

MEMORIES OF JOHN MILES LONGDEN

By Peter Stockill (after an intro abridged from Andy Croft's in John's book *LP's and Singles*)



John Miles Longden was (as described in the introduction to John's posthumous book *LP's and Singles* – Poems by John Miles Longden - Mudfog (writing from Teesside – Middlesbrough 1995 ISBN 1 899503 10 2.

“one of Teesside's best loved eccentrics.. who wrote more than 5000 poems, mostly untyped and unpublished when he died in 1993. He was born on 30th March 1921 in London. His father worked in the Civil Service, and his grandfather was an accountant in George V'S Royal household (as his great-grandfather had once been employed in Queen Victoria's).



When John was ten the family moved to Middlesbrough and a large house on Thornfield Rd., Linthorpe. He was educated at Friend's School in Great Ayton and then at Middlesbrough High School (where he was editor of the school magazine, secretary of the chess club and secretary of the Literary and Philosophical Society). In 1938 he won a scholarship to study PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) at New College, Oxford. There he found himself drawn into the political excitements of those years, secretary of the Cole Group and editor of the Labour Club weekly paper from 1940 to 1941. In 1940 he joined the Communist Party, to which he remained committed until its dissolution in 1991.

During the war he served in the Signals in India and Burma and engaged in famine-relief work on the Ganges delta. After the war he was employed as a Statistician, first in the Ministry of Fuel and Power, and then at the Medical Research Council. In 1948 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Statistical society. Between 1950 and 1956 he worked as a statistician in Lagos, Nigeria, returning to Britain to work as a research assistant at Cambridge. In 1962 he was appointed Professor of Applied at Cambridge. In 1962 he was appointed Professor of Applied Economics and Statistics at University College, Haile Selassie University, Addis Ababa. Other overseas academic appointments followed – at the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Adelaide, before in 1967, he returned to the North East to work as a Senior Research Assistant at Newcastle University.

It was a distinguished academic career, and yet John was prevented from achieving the success that others expected of him because of desperate ill-health. Suffering from

malaria in India 1943, he was treated with a prohibited synthetic anti-malaria drug, as a result of which he suffered a series of manic-depressive breakdowns. Returning to Teesside in 1968, his last paid employment was as a part-time Glassman in the Talbot Cellar bar in Stockton.



John continued thereafter with his literary pursuits. In 1968 he could be found in the original Purple Onion ‘Caff’ in Bottomley Street, Middlesbrough, sitting in the corner writing his poems as Peter Stockill describes later and as John wrote about after the demolition of central Middlesbrough to make way for the present Cleveland Centre. (see John’s poem on the next page The Ballad of Bottomley Street, which was published in the first Teesside Writers Workshop broadsheet in 1984.

In 1968 John also was a co-founder of The Thornaby Pavilion Poetry group along with Ray Tester, Vincent Mullholland and Norah Hill with (as Norah Hill testifies) *“readings on Sunday afternoons, producing astonishingly large audiences of all ages and backgrounds. Participants read their own work or that of othersk. However none came to the weekday evening groups. There was also a children’s creative writing rgoup and a crèche on Saturday afternoons. And a Children’s poetry competition which had 300 entrants”*

John’s own poetry was *“an idiosyncratic and intensely lyrical poetry of love, landscape and loss”*. He used (and was an expert in classical forms of poetry such as the sonnet, Japanese Haiku, Tanka, Renga and the Elegiacs of Antiquity and also did retreads – especially of Japanese poetry. John innovated with these forms to suit his personal style, combining the Japanese forms into what he called the Trivet (Tripod) of seven Tankas, equivalent to seven Elegaic couplets or one sonnet. A blend of three classical poetic forms from three cultures and periods.

He worked out that ten English syllables are roughly tantamount to the Japanese Haiku / Senryu’s seventeen, or the English hexameter.

John’s spelling may seem eccentric but as John explains *“ I aim at a colloquial tone. I have preferred a Northern English style, by which I mean roughly that of Britain north of Brum. This reflects the development of ur language beyond the limits of the latinized mandarin and computerized cosmopolitan of received royal Britspeak which denatures our tongue.*

To a degree I proffer a foretaste of the continuing evolution of English – terse, elliptic and free of the redundant letter H. This style offers a reminder of the richness of colloquial and Northern speech, and reinforces the conversational tone.”

THE BALLAD OF BOTTOMLEY STREET

Tune - The Mountains of Mourne

Now this is the story a' 4 real McCoys
their mum as 4 childer 'n all on em boys
they was raised in the Masham until their dad died
'n couldn't maintain it for all that they tried
But drop a McCoy 'n e'll land on his feet
'n that's ow they ends up in Bottomley Street

John started a nite Spot the onion it was
but the council did nivver allow it because
their onion was purple a villainous shade
so the sign was unlucky the day it was made
'n nivver a shopper was ready to eat
at the centre a' vice life in Bottomley Street

An onion that's purple as no chance to win
so they maks it a caff as they calls Coffee Inn
the chips is real scrumptious 'n so is the grills
'n some a' the youngsters remembers their bills
F'm 8 to 5.30 the best place to meet
is over a coffee in Bottomley Street

But the council resolves - for the good a' the town
they'll uff 'n they'll puff 'n blow Coffee Inn down
'tis a terrible thing they're decidin to do
to the home a' the muses 'n derelicts too
'n soon the McCoys cannot dally to treat
The ungrly young people round Bottomley Street

So 'ousewives 'n students 'n derries 'n clerks
wen ever you maks them unappy remarks
on ow you could do wi' a caff a' yer own
remember the caff the town all bulldozed down
remeber the friends as you all used to greet
wen guide books taks notice a' Bottomley Street

Now Bottomley Street's be'ind glass double doors
'n the terraces swallered by uge modern stores
the sky is screened off by colossal arcades
ere ousewives parades through the dusk a' the shades
The block as it was is become obsolete
'n there's no Coffee Inn 'n no Bottomley Street.

John L.

*i am but a brick only 50 years old
when i was laid to rest in this
beautiful building i thought i
would last longer, in other towns
old buildings are preserved, i only
needed sand blasting instead i have
been chopped in half and now lie
at the bottom of the pile. the brick
above is 50 too. we wait to be taken
away. i was just going to chat to the
brick who laid next to me it took me
50 years to pluck up the courage. oh well
that's tees-side.
(26,6,84)*

Malcolm L.

John took an active part and made valuable contributions to the developing Cleveland writing scene alongside a small group of writing activists which included Ann Wainwright and Pamela Hutson, Trev Teasdel, Colin Walker, Andy Croft, Gordon Hodgeon, Terry Lawson, Pauline Plummer, Viv Harland and Mel McEvoy, Alyson Perry in the 1980's and Bob Beagrie, Margaret Weir, Richard Briddon, Rebecca O' Rourke, Linda Innes, Mark Robinson, Andy Willoughby in 90's.

John took part in (but did not organise) poetry readings at the Dovecot's Castalians and New Poetry Scene events in the early to mid 80's; chaired and was actively involved with the Community Arts established Teesside Writers Workshop from 1984; joined the committee of the 2nd Write Around (Cleveland's annual writers and readers festival). John also helped encourage young communist poets.

Not everyone on the writing scene took to John however. His incredible intellect and bluntness didn't sit well with new writers in the community struggling to develop and increase their confidence. Sometimes it was necessary for groups to break away as happened with the Teesside Writers Workshop which had been set up as a Community Arts project to encourage writers with little or no experience. Among those who could handle his high academic approach and eccentricity, he was very well respected and loved. The breakaway groups however proved to be a fruitful way of expanding the development of the newly developing Cleveland writing infrastructure. Conflict isn't always negative but can be creative and an indication of the growing complexity and diversification of a writing movement. The best known writing movements were not without differences of ideas and approach but that's often what made them strong.

Outlet Magazine, which began in 1986 as a development base led by Trev Teasdel, actually came out of the breakaway group Write Now and not Teesside Writers Workshop as previously cited in some journals, John was not involved directly but did contribute poetry, did the annual accounting, wrote some 'poetry workshop columns' and kindly arranged for a small donation to be made to Outlet funds from the dissolution of a Community Arts Project. There were conflicts which have been previously papered over and which may have been partly due to John's stress-related problems in his latter years, but nonetheless John always championed and supported these new community writing initiatives, always had a suggestions to make, sometimes a brilliant one. John continued to be heavily involved with the writing scene right up until his death in 1993 and played an important role in it's development.

Octave

the worlds wet wounds lets out their crimson tide
the earth is feverish er flesh is scarred
scabbed maimed 'n poxed er arteries grow ard
'n lemming man achieves is suicide

o for a red death like a butchers bride
featureless tongueless eyeless limbless marred
in war 'n then to lie in state bestarred
'n belted wi' earths universal pride

then all me flesh made light shall day 'n night
pulse through me veins in alternatin skies
maelstroms 'a pearl poisoned wi' splendid dyes
convulsin times space girded citadels

blast to eternity the 7 hells
red

flame

gold

green

lazuli

purple

white ::

*Poona Army Hospital. February 1944. Sonnet written
during a breakdown caused by wrong treatment for
malaria in Bengal.*

MEMORIES OF JOHN LONGDEN

1968 was the year of flower power and demos. Well, that's how the media portrayed it. But for me, an insignificant event happened that year which was to take on immense proportions in my life. Being a typical teenager, I spurned family and sought the company of friends, well one of them. Martin Crass was his name, and he occupies a footnote in my biography, should it ever be written. Actually, that should be two footnotes. One because he vainly attempted to teach me to drive, and secondly because I happened to meet him in the centre of Middlesbrough one afternoon. I failed my driving test, so one footnote can be discounted. But the other footnote still has ramifications in my life that I am still coming to terms with.

Martin was my fellow student at Kirby College of Further Education. My chance encounter with him coincided with a pang of peckishness on his part, and being a typically hard up student, he dragged me into the cheapest cafe he could find.

It was the Purple Onion, otherwise known as Coffee Inn. This archetypal student cafe is now legendary in Cleveland culture, and has long since been demolished and replaced by the Cleveland Centre. Such is my devotion to this hallowed piece of real (or rather unreal) estate that I have taken great pains to work out where it once stood. The Cleveland Centre is a typical down town mega/hyper retail development. Several blocks of

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should be 0-052 of his life story. He gave me a
 streets were demolished to accommodate all the
 shops and stores previously strung out along the
 typical High Street - from Boots and Littlewoods to
 W.H. Smut. Somewhere between the men's trousers and
 the lingerie counter in Littlewoods lies the spot where
 the Purple Onion cafe once stood. As I figure out my
 waist measurement, a shiver goes down my spine as I
 realise that many years before, on that spot a chance
 encounter occurred which changed my life, and I thank
 Martin's impecuniousness for it. His search for the
 cheapest chip buttie in town not only provided him with
 a cheap nosh up, but led to my meeting with the most
 remarkable person I have ever known.

As Martin nibbled, I sipped a cuppa, and as I did
 so I noticed a figure in the corner of the cafe. How I
 engaged him in conversation is now lost in the mists of
 time, but the outcome has resonated down the years.

A portly figure in his forties, he sat scribbling
 in a notebook. A pendant dangled from his neck. Somehow,
 he radiated superiority, and as I was a student, that
 suggested to me that he was a teacher. 'Are you a
 teacher?' I asked, to which he simply replied 'yes'. His
 name was John Longden, and he wasn't a teacher, ^{HE WAS A LECTURER} He
 could have told me that straight away, but being modest,
 he simply concurred with my guess. Upon further enquiry,
 I discovered that he was a lecturer in statistics at
 Newcastle University. But that was only a fraction, or

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should that be 0.05% of his life story. He gave me a story that seemed light years from my experience of life - he was an Oxford graduate and had been a professor at the University of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. As I slurped and listened, my old friend Martin began to diminish in my life and faded away. But my new friend John grew in my life in a way that I could hardly have imagined.

The Purple Onion was owned by the McCoy brothers - Eugene and John. They are a very culinary family, and now own the Cleveland Tontine Inn on the edge of the North York Moors. But in 1968, their epicurian empire did not extend beyond the Purple Onion and the nearby Masham pub. Eugene McCoy, who I knew slightly from Kirby, has in recent years become a television chef, and a judge in cookery contests. But in the 60s, his main claim to fame was part ownership of the Purple Onion. That cafe also has claim to literary history because in the upstairs room, John Longden found a refuge. He spent many hours there working on his poems. The significance of this became apparent to me many years later.

I happened to befriend John at a crucial time in his literary development. He had been writing poems for many years, but only as a sideline to his academic work. However, a recent nervous breakdown had forced him to retire from university life, and he decided to devote himself to writing. John's poems had originally been in fairly standard English, but at about the time I befriended him,

he had come to the conclusion that the future lay in what he called 'exemplary Northern English', a sort of dialect. In the years that followed, John set about adapting his poetry to the new format. It was this work that he began in the upper room of the Purple Onion.

When progress beckoned and the cafe was due to be closed and demolished, it was characteristic of John that he commemorated this by writing 'The Ballad of Bottomley Street', which was published many years later. He also bought a roll of wallpaper, and in a parody of an ancient scroll created a memento of the cafe in which all the regular customers wrote their names.

To my everlasting regret, I only visited the Purple Onion/Coffee Inn a few times. However, I'm glad that I had a foot in the door of the Cleveland literary renaissance before it fully opened. That's always the case one doesn't appreciate a golden age when one is in its midst. The Purple Onion was bohemian - one could stand up in mid chip buttie and spout a poem or twang a guitar. But then, perhaps I'm being pretentious, trying to create an instant mythology along the lines of the beat poets and Greenwich Village. Nevertheless, John Longden remains the nearest Cleveland has come to Allen Ginsberg.

My encounter in the cafe, or caff as John would say has become the stuff of legend. And like legend, it became lost in prehistory - the prehistory of our friends. In later years I discussed with John our first meeting. He couldn't remember meeting me in the Purple Onion.

He said that his first memory of me was from the Linthorpe Hotel, adjacent to Kirby College. However, I can't remember such an encounter. We both made a joke of this - I could remember meeting him in the Purple Onion, but he couldn't. He could remember meeting me in the Linthorpe, but I couldn't. Our first meeting was lost in an historical haze, and it stayed there throughout our friendship, much to our amusement.

Neither of us could agree on our first meeting - caff or pub. But we could agree on our second meeting, some time later, in 1972. We chanced upon each other browsing through the magazines at Smiths. He gave me his address in Marton Road, and invited me to visit him. He warned me that his bedsit was 'possessed by books'.

When I called on him, I found that this was no exaggeration. His room was indeed possessed by books. There were banana boxes from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall serving the purpose of book shelves. There were thousands of books - I didn't know so many could be squeezed into one room, and squeeze they did, along with all of John's other possessions. These included remnants of his ancestral belongings, such as a delightful glass-fronted bookcase, an antique dresser containing hundreds of books, and numerous framed pictures on the wall. The impression was one of utter chaos. The clutter was everywhere. One had to stride over boxes of books and papers in order to reach the tattered chairs.

As we sat by the gas fire, John showed me his poems.

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They didn't mean much to me then. Only later did I realise the significance of what I was holding. John said that he was writing a series of sonnets which he was dedicating to his friend, Michael Richmond. This, he claimed was the first 'live' sonnet sequence since Shakespeare. Fascinated though I was, the significance of this literary epic was not uppermost in my mind, as my re-acquaintance with John coincided with my imminent departure for Keele University. As it ought to have been, and to my amazement, I realised the magnitude of the intellect of my new mentor.

John Longden, ex-professor could match his professional background. In cafe or pub, no matter in whose company, he would make no concessions to circumstances on occasion. Over a pint of beer in a pub or a bacon buttie in a cafe, he would deliver a lecture to anyone within reach of his booming steatorian voice. His knowledge was vast and he seemed to be an expert in anything and everything, from flowers to philosophy. A walk in the countryside would prompt John to pick up a flower or fungus and give a detailed botanical or mycological account of the accidental discovery by the wayside.

When I returned to Keele I did so in the knowledge that education and learning are not synonymous. Education was about passing exams. Learning was about creating a philosophy of opening up one's mind to the world and its wonders. John gave me this insight, and he taught me that learning lasts a lifetime - long after education is over.

MEMORIES OF JOHN LONGDEN continued 1

At Keele, I immersed myself in my studies, writing such essays as 'Am I really writing this essay, or is it an hallucination?' At Christmas I returned home and invited John to visit me in my ancestral home in Barsby Green, known to my friends as 'Barsby Towers'. I showed John my essays, pretentiously expecting him to be impressed. He accepted them as valid pieces of work, but then expounded on them to such a degree that my ego was deflated, as it ought to have been, and to my amazement, I realised the magnitude of the intellect of my new mentor.

John Longden, ex-professor could not shed his professorial background. In cafe or pub, no matter in whose company, he would make no concessions to circumstances or occasion. Over a pint of beer in a pub or a bacon buttie in a cafe, he would deliver a lecture to anyone within range of his booming stentorian voice. His knowledge was vast and he seemed to be an expert in anything and everything, from flowers to philosophy. A walk in the countryside would prompt John to pick up a flower or fungus and give a detailed botanical or mycological account of his accidental discovery by the wayside.

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My years at Keele coincided with the zenith of my friendship with John. During vacations I would visit him and be fascinated by the stories he would tell. He recounted anecdotes of life in Ethiopia, Nigeria, India, Australia and Oxford and Cambridge universities as if these places were in the next street. He told me of being a student of Lord Lindsay, one of Keele's founders. He told me of his friendship with Sir Claus Moser, currently Chancellor of Keele, ~~He told me~~ of how he met Harold Wilson at the Board of Trade, and of his friendship with satirist Peter Cook, and actor Derek Jacoby. He told of his work during the war in ~~what is now~~ ^{INDIA} Pakistan. He and his colleagues at their base were supposed to be monitoring the Japanese. But in fact, as the Germans approached Moscow, that outpost of Empire and its occupants was more concerned with monitoring the Soviet Union, which was perceived as the main threat to Britain.

KNEW

This was a positively surreal experience for me - listening to such a life, sat as we were amidst the banana boxes. My traditional working class, Secondary Modern School background made me totally unprepared for such revelations. I had only experienced such a lifestyle through reading and watching television. The contrast between John's Establishment background, and my own was startling, as indeed was the contrast between tales of Oxbridge and John's bedsit. John lived not so much in genteel poverty, as genteel squalor. His bedsit wasn't dirty, just chaotic,

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though he miraculously kept track of every scrap of paper.

During my time at Keele, John migrated around Teesside, from bedsit to bedsit, from flat to flat. From Marton Road he moved round the corner to another bedsit in Russell Street, which was even more cramped than his previous one. Then he moved to a more spacious flat in Yarm Road in Stockton. It was a sort of travelling circus of clutter - an intellectual road show with its attendant camp followers of friends eager to keep in touch with a magnetic personality who drew people towards him. Finally, John settled in one place for 15 years. This was a tiny one bedroomed flat in Beckenham Gardens in Hemlington.

WITH

It is this flat that provides me with my abiding memories and images of John. His thousands of books lined every available wall, creating a sort of halfway house between a second hand bookshop and Professor Brainstawn's study.

Hemlington is on the edge of Middlesbrough, and this provided John with ample scope for natural history lessons. On walks with him in the countryside, he would delight in giving me a guided tour round trees and flowers - showing me stamens and different types of leaves, and telling me how they function. Anyone else may have found John overbearing, but I relished such studies as a relief from Sociology and Philosophy.

In 1976 I took two years off from Keele. To put it

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bluntly, and in contemporary student jargon, I freaked out over the exams. John, being the archetypal academic, gave me the encouragement to go back to university and obtain my degree, which I did. Those two academic years away from Keele - 1976-78 were memorable for me because during the summer months I would go to John's flat and type his poems. At its most intense, this meant going to see him two or three days a week. In the morning I would sit at the desk and type the poems John was busy transcribing from his hundreds of notebooks. At mid day we would go for a walk in the woods. John was an expert at frugal living, and he would pick bags full of edible fungi which he would mix with other ingredients into a delicious stir fried meal of his own invention. I trusted John not to poison me, and I learned a lot about living off the land.

In the afternoons we would do more typing and transcribing. In the evenings we would go for a drink, often at Coulby Newham, or the Cleveland ^{HUNTSMAN} Huntman, where we might be joined by another of John's protoges, Peter Crowder. Now, those far off summers seem like a golden age. I felt that I was doing something useful in helping John to obtain the recognition that I felt he deserved. Philosophy and fungi seem odd intellectual bedfellows. But in John they, and everything else merged into his world view and personal philosophy.

One of John's favourite sayings was, 'Man has ~~created~~ ^{MADE} man', a slightly politically incorrect statement nowadays. John's philosophy owed much to his degree in Politics,

Philosophy and Economics at Oxford. But John created his own philosophy, merging Marxism with an irrepressible optimism in human progress. In a nutshell, John believed that we create our own universe through our mastery of language, and that is what separates us from the animals.

I recall one heated argument in which John expounded his views to friends Barry Jewitt and Eric Thompson, as well as myself. We expressed scepticism over John's theories, feeling that his views should stay where they belong - in a university philosophy seminar. In order to cut through the argument, I said, 'Either the world is flat or is round, it can't be both'. John responded with a very voluble 'NO!' End of discussion. We gave up in exasperation. No doubt a professor of philosophy would be able to give a technical term for John's ^{THEORIES} belief, but at the time we felt that John was living in a fantasy world.

To some degree, John was living in a fantasy world, though not entirely of his own making. In India during the war he was given drugs for malaria which unbalanced his mind. This led to repeated nervous breakdowns, centering on manic depression. Sometimes, when he was manic, it was difficult to know when his profound intellect was being interfered with by mania. The two would sometimes merge, creating explosions of creativity and new insights.

Often, over a pot of tea in a cafe, John's eyes would sparkle as new thoughts tumbled over one another and he would jot ideas down in a notebook to be worked on later. I felt that I was in the presense of a great, but flawed

mind. His temper could get the better of him and project an appalling impression of arrogance. Those who knew John made allowances, knowing that he was his own worst enemy.

Gradually, a community of ~~intellectual fellow~~ LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE travellers hitched a ride on John's travelling circus, and over the years this became formalised into a recognisable institution. John became the centre of unofficial intellectual life in Cleveland, and very immodestly, I must admit to playing a part in this. I had regular meetings with John, often once or twice a week, in cafes and pubs, ranging from the Linthorpe, the Dovecot bar, 'Mrs Jones', 'Supernatural' and the station Buffett. This was apart from visiting each other in one another's homes, and homes of friends. Over time, more people joined us, such as ~~Ann Wainwright~~, Peter Crowder,, Denis Carling, Maria Morgan, Jack Sowerby and Adrian Wright.

Often, we would meet in our homes in a sort of parody of a university seminar. I particularly enjoyed 'the Wednesday Club'. On Wednesday afternoons I would meet Barry after he had signed on. We would then go to Denis' house in Bow Street where John would hold court and hold forth on a dazzling miscellany of fascinating and arcane topics to all and sundry. It was in this unpretentious terraced house that I came closest to intellectual fulfillment. I felt liberated as I was given equal space and time to an Oxbridge professor. If only I had felt

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like that at Keele. I gave this amorphous collection of amateur academics the name 'The University of Cleveland', and it stuck. John revelled in his chancellorship of this new institution, and rather tongue in cheek, he even issued diplomas written in Latin.

Over the years I became virtually a secretary to John, not that I objected, I relished the thought of helping John to achieve the recognition he deserved. He would either come to my house and supervise my typing on my large electric typewriter, or I would take my

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portable manual typewriter to his flat. I eventually bought a more sophisticated electronic typewriter with word processing functions. I did so with John in mind, and I am sad that he died before he could benefit from it.

All this typing gave me exposure to John's poetry and with all due respect to Kirby College, I learnt far more about poetry from John than I did from studying A level English Literature. John was imbued with a love of Japanese verse forms, especially tanka, renga and haiku. He combined these formal poetic structures with his 'exemplary Northern English' to create a unique literary form.

Central to John's use of language was dropping H's in classic Northern vernacular style. He used this to great effect, creating new complexities which standard orthography could not equal. One poem in particular exemplifies this, about the Piper Alpha disaster. John used the word 'arrowing'. This was both 'harrowing' with the 'h' dropped, and also means pierced with an arrow.

John's very deep voice with his very middle class, Southern accent jarred with his reading of his poems and created a surreal effect. His natural speech in talking to people was Southern Received Pronunciation. He would say 'parse' for pass and 'clarse' for class. When he read his poems, John switched to his Northern English, dropping his h's and employing Northern slang. The effect could be unsettling - which was the true John? A

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stranger may have found this patronising, but those who knew John understood his reasoning - Received Pronunciation was dying, to be replaced by the language of the people.

I consider myself to be a graduate of two institutions - the University of Keele and the University of Cleveland. I sought wherever possible to merge the two. John had been to Keele before I went there. He attended a conference of the Association of University Teachers as a delegate. It was only natural that I invited him to visit me during my residency. John came to visit me twice, once in the summer of 1975, and again in the summer of 1979.

John's first visit was spectacular in its success. I signed him into the university library as my guest. He spent half of his visit to me revelling in scholarship among the books. The usual procedure in the library was that at the end of each day, the staff would return any books they found on the desks to the shelves unless a note was left to the contrary. On his first day, John left a huge pile of books he was consulting on a desk with an accompanying note in huge capital letters: VISITING SCOLAR, PLEASE LEAVE. I had the distinct feeling that John was fantasising about being an academic once more. Coming from a cluttered Council flat and living frugally on state benefits, he once again caught a glimpse of 'real, academeia, as opposed to the fantasy world of the University of Cleveland, and I let him indulge

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himself.

John had a dramatic impact on my friends. They found him far more stimulating and fascinating than any of the staff at Keele, and I recall all-night discussions in classic student style. If only John had been a lecturer or professor at Keele at the time. As it was, John had a low opinion of the founding academics at Keele, feeling that expansion had been too rapid. As a student of Lord Lindsay and a Cambridge academic, John had a unique view of Keele's prehistory.

John's anecdotes of Oxbridge life certainly put my Keele experiences in the shade. When John recalled living in Isaac Newton's rooms, all I could retaliate with was my friendship with a student who had sat next to Princess Anne at school. I was totally in John's shadow. Even as my guest at Keele, John overshadowed me. His aura of self confidence amazed me. If I had been as poverty-stricken as John was I'd have been in despair.

Like Vladimir and Estragon, John could, and did, philosophise about the universe in the middle of nowhere - even waiting for the bus from Newcastle under Lyme up to Keele. John relished talking to real students at a real university. As I saw him onto the bus at the end of his stay I felt sad that his brief fantasy was over. I would probably have next met John at Madge's Cafe in Hemlington during my next visit home, where he would have expounded philosophy over a plate of chips. Again, absolutely no concession to place or occasion.

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If John's first visit to me was a spectacular success, his second visit to me in the summer of 1979 was a spectacular disaster. John had told me of a mathematical theory he was working on, what he called 'see-saw'. Not being mathematical, I didn't understand any of it. However, I thought that it would be a good idea if he came to Keele and explain his theories to a member of staff in the Department of Mathematics. I made an appointment with a lecturer and invited John to Keele to meet him. Being the summer vacation, the lecturer (who's name I have forgotten) needn't have agreed, but he was interested to meet John.

John's visit was an absolute shambles as it coincided with one of his periodic nervous breakdowns, possibly due to a rift with Mike. I met John at the bus station, and as he stepped off the bus I was stunned by what I saw. There was John dressed in a punk rocker outfit, with a peaked cap, chains everywhere, and strategically placed holes in his shirt which revealed nipples pierced with safety pins. That summer of course was the golden age of punk - when Messrs Rotten and Vicious did indeed sport various self-inflicted assaults on their anatomy. But John - that was unimaginable. I knew he was young at heart, but that was ridiculous. The taxi journey to the university was a nightmare as John spoke incoherently of punk as the great new phase of youthculture. What the driver thought, I don't know, and I don't want to either.

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When we arrived at my flat on the campus, the first thing John asked for was a knife. As I was preparing bacon sandwiches, I thought he was going to join me in preparing the bacon. Instead, he took it into the bedroom I had allocated him, and I nearly fainted with fright. I heard tearing and ripping sounds and I was convinced that John was mutilating himself. He emerged with his clothes in tatters. Just at that point, my friend, Paul Dunn arrived and I had to somehow salvage the situation. I introduced Paul to John, saying that my friend was a punk poet. It was true in a way, but I sought to explain this bizarre scene in terms of some sort of 60s style happening that had strayed into the late 70s.

John was hyper-manic and was clearly having an attack of manic depression. I was totally unprepared for this. I telephoned Barry and told him what was happening, and heapologised for not warning me in advance. I spent most of the duration of John's visit chaperoning him to make sure he didn't harm himself or make a fool of himself. The mathematical interview was a disaster of course. John emerged with a reading list the lecturer had given him, and I heard no more about see-saw numbers.

In the midst of the mania there was a great mind at work, but John was embarrassing and he created an appalling impression. I kept him to myself as much as possible, and at the end of his stay I practically bundled him onto the bus. With great relief I waved him

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goodbye.

That was the first time I had seen John having a nervous breakdown, although he had had previous breakdowns in India (1943), Nigeria (1955), Adelaide, Australia (1963), Newcastle (1968), and Middlesbrough (1971, 1972). I had heard about John's 1963 Adelaide breakdown from Gillian Lang. She was a researcher in the Department of Psychology at Keele, and had known John at the University of Adelaide, where he was a lecturer. But nothing prepared me for the punk episode.

However, one positive aspect of John's traumatic encounter with safety pins was that he changed direction somewhat. I knew John was artistic, but I knew him chiefly as a poet. In the aftermath of his breakdown, John realised that he had been isolated too long and resolved to be more gregarious. He became a part time mature student at the Cleveland College of Art and Design, and his association with that college lasted many fruitful years.

John flourished at college and he produced some wonderful prints and sculptures. It was characteristic of John's life that he triumphed over adversity, never losing his optimism. This dramatic change of direction was only one of many, and some were fortuitous. Years earlier, when John applied for a position of lecturer in statistics at the then Teesside Polytechnic, he had failed to get the job. He complained bitterly that the interview became personal and acrimonious. John felt rejected by academia

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and he resolved to retire from higher education in order to concentrate on writing poetry.

Looking back on my memories of John I can now see that his life was beset with periodic convulsions and set backs which forced him to alter the direction of his life drastically. Academic rejection propelled him towards poetry, a manic breakdown drove him to art. Poetry and art had been part of John's life all along, of course, but John's life was punctuated by these pivotal events which forced him to re-evaluate the direction of his life. They were distressing episodes for John, but they left a trail of creativity which can be enjoyed to this day.

The 1980s were in many ways John's golden age, as he immersed himself in local culture, particularly literature. He became less isolated, and joined in formally organised events, as opposed to the literary world of his own creation.

A key event was my introduction of John to Ann Wainwright. Ann and her friend Pamela Hutson edited a magazine, Poetic Licence, and I thought this would be a good outlet for John's poetry. Ann was involved in a literary circle called the Castalians, and organised poetry and music events at the Dovecot bar in Stockton. I invited John to one of these meetings, and we became regular Castalians. I have many happy memories of hearing John read his poetry at these meetings, and he made new friends there, including Trevor Teasdel, who

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went on to help publish Outlet magazine. John came out of his shell at Castalian meetings, and having emerged he stayed out, joining other groups.

One of these groups was organised by Andy Croft at Hemlington library in 1984. This was intended for unemployed people to respond in writing to their predicament. Andy represented Leeds University, but there was no hint of academia as we shared our love of writing. As well as John and myself, other members of the group included Catherine McKenna, Albert Mett and Duncan Rowe. We revelled in our new-found friendships and forged close links which still survive. We produced a booklet, 'Lazy Tees', which was published by the University of Leeds Centre in Harrow Road.

Lazy Tees was well received, and was a great boost to our self confidence. We kept in touch, and to our surprise, we all met up again at the Albert Hotel on April 11, 1984. We had responded to a leaflet inviting us to a meeting of the Tyneside Writers' Workshop. Organised by Paul Hyde and Pete Roberts, this meeting was intended to initiate a similar group in Teesside.

Out of that meeting emerged the Teesside Writers' Workshop, and I feel that it was in this group that John made his greatest contribution to local culture. We held our inaugural meeting on 25th April, and began meeting

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regularly thereafter. John quickly emerged as a natural leader, although his sometimes overbearing personality caused friction which led some members to leave.

Members of the Teesside Writers' Workshop included: Billy Allen, Johnny Nichol, Vera Davies, Albert Mett, Alan Watkiss, Catherine McKenna, Richard Verrill, Terry Lawson, Trevor Teasdel, Pauline Plummer, Susan Wilson, Peter Lammiman, Mel McAvoy, Chris Bartley, and Jerry Slater, who was to have a profound effect on John's life. John threw himself into literary life with gusto. A string of workshop publications followed, and John seemed destined for the recognition he deserved.

However, sadness was never far away. John's companion, Mike committed suicide. Disabled and deaf, he could bear life no longer. John was devastated, and it is to his credit that this did not cause a breakdown.

Mike's place in John's life was taken by Jerry. They had first met at a Castalian meeting in the Summer of 1983, but it was in TWW that their friendship flourished. They went on several holidays together, to Spain and Ireland and John was reinvigorated both temperamentally and intellectually.

During the TWW years I continued typing for John, but he also greatly encouraged me. I was writing an interminable book about the 1960s, and was much disillusioned by the rejection slips. John's support helped me through the disappointment and he invited me to

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submit samples of my book to the Workshop. This has reverberations in my life today, as I am now known for my nostalgia for the 60s.

I would turn up at the Albert laden with mountains of photocopied chapters of my book, and these would be passed round the table, with people saying such things as 'who's got page 20? Hurry up'. I felt embarrassed at this. Not being a poet, I had nothing short to offer. Again, John encouraged me. I began writing short pieces which I could present to the Workshop without taking over the entire meeting. John enjoyed these little anecdotes of my life and gave me the confidence to continue. Thus were born my autobiographical snippets - born out of the wreckage of my 60s book and a desire to prevent a stampede to the bar in a belated beer break. John was central to my feeling of self worth as a writer and his judgement became my imprimatur, determining whether I should persevere with a piece of work or not.

John presided professionally over meetings of the Teesside Writers' Workshop as if they were surrogate seminars. Again, I couldn't help feeling that John was fantasising about academia, imagining himself chairing a tutorial. He was a natural chairperson, although he sometimes delegated to me the task of chairing TWW meetings. In any case, talk of chairing TWW implies some sort of structure and organisation. In fact, although early meetings were fairly structured, they evolved into

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random discussions punctuated by members reading their work.

John not only supported me in my writing, but such was his generosity that he helped others as well, in particular, Albert Mett. Albert is a devout Roman Catholic and he expresses his devotion in writing. Over many years he has written hundreds of childrens' fantasy stories which have a strong Christian theme. Inspired by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, Albert seeks to create modern fairy tales. Albert had a difficult childhood, and this has impeded his literacy. Nevertheless, with the aid of friends including Ann, John and myself, he has produced a vast corpus of short stories, some of which have been published by the Teesside Writers' Workshop.

Albert makes notes and then dictates his stories to various people, including myself, and these are then typed, often by Ann and I. John revised many of Albert's stories, often changing them so completely that they bear little resemblance to Albert's originals. Albert often complained to me about this. He felt reluctant to submit the stories John had revised for publication. This compulsive over-revision was characteristic of John. Indeed, he used the term, 'revise to death' in connection with his writing. I had several arguments with John about this, saying that a poem should be a snapshot of how one feels at a particular moment in time, and this spontaneity would be lost with too much revision.

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A routine developed similar to the Wednesday Club. John and I would meet at Albert's flat in Stockton on Friday afternoons. Albert would dictate his stories to me, and this would often spark intense discussion. We would have heated arguments about whether magic, central to Albert's stories, is inimical to Christianity. One bizarre argument was whether there could be good goblins or not. All would be resolved when we adjourned to the nearby pub, The Cricketers, where John would convene a branch meeting of the University of Cleveland. In spite of John's irascibility, he often had a harmonising role in ironing out conflict.

John was a natural raconteur, with a never ending supply of anecdotes. On one occasion, I played a trick on him, and he never knew it. John could, and did, talk for hours with hardly any prompting, and I put this to the test. I wanted to see how far John got just by talking by himself. In 1988, John, Albert, Jerry and I rented a cottage in Hawes. One afternoon John said that he and Albert had seen a heron while out walking. I listened, simply nodding and expressing interest, but hardly saying anything.

The mention of the heron prompted John to talk about wildlife. He mentioned the bats which lived under the archway by his flat. He continued talking about wildlife, mentioning that when he was in Nigeria in the 1950s a large toad came bouncing into his bungalow. In one of my few interjections, I said that it must have

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caused a mess. John replied that his 'steward' or servant cleared up after the toad. Talk of servants led John to speak about the relationship between the black population and the whites in Nigeria. John said that he was shocked at the snobbery of the colonialists and refused to join the white club, preferring a mixed race club instead. This 'discussion' on Nigeria led John to talk about the politics of black Africa, and whether the borders imposed on Africans by the Europeans should be changed to accommodate the realities of ethnic geography. This led to a 'discussion' of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and the drawing of arbitrary lines on maps, ignoring reality. All this from herons, with little or no prompting from me.

John's ability to talk about almost anything was well known among his friends. On one occasion I met Johnny Nichol by chance, and we discussed this. Johnny said that John should set himself up as some sort of professional speaker, offering for a modest fee to speak for say ten minutes on a given subject. Johnny mentioned as a possible topic, Thomas Hardy's poetry. The following week, John and I met on one of our periodic assignments, and I told him of Johnny's suggestion. I happened to mention Johnny's example of a topic - Thomas Hardy's poetry. There and then, John delivered a ten minute talk on Thomas Hardy's poetry. John thought all this highly amusing, and we laughed over our cups. Supposing Johnny's suggested topic had been

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Einstein's theory of relativity? I have no doubt whatsoever that John would have risen to the occasion and delivered a mini lecture on this subject.

John's encyclopaedic knowledge made me feel that he was a Renaissance man born 500 years too late. This is a kinder way of describing John than the epithet which is, and was, used to describe him - eccentric. But then, the scientific definition of eccentric is 'situated away from the centre or axis'. This is how I would like to remember John - on the margins of society, enabling him to offer a semi-detached view of life and society unencumbered by 'normal' conventions.

John's argumentative nature sometimes merged into mania. In 1989 John had another nervous breakdown. I had arranged to meet John and Jerry in the Linthorpe on Tuesday 10th January. I arrived first, and John and Jerry arrived soon after. John started shouting abuse at the landlord, who told him in no uncertain terms to get out. John was uncontrollable, and Jerry and I left him in the car park. However, I slipped John a fiver to make sure he got home alright. Jerry and I notified the police in case John got out of hand. I later returned to the Linthorpe and smoothed things out with the landlord.

John did return home safely, although shortly afterwards he was admitted to St Luke's Psychiatric Hospital, on 14th January. Even in hospital, John continued to write. John and I would meet in the WRVS cafe, with John writing, and me checking what he had

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written for legibility because of the tremor brought on by the medication. I would go home and type, and next day I would return with the typescript which John would inspect, and, yes - revise. Not only did John continue to write, but lecture as well. He had a captive audience, but I'm not too sure whether the other patients were in a fit state to comprehend philosophy. A retired professor lecturing patients about philosophy in a psychiatric hospital sounds like something written by Ionescu, or other practitioners of the Theatre of the Absurd.

John came out of hospital on Monday 6th February, and with John and Jerry supporting him he became well again. However, he had to return to Hemlington and an often hostile environment. With the exception of Bob Brown, John's neighbour, the people of Hemlington displayed total incomprehension towards John, often verging on hostility. There were exceptions of course - Peter Crowder and Vera Davies lived nearby, and Mike had lived on the other side of Hemlington. But on the whole, the people of Hemlington did not know what to make of John, and that's being diplomatic. On one occasion, John left the kitchen window ajar to let his cat, Jolie, come and go. He returned to find his curtains on fire. Someone had spotted the open window and had attempted to set John's flat on fire. John was also burgled several times, and on one occasion his famous camouflage jacket, festooned with dozens of badges was stolen. John told me who had taken it, but the law of libel prevents

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me from disclosing that name.

In spite of being persecuted in Hemlington, John busied himself with cultural matters. In particular, helping ~~teesside~~ Writearound, Cleveland's annual literary festival, and the festival bears John's stamp today, in the logo he designed.

John took his duties as a member of the Writearound committee just as seriously as his involvement with the Teesside Writers' Workshop. He was a judge in Writearound poetry competitions, and his contributions to the committee were profound. John's Oxbridge background lent weight to our endeavours, and it was characteristic that the areas of literature he recommended for events were in some way 'highbrow'. He suggested a workshop on sonnet writing, and volunteered to chair it, but unfortunately nothing became of it.

However, the Writearound event in relationship to John which sticks in my mind is his talk on poetry in translation. This was at the first Writearound festival in 1989 and took place at St Mary's Centre, Middlesbrough. It was just up John's street, and he prepared for it enthusiastically, almost obsessively. He spent weeks making notes and amassing books and photocopies, relating in particular to his own field of Japanese rendered into English.

The day arrived, and I eagerly attended the event.

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It was heartbreaking. Only three people turned up: myself, Peter Crowder and veteran local writer, Miriam Flint. There was John, peering over a mountain of books and papers delivering a very academic, though highly enjoyable talk on Japanese phonetics to an audience of three. Again, the Theatre of the Absurd springs to mind. What a tragedy John's talents were not recognised.

John's active involvement with Writearound was cut short when he left the area. Jerry, who had been living in Darlington bought a house in Pine Street, Langly Park, near Durham City and invited John to share it with him. By November 1991 they had settled in and a new phase in John's life began. He had always wanted to write a novel about Teesside, but said that he would have to leave in order to write it. I very much looked forward to this project. It would have been a masterpiece. After all, James Joyce could only write Ulysses while living abroad. Alas, John's novel never materialised.

I stayed with John and Jerry twice and at last John felt free from the pressure of living in Hemlington. I used Jerry's word processor to type for John while I was at Pine Street. It was certainly an improvement on my battered manual portable typewriter. But I missed the old days - the walks in the woods near Hemlington Hospital and fried blewits. At Langley Park, the nearby Chinese chippy replaced hand picked fungi, and Jerry's car replaced the 291 bus. All this was a world away from those early days, and with all respect to Jerry, it is

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Beckenham Gardens, not Pine Street, which lingers in my mind.

It was at Pine Street that John died on July 25th, 1993. Andy Croft told me the next day at Harrow Road, and I was shattered. Even now, I can't believe that I'll never see John again. He was an enormous part of my life. But that's being egocentric - appropriating John for myself. John belonged to all who knew him, and his passing vastly impoverishes the world of literature - and our lives. My overwhelming feeling is one of sadness that John didn't live to receive the recognition he deserved. How he would have loved to hold "LPs & Singles".

John's funeral was on Friday July 30th at Durham Crematorium. The chapel was packed with his friends and family, paying respects to a central figure in their lives. Jerry chose the music, including a Paul Robeson song, which was John's favourite. Fighting back the tears, Jerry read one of John's poems. As we filed out of the chapel, I broke down. I cried on Jerry's shoulder. He hugged me, saying "Let it flow, Pete". Now, much later, I'm letting it flow again, this time with ink instead of tears, creating a tribute to the most remarkable person I have ever known.

POSTSCRIPT

As for myself, I have long since abandoned my

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literary pretensions, along with my book on the 60s. I now amuse myself and my friends with my autobiographical snippets, and who knows, something may become of them. John helped me to keep my feet on the ground, even when he was high as a kite. His courage in continuing to write in adversity is an example to all writers. I am content with being a footnote in the history of Cleveland culture - amanuensis to Albert, publisher to Ann, and above all - secretary to John.

A NOTE ON JOHN'S NAME

John's friends, including myself, were often confused by the names John gave himself, and I now hope to clarify this. John's name was simply John Longden. He often signed himself 'Jon'. This was simply a whim, and is not short for Jonathan. John gave himself the middle name Miles because it is a shortened form of Michael, a reflection of his friendship with Michael Richmond, and is derived from the Old German 'Mil', meaning beloved.

Incidentally, John's sequence of 500 sonnets is called 'Johnson', again a recognition of Mike's place in John's life - son of John.

This linguistic confusion caused numerous problems at Writearound proof reading sessions. We would search the archives to see whether John signed himself Jon more times than John. Such was the complexity of John's life.