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Dave Reeves, *Black Country Dialectics*

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REFERENCES

Dave Reeves, *Black Country Dialectics* (Oswestry : Offa's Press, 2012), 36 p, ISBN 978-0-9565518-3-2

- 1 Dave Reeves has been working as a freelance writer, performer and musician for over twenty years now. He sees himself as a performance poet, and performance is indeed the essence of what he does. He usually performs poetry while accompanying himself on the harmonica or the melodeon. His work has taken him to pubs, workingmen's clubs, literary and rock festivals, and many other places, and his performances never fail to enthrall his audiences. He was once described by a *Times* journalist as a "kind of cultural hired gun around the West Midlands". The adjective "cultural" is quite apposite as Dave Reeves is committed to the Black Country, the area he is from, and to its people. He has been involved in numerous oral history and community writing projects and has produced poems for public art commissions in the West Midlands, where he is well-known as a writer, poet and performer. Over the years, he has been involved in a number of community projects in rural or urban locations. These projects have usually been about a sense of place and about how people relate to their own environment and surroundings. One such project in Sandwell (in the West Midlands) resulted in an exhibition entitled "Beneath4Moons" and involved working with people in residential care homes and with wheelchair users.
- 2 In 2004 Dave worked with the rural community around Craven Arms (in Shropshire) on a project called "Passion for Landscape" and the outcome was an exhibition in which seven artists took part. The exhibition was held at the Secret Hills Discovery Centre, in Craven Arms. Dave Reeves also held a writing residency in the parish of Bomere Heath, in Shropshire. The poet worked with pupils in schools, ran open sessions in the local Post Office, and talked to the locals in their homes.

- 3 From 1995 to 2008 Dave was editor of *Raw Edge Magazine*, a magazine which promoted new writing from the West Midlands, and he currently broadcasts a monthly live literature show over the internet for Radio Wildfire, an online radio station he runs with his son Vaughn Reeves.
- 4 Dave Reeves' latest collection, *Black Country Dialectics* (Offa's Press, 2011), is subtitled "A burlesque in poetry", which is a reference to the eighteenth-century poet William Shenstone's definition of "humour in prose" ("What is termed humour in prose, I conceive, would be considered as burlesque in poetry", *Essays on Men and Manners*, a quotation used in epigraph in the present collection). The word "burlesque" in a literary context refers to devices like parody and satire, and there is plenty of these in Dave Reeves' collection. Indeed *Black Country Dialectics* can be seen as a mischievous evocation of a Black Country childhood, a fond look at a world which was already fading out of existence when the poet was growing up, but whose tenacious working-class culture was still an important element of life in the Black Country. Black country dialect and the working-class culture it conveyed lie at the centre of Reeves' book.
- 5 Reeves' book can be viewed as an attempt at capturing the sounds of dialect as well as the particular world-view this dialect is associated with. The literary device which recurs in many poems is that of the dramatic monologue, which enables the poet to give a voice to the Black Country characters of his childhood like "the barrellfighter" at the "Black Country fayre" or William Perry, known as the Tipton Slasher, a nineteenth-century prize fighter. The Black Country's industrial past is explored in poems like "Unce, ther was grass" or "Stamp Shop". The piece entitled "A Black Country Guide to Computers" is a humorous take on the culture clash between modern technology and the working-class culture of the Black Country. So we learn that in the Black Country, "aardwier" means "buckits" and "galvanised baths", "saftwier" would be "a claensuwt aer a bikini in a blizzerd", and that "ram" is a "woolly thing- wi' 'orns". Through punning and wordplay, Reeves explores the link between language and identity, and the way language functions as the grounding of one's identity.
- 6 "Toad Paradox" is another hilarious look at the intricacies of Black Country dialect with phrases like "Yo' be tode" and "I'll learn yer" or words like "tay" ("tea") which in a working-class context refers to dinner as well as to "isn't" in dialect. Reeves explores "the British caste system" through language and points at the clash between the Black Country culture he was immersed in as a child and the standard English and literate culture he had to absorb at school.
- 7 Reeves has got a keen ear for dialect and obviously takes great pleasure in giving a poetic voice to the people he rubbed shoulders with as a child. For instance, "Vile Ada" takes the form of a dialogue between two Black Country characters who reminisce about someone they once knew:
- Do I know vile Ada?
Yow know vile Ada.
Do I know vile Ada?
Vile Ada: you know. (*Black Country Dialectics*, 29)
- 8 But Reeves' approach eschews the sentimentality and often nostalgic outlook which sometimes mars dialect verse, an easy identification with the past as a time when "things were better".
- 9 In the piece entitled "Saftness", working-class attitudes to book learning and education are examined through the recreation of Black Country speech:

Saftness.

Why do' ya find summat useful to do?

Yo'n allwys gotya yed inna book.

It wo' get ya noweer (*Black Country Dialectics*, 11)

- 10 In an environment where “the's steps t'be srcubbed/Yards t'be swept” (*Black Country Dialectics*, 11), reading was considered as a waste of time as it would give “fowk ideas abuv th' staeshun” and stop them from doing their job.

- 11 Reeves also avoids the pitfall of sentimentality by resorting to a ferocious brand of satire and parody, as in “Saturday Night in Dodge City”, which transplants Black Country culture to the American wild west and turns Billy the Kid into a West Midlands immigrant:

Oi yo' I'm callin' yo' out!

Saturday night in Dodge City

And Billy the Kid is angry.

A pint o' mild an' a bag o' scratchin's luv. (*Black Country Dialectics*, 20)

- 12 Typical Black Country cultural elements like “pork scratchings” (a West Midlands delicacy) find themselves in seemingly outlandish setting until we learn that in the nineteenth century many immigrants to America came from the industrial Midlands.

- 13 Reeves' parodic approach also appears in “The Singularly Entertaining Ballad of AyliQuixote and Sancho Aynuk in which Ayli Quixote Mistakes the Pitheads of the Delph for Giants and Attacks Them”, a send-up on the Don Quixote story, but this time with two local characters, Ayli and Aynuk, two well-known characters from Black Country folklore who represent the common people. This time Ayli Quixote finds himself in the industrial North and has to do battle against “pitheads” that he mistakes for “giants”.

- 14 There is also plenty of pathos in some of these pieces, like Reeves' evocation of the father in “Fayt (Wuss Than Death)”. Based on a pun on the Black Country pronunciation of “feet” (“Fayt”) the father's odorous “fayt” represented for the whole family a worse threat than the “belt behind the kitchen door” which hung from a peg as a “Christ on a cross” or “a head on a stake”, warning the children about the dangers of disobedience.

- 15 “Stamp Shop” looks at the fate of those trapped in dead-end and deafening jobs in the industrial Midlands but who chose to rebel. The persona in the poem dreamt of travelling and collected stamps. As an adult, he had to work in a different kind of stamp shop where:

There's thuds in the morning

Like western front guns

The ground shakes and yer boones shake with it

It knocks the air from yer lungs

Rattles the teeth in yer yed (*Black Country Dialectics*, 31)

- 16 Dave Reeves' collection is accompanied by a CD recorded with and produced by the guitarist Chris Lomas. Poems like “A Black Country Guide to Computers”, “Stamp Shop” and “Toad Paradox” are featured on this CD, which will be an invaluable help to the readers who are not familiar with Black Country dialect. The CD also allows the reader to experience Reeves' art in a performance context, and the interplay between music and poetry works beautifully (for instance on “Saturday Night in Dodge City”). These recordings remind us that Reeves' art can be seen as the continuation of a long tradition of performance poetry in the UK which includes poets like John Agard, Attila

the Stockbroker, John Cooper Clarke, Adrian Henri and the Liverpool poets, Joolz, Roger McGough, and Benjamin Zephaniah among others.

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Mots-clés: communauté, dialecte du Black Country, humour, parody, poésie orale, satire

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