

Collected Earlier Poems
(1966-80)

Bill Griffiths

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Preface

We have endeavoured to collect all Bill Griffiths' poems, in largely chronological order, from his earliest work to the publication of *Building: The New London Hospital* in 1980. This span includes the poems he wrote and published during the main period of his Pirate Press imprint (1971-79) and his very active involvement in the Consortium of London Presses at the Poetry Society (1975-77). Some of his best-known work such as *Cycles* and *War W/ Windsor* was written during this period, as well as many poems which made fleeting appearances in short-run pamphlets and magazines. While certain poems have been reprinted in later selections others can now only be found in their original ephemeral publications. We hope that this volume will serve as the first step towards a complete edition of one of England's most inventive poets, who continued to find new forms and ways of saying until his death in 2007.

Griffiths was often cavalier with his work, fond of taking lines, stanzas and longer sections from one poem for transformation in another. This practice inevitably creates obscurities and anomalies in a retrospective account but fortunately Griffiths was also an obsessive compiler of lists and chronologies. The ground plan of the present collection is the *Poem List* published by Pirate in 1978 and designed to be used alongside the *Pirate Press Book List* issued in the same year. The *Poem List* catalogues 158 items (plus some miscellaneous addenda) year by year from '1968' to 1978. It includes some texts which fall into other genres – visuals, music scores, prose works (as opposed to prose-poems) – but if these are discounted we can regard it as the contents list of a provisional collected poems, a book Griffiths would have published at the time if there had been the opportunity.

The *Poem List* provides both a skeleton structure and a guide to the original printings of the majority of these poems. Pirate Press books and those of Griffiths' other regular publisher Writers Forum were produced by ink duplicator or offset from typewritten copy, and the settings sometimes bafflingly migrate from one pamphlet to another with occasional changes which may or may not be accidental. The main period of Pirate publishing ended with two compendia, *Quarto Book* and *Oblong Book* (1978-79), which gathered the remaining unbound sheets of the pamphlet publications, in either portrait quarto or oblong foolscap, together with a number of texts retyped (and occasionally revised) to fit one or other format. These two books are the nearest Griffiths did come to making a comprehensive compilation of the first decade of his work – incomplete, haphazardly arranged

and issued in very small editions, but the repository of texts and variants which might have been otherwise lost.

The *Poem List* is not wholly reliable. Doug Jones' bibliography, compiled in consultation with Griffiths and published in *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths* (edited by Will Rowe, Salt 2007), has supplied corrections and additional information.

Our collection is indebted to one other source. In 1991 Griffiths made a very large compilation of his poems which he downloaded on floppy discs. This compilation was updated in 1996. The discs must be regarded as a form of publication: they have a preface which presents them as such, and a few copies were offered for sale. Griffiths was enthusiastic about 'post-book' technologies and at the time he probably considered the floppy disc the future for textual transmission, just as he had embraced microfiche in the late 1970s and was to build his several websites during the last years of his life.

The discs contain three large files of his poetry dated 1966-79 as well as addenda designated '1970s' to files of later work. They have been invaluable in establishing 'final' texts of poems which show imponderable variants in early printings; in supplying copy for poems appearing in the *Poem List* and/or Jones' bibliography but otherwise elusive; and providing poems previously unrecorded, unpublished or only published in truncated versions. Undoubtedly the poems predating 1968 must be seen as juvenilia. They are included here because by 1991 Griffiths had clearly decided to preserve them and because in spite of obvious faults they contain lines and turns of phrase presaging the unique way Griffiths came to see the world and transform it into poetry – even so early we hear the gentle and comic tone which counterpoints his more famously aggressive biker-anarchist persona.

Our presentation of *Cycles* and *War W/ Windsor* in some degree disrupts the chronological order. These sequences were composed and assembled over several years, often drawing on fragments of earlier poems and in some cases printed and reprinted in variant and sometimes radically reworked drafts. In its first publication the title *War W/ Windsor* refers only to the eventual Text 5; the text which became 'Into Prison' was originally designated as a draft for *Cycle 3*; 'To Johnny Prez' developed out of the early poem 'Black Mass' and appeared in several variants; the *Cycles* were written and first published in an order different to the eventual numbered sequence and did not appear in their final revisions until the Writers Forum edition of 1994: these are only a few of the editorial conundrums involving both sequences. Since the reader will reasonably hope to find them gathered in their eventual arrangement we have placed them at the time of their first completion and publication as detailed in the *Poem List*. Where earlier poems

were wholly subsumed within a later text (e.g. *War W/ Windsor 1* which is largely assembled from much shorter poems) they have been omitted; our endeavour to include *all* the poems failed in this respect but we preferred to avoid undue repetition. Some *War W/ Windsor* ur-poems such as 'Black Mass' are included both on their own account and as pertinent examples of Griffiths' practice. Further comments on the composition of *Cycles* and *War W/ Windsor* will be found in the endnotes.

Our thanks to Joanne Harman for her permission to produce this book; to Steve Clews who provided texts from his private collection and Michael Mann for downloads of the 1991/96 discs; to Geraldine Monk, Clive Bush, Michael Gibbs, Harry Gilonis, Doug Jones, Bill Lancaster and Will Rowe for their advice and encouragement; and posthumously to Bob Cobbing, Eric Mottram and Jeff Nuttall, without whom Bill Griffiths' work might never have seen daylight.

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