.'

ND: There's one bit in *Clay*, where his friend, when he sees Stephen Rose is making the figure, says, 'Who's this, Saint Buggerlugs?' I thought, there's no other way you could say that. And similarly, there was that scene on the beach when Bobby and Joseph are making up and he says, 'Hadaway and shite.' That's a similar thing, there's nothing that could capture it in the same way.

DA: I remember writing that phrase in *The Fire-Eaters*. I felt great joy in writing it in this book that I knew was going to be reviewed by serious reviewers, and there they were reading a book which contained, 'Hadaway and shite.' I thought, 'Oh, fantastic.'

ND: Another idea that seems important is evolution, particularly in the way that often the children, especially these really native children, see themselves as half-human things, fishy-froggy things, things that are almost primal themselves in their actual physical form. Is that tied to the idea about angels as well, perhaps that's a similar process?

DA: I think what they're doing is saying, 'You know we might be angelic, but we're also blood and guts, and we're also beasts, we're also fishy-froggy things, we're all these things together.' A lot of my writing is about the physicality of people, of the body. I remember when I was writing *The Fire-Eaters*, the bit when she takes the frog out and exposes the frog's heart and everything, which is obviously about the human heart as well – just that emphasis on saying this is the body and it is beautiful. Again maybe that's something to do with reacting against the sense in some Catholic stuff about the important thing about us being the soul, the spirit, whereas one of the amazing things about us is this incredible body. Also kids just love physical things. When I was writing *Kit's Wilderness*, when they cut their thumbs and become blood brothers, all that stuff about blood and skin and flesh and bone, really matters to me. And also the words associated with it are just so great, and lots of it is to do with the words – the language of the body is just so lovely, very physical words, blood, bone, flesh, skin.

ND: Visceral?

DA: Very visceral, lovely, and you can't get away, you can't attempt to write about bone in any other word except bone. Then you say it in this voice and it sounds lovely as well. I think about my books as bodies, and when they're digging into the body, into the ground, they're digging into the body, or into the mind. The books to me feel very physical.

ND: There is also that figure then of Clay, where a body is created, built and brought to life. I do have a question about *Clay*. I remember when I spoke to you a while ago, you were talking about *Clay* and it coming to being made into a film, and you made this really intriguing comment which I haven't stopped thinking about since. I was asking you about when you see the finished product,

does it ever feel finished, and you said, 'There's something in it, not that I got wrong, but that I wanted to change. But don't worry, we'll get it in the film.' Do you know what it is?

DA: I think I do, yes. We didn't get it in the film actually. The body needed some writing on it, somewhere on the body.

ND: Is that linked to this idea about incantations, calling it into life?

DA: That's right, and also like the Golem, when the Jewish Rabbi produced a golem in Prague, and put the name of God on its brow. In the book, what they should have done is put their names on him somehow, Davie and Stephen, so that it wasn't the name of God, but it was the names of two boys.

ND: That's really fascinating, and seems to talk all about living texts and the way that text comes to life.

DA: I'm really interested in that. I've got a great image that I'll use some time, an Islamic thing about eating words, actually eating text.

ND: I know you've said before that you didn't really read Westall for instance as you were growing up, and you weren't really aware of his work. Did you feel yourself writing within a tradition of writers from the region? Is there a sense that you think, 'I'm writing about this place on the shoulders of people who've gone before'?

DA: You know, I don't really. No, the only one I've thought of in that way was St Bede but he's so long ago and so different. Certainly when I was writing that novel which used the St Cuthbert stories, I was aware of using Bede, and again when I wrote the bit in *Heaven Eyes* about discovering the saint, I reread lots of St Bede again. When I think of, 'Whose shoulders am I writing this on?' I think about people like Flannery O'Connor from the Southern States, William Goyen who was a Texan writer, who, talking about the incantation of language, did fantastic things with incantatory language from the Southern states, Texan

dialect. And writers like Marquez, and Seamus Heaney. I learnt loads from Heaney about how to write about childhood, ordinary childhoods and ordinary places. Tony Harrison. This isn't one coherent tradition. Westall, I never felt that close to. I mean I never read his work, and when I began to write about the North East didn't read his work. Then I read some and admired it but didn't feel that close to it.

ND: Earlier, you said about the fact that you felt writing in this voice and from this place freed you. But there's also a sense you're creating the place again, and your readers are reading about it and it's forming their images of what the place is. Is that something that you feel a responsibility about as well?

DA: I feel a responsibility to the stories, to make the stories the best that I can. I don't create the North East, I create a kind of imaginary place that looks pretty much like the North East. I want to produce the best imaginary North East that I can, so that people will look at it and read it and see something and maybe, if they come here, they might see bits of my work reflected in what they're looking at. But it's not the same thing, it's fiction. I suppose in lots of ways I feel like part of an Irish tradition, which is maybe to do with being a South Tyneside Catholic, growing up with the Kellys and the Flynns, but also feeling really close to lots of Irish writers that I've really liked and enjoyed.

ND: Do you think there's something there about that sense of being marginalised from the mainland?

DA: Yeah, I really recognise that, that's how it feels a lot of the time, that it is in a different place somehow. It might be people feel that about any locality.

ND: Yes, maybe, but it seems to me so ingrained in North East identity, you know?

DA: Yeah. I mean there's dangers in it, there's social danger in it – feeling on the one hand alienated, on the other hand very exclusive, 'We're better than



everybody else,' this awful Geordie nation claptrap. But also it can bring big benefits. Certainly to me it has.

ND: If childhood itself has become globalised to some extent, what does that mean for a sense of regional belonging? Especially for a child, probably their world is much more geographically limited than the adult's world. Of course, now once you go on the internet, you can go anywhere you want to be instantaneously. Is this part of the magical and post-modern sense that comes across in your writing about the region? That the region can't be as limited as it was?

DA: It can't be now, can it? Children's worlds now are so different. Freya's growing up here so she sees this as her world, but actually through that and through this, the world's everywhere, you can travel all over the place. Maybe it is to do with my sense of locality when I was a kid, and feeling very not tightly bound, not feeling cloistered at all, not feeling hemmed in. And then to write about it now, in 2008.

ND: In the sense that you had freedom? Even though it was rooted and within one particular place, but still there was a freedom there.

DA: Oh yeah, we had massive freedoms, compared with what we allow Freya. And it's one of the things that kids'll often comment on about my work, 'But they just go out!' We had massive freedoms – from the time I was fourteen we used to go for weekends to Seahouses, just me and my friends, we'd just go up and camp in the dunes and have this huge freedom just to wander. Often writing feels like that, just like you're wandering about the countryside, wandering about the landscape. Maybe that's one of the reasons that I write for children, it feels like being a kid again. I've got this landscape in my head and I just walk across it, make stories around it and through it. If there'd been CCTV cameras on me as a kid, and on my friends as a kid, as there are now, people would have been pretty horrified what they saw, and what our parents allowed us to do. We had massive freedom – it was restricted in some ways, but physically we had much more liberty.

ND: I'm very conscious of these materials that are here. Could we talk a little bit about the actual writing process, and how you work towards putting it together? I'm particularly interested in how images of place and people develop through the writing process – but really anything about how you write, how you go about writing, how it develops.

DA: I do lots of scribbling and use lots of notebooks and things and I'm very messy in the first stages. I suppose I just become progressively tidier and more organised as it moves towards being a finished thing and I make massive changes in things. I don't know if any of these will demonstrate it. [REFERS TO DRAFT MATERIALS TO ILLUSTRATE] When I got this out, I was amazed, I'd forgotten about this. This is a notebook with, actually, longhand pages, which I never do now. But also pages like that. I change names, see he was called Caley there.

ND: This is Askew isn't it, of course?

DA: Askew, yes. So I do a lot of that. You see, I haven't seen any of this for years. I remember doing this because I got stuck and I thought I'll just try writing it out in longhand – but I hardly ever write a page like that in longhand. You see, that's, 'We came to Stoneygate because Grandma died and Grandpa was left. Mam and Dad said this would be a great place for us.' So that's not how the final version was.

ND: As a researcher, it's fantastic to work with material like this. Often it's about tracing simple things, like tracing colours of ink through different parts of the text, trying to match it up. Looking at what's seemingly just been placed side by side but might actually have influenced the thought process at some point. Is it hard to discard parts of it?

DA: Not really, not when it's obvious what needs to go. It can be really liberating just to throw out huge sections. I spend most time on the beginnings. So with *Kit* I did the beginning umpteen times. I kept throwing it away and

throwing it away. For a long time it was called 'Quiet Michael in the Wilderness'.

ND: 'Quiet Michael'?

DA: 'Quiet Michael', because I had a character I thought was really important called 'Quiet Michael' – but he wasn't.

ND: And he's absent from the finished text?

DA: He's absent, yes. He wandered around the river. I can't remember, but he was quite significant. He was a big guy, who wandered back and forward along the riverbank, and maybe somehow drew the characters together – but it didn't work.

ND: So would you find that you were working in this phase for quite a while? Purely working on this, or would you be working on typing up as well?

DA: I usually keep the computer there, so I'm usually working on the computer at the same time. I think I wrote those out pretty much as they are there, and put them on the computer screen, which I hardly ever do now. I usually scribble, go onto the screen, and do it like that. The book I'm writing now is much more directly onto the screen.

ND: How does it feel, going back to look at this material, with a book that's finished? Is it different looking at this material than looking at the material for one you're working on at the moment, or does this still feel like living text?

DA: Yeah, it still feels alive. Except you've got the finished book at the end of it. It's helpful to look at it, because you see how it's always hard, because you have to make so many changes to find the first sentences. You know, 'We played the game in the wilderness that stretches down towards, blah blah blah,' – god, I wrote that? But then it starts with, 'In Stoneygate there was a wilderness.'

Suddenly, that's how I do it! The process of getting that sentence actually can be a very long process, to find the first sentence.

ND: And is that about the rhythm of it?

DA: Yeah, it's got to get the right rhythm. And sometimes it comes very early on, like with *Skellig* or with *The Fire-Eaters*, it came very fast. But most of the other books, you just keep going in and going in and going in. It's not this huge struggle, but it takes time and concentration.

ND: You've talked about the pleasure of seeing the printed word on the page. Is it nice then to ink on it as well, and add to it?

DA: Oh yeah. The process of scribbling.

ND: The other thing I was going to ask about was about the role of the editor. Some writers that we have in the archive at Seven Stories you can really see that it was a partnership, a relationship that really informed and shaped the writing. But I've been given the sense that actually the nature of the author-editor relationship has changed quite a lot, partly from commercial interests, perhaps editors aren't in their role as long as they used to be, or it's more of a marketing job. How does that work with you?

DA: When I first started with these books I had a great editor, for *Skellig*, *Kit*, *Heaven Eyes*, *Counting Stars*, and then she started having children, as editors do. But the relationship there was really important to me, and she understood lots about me and got my work. She made some great suggestions, she was really helpful with *Kit's Wilderness*. I like to be edited, as long as I like the editor, and trust them. I know some writers won't, they refuse to be, and I think they're daft really, because there are some really good editors around. I do think the relationship's really important. I would never send anything to an editor that I didn't feel myself was just about there. I know some writers do, and want their editors to act as an almost equal partner, so they almost say, 'Oh, well I've got something here, will you have a look at it, see what you think I've got?' It's the

writer's job to know what they've got, and then to work to tone it and hone it with an editor.

ND: So is it like you hew it out of the coalface, then polish it?

DA: That's right, and you rework it and get it. Then I think, 'That's just about there, near as damn it.' If you've got somebody that you really trust, they work with you as a first reader, and they'll go through and point up stuff. With Isabelle, often she would point at something and as soon as she pointed at it I was aware when I wrote it, I thought, 'Oh, gosh, yes I remember that.' That's what a good editor does, reminds you about little slippages. I'm working with a new editor at the moment for this book that I'm finishing now. With Walker Books I've got a great editor there, Jane, who was very helpful with my first Walker Books book, 'My Dad's a Birdman.'

ND Are you working with Walker Books now then?

DA: I'm working with two publishers, I'm working with Walker and with Hodder. The novel I'm doing now is for Hodder, it comes out in November, and I've got a book with Walker, I've got another book coming out with Walker in April, and then another one coming out with them next year.

ND: Is that *The Savage*, the first one?

DA: *The Savage* comes out in April. I've got a proof of that I think. That's illustrated by Dave McKean who's something else really.

ND: Almost a perfect partnership, I would have said.

DA: When I finished it I thought, 'Oh, Dave McKean.' And when Walker got it, they said, 'Ah, Dave McKean!' And Dave McKean got it, and he thought, 'Oh, I'll do that.' So we're really pleased. Not long until it comes out, there'll be proofs out soon.

ND: So he's living in Burgess Woods, is he living in the North East, or is it unspoken?

DA: It's unspoken. It is the North East, but it's not a named place. It's a bit more rural than a lot of the stuff, a bit more like here I suppose.

ND: I felt that with 'Secret Heart', it was less explicitly tied to the North East, but to me it was the North East.

DA: I know where that is – that's actually beside where the Angel of the North is, you know the slope that goes down to the waterway there, and then it goes up again on the other side into County Durham. So it's a kind of sylvan version of Springwell, Wreckington.

ND: And Keely Bay for me, I live in Whitley Bay now and I know it's not Whitley Bay, but it had resonances of that for me, like the beachside cafes and all of that kind of thing. I think I read an interview where you said it was a combination of different villages further up as well.

DA: Yeah, sort of Seaton Sluice, Newbiggin, and there's a place called Hauxley, Low Hauxley, which is the beach itself and the island, there's a lighthouse on the island. Perfect *Fire-Eaters* landscape.

ND: And of course, regarding Whitley Bay, I've been reading *Clay* recently.

DA: Of course, Whitley Bay features in that.

ND: Whitley Bay features in that. And, I don't know if you know that we've moved the Seven Stories collection, to Felling.

DA: To Felling? I didn't know.

ND: Well that's fantastic. That's great, thank you very much.

DA: Good, great.

