The Bard of Stepney 1917-1999
Gladys McGee

Please read my poetry -
Don't let me write in vain...
Because it is only in the last few years I found I had a brain.

It was fellow-Basement Writer Alan Gilbey who first dubbed Gladys McGee 'The Bard of Stepney' (Barred from pubs and betting offices throughout the Borough...). She was never really barred from anywhere of course but she frequently caused a commotion wherever she went. As an early member of the Basement Writers she would engage in fiery verbal combat with others young enough to be her grandchildren and was always the star when it came to live performances. With a gold lame trouser suit hanging on her tiny frame, constantly adjusting her spectacles, she would throw her arms about and yell out her poetry. But it wasn't all loud. Quiet introspective pieces about regret and loss were mingled with angry diatribes against injustices in society.

Gladys wasn't just known in East London either. At an age when many older people are taking it easy, Gladys would be hurtling up and down the motorways in the back of a minibus, visiting other writers groups and performing all over the country. She was prominent at Federation of Worker Writer & Community Publishers Conferences, reading such pieces as 'Empire Day' (reproduced here) and 'Snowy Day Failure', a true experience about arriving at a reading to discover that the poetry in her notebook had literally been washed away with the rain.

Eastside published two of her collections and her work was featured in various anthologies. She appeared in a television film 'Breaking Through', about East London writing and had a small acting role in a mid 1980's movie about the Titanic - in the lower decks, of course.

Although even in her seventies Gladys could dance into the early hours at parties, ill health and accidents dogged her in recent years. But she could take it. She had, after all, entitled one of her Eastside collections 'Old Age Ain't No Place For Sissies'.

Gladys died in March surrounded by her family, including daughters Kim and Christine.
Transmission

Are you interested in taking part in the following?

Transmission is a special project organised by Eastside. Fifteen young adults (between the ages 16 - 25) resident in Tower Hamlets and Hackney will be invited to work in a group with two facilitators. The group members should have an interest in writing for and working in film, television and radio. Under guidance they will set up links and meetings with organisations such as the BBC, commercial radio and independent film companies, as well as with individual practitioners.

The group will meet at regular planning meetings at various locations in and out of Tower Hamlets. Through a practical hands-on series of workshops and events they will gain direct knowledge of the media industries. As a result of this project, an accredited training course in writing for film, TV and radio will be established.

The Transmission project aims to attract young adults who will be self-motivated and able to display commitment towards this project. Are you interested in taking part? Do you know anybody else who might be? Contact Roger Mills at Eastside, 178 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1BJ. Tel: 0171 247 0216.

Young News

Young News is a new newspaper written by and for children of 8 - 11 years in Tower Hamlets. Send in creative writing, news, puzzles, photos, drawings and any information about events for children to YOUNG NEWS, c/o Eastside, 178 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1BJ. Young News is available FREE from the Eastside Bookshop (address as above).

Eastside Stories 1999

A CHANCE FOR A FIRST TIME NOVELIST TO WIN £1,000 AND HAVE HIS OR HER WORK READ BY A LITERARY AGENT.

The Eastside Stories Bursary has just been launched at a special event in the Bookshop. This years judge, Ardashir Vakil, author of the much acclaimed Beach Boy (see mini review), attended and spoke about how the award is a great encouragement to talent that might not otherwise find an outlet. As in previous years, the award is intended to offer some measure of financial support to a new writer in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Newham or Hackney. This year, it is also open to people attending writers groups in those boroughs even if they live outside the area. The winner's chances of finding a publisher will be boosted by the involvement of a leading literary agent. The Wylie Agency have kindly agreed to read this year's award-winning entry. The very first winner of the Bursary in 1995 was Ben Richards, whose book 'Throwing the House out of the Window' was published as a direct result. Ben has gone on to have a series of books published and is now writing a screenplay. Entry forms are available from Eastside Bookshop or by post first class SAE.

Eastside's Future Plans: an update

Thank you to all of you who replied to our questionnaire about Eastside now and in the future. We are still gathering information, and so a further copy of the survey is enclosed for those of you who haven't yet replied. If you have, please pass it on to a friend! And please let us know of anywhere that could display the questionnaire for others to pick up.

The first of the open meetings, where people can discuss the possibilities for the Centre for the Written and Spoken Word in greater depth, took place at the end of March. All those who had expressed an interest were invited and it was a lively and inspiring evening with all sorts of brilliant ideas expressed, ranging from a cafe with "word game" sessions to children-friendly book areas, from song and poetry performances to translation workshops, from publication facilities for short-run printing, to community Internet access. There will be more meetings 'throughout the summer, and we will keep you all posted on progress. We hope you will join in the discussions and add to the ideas.

Of course this is just the first stage: consultation and initial feasibility. To make all these ideas a reality, we need to raise at least £500,000. We are already starting to apply to various funding sources for this. At the end of the March meeting, we all pooled our expertise, and offered any skills that we might have. Is there anything you could do? Either practically or financially? Any ideas for funding or fund-raising? Please contact Pippa at Eastside for any input to this exciting future.

STOP PRESS: An event to mark the launch of 'Rodinsky's Room' by Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair (published by Granta) will take place at the Eastside Bookshop on Monday the 7th of June. For details, contact Fiona Mottershow on 0171 247 0216.
Writers Groups in East London

Eastside organises and runs several regular writers workshops for all sorts of writing. The groups are informal and encourage discussion and constructive criticism. New members are welcome.

Eastside Writers - A long standing Eastside group encouraging writing of all sorts. Poetry, prose, short stories. Meetings are held fortnightly on Thursday evenings.

Eastside Novel Writers Group - Specially for people working on or attempting to write a novel. The group mixes writing exercises with readings from work in progress. Meetings are held monthly on Thursday evenings.

‘Words’ Writers - Eastside’s writers’ group for adults with learning difficulties. The group took a short break last year but have now returned with a new convener, Tina Poyzer.

For details and dates about the above contact Roger Mills on 0171 247 0216

Other creative writing groups in and around East London include...

The Basement Writers - Poetry and prose. Meetings are held on the last Tuesday of every month in the evenings at 7/9 St. Margarets House, Old Ford Road, E2. Contact Francis Lane for details and dates on 0171 613 1203.

Approach Poets - ‘Old or young, new readers and listeners - all are welcome.’ Meetings are the second Sunday of each month. This group has a new venue, upstairs at the New Globe pub, Mile End Road, E3 (Near Mile End Tube). Contact Michael Aitkin for details and dates on 0171 538 0970.

Writing for Pleasure/Writers Workshop - Two sessions on Wednesday evenings and Thursday mornings respectively, organised by the Tower Hamlets Adult Education Service at the Bethnal Green Centre. Contact Sergio Dogliani for details on fees and dates on 0181 809 1352

Writers Wanted - Writing of all sorts. Aimed mainly at residents of the Aberfeldy Estate in Poplar. Every Thursday at 7.30pm at St Nicks Centre, Dee Street, E14. Contact Mark Gower 04325 383 706 (pager) for details.

Survivors Poetry - Workshops and performances by and for survivors of the mental health system. Various gigs and venues throughout London. Contact Clare Douglas for details and dates on 0171 916 5317.

London Voices - Poetry & prose. Everybody welcome, especially young people. Meetings are held at 8.00pm on the last Friday in the month at the London Spa Pub, Exmouth Market, EC1. Nearest tubes Aldgate & Farringdon.

A Tapestry for the Millennium

Eastside is currently working with the ‘Stitches in Time’ Tapestry Project in Spitalfields, helping to make East London literature a part of the finished work. The giant embroidery will feature contributions from different local groups depicting aspects of East End life. Groups involved include the HEBA Women’s Project and Locksley Community Project, working with Di England of Art workshop. Volunteers are still required to work with HEBA in Brick Lane. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets will include this historical tapestry frieze in its millennium celebrations. If you are interested in knowing more about this project, please contact Diana England on 0171 247 0858 or Christine Phillips on 0171 987 5715.
Photobooks
There have been a number of excellent East London photobooks released lately. All black and white, all featuring everyday life in the streets, shops and laundries (yes, laundries). Here's three of them - Common Ground - Portraits of Tower Hamlets by Rehan Jamil, Ragged School Museum Trust £3.00. A New Perspective - A Photographic Essay of East London by Various photographers, St. Katherine & Shadwell Trust £5.00. Laundry by Cheryl A. Aaron (with a foreword by Mike Leigh), Printers Inc. Press £9.95. Also, enlargements from East by Phil Maxwell (featured in the last issue of What's the Word?) are now available at Eastside Bookshop at £20.00 each.

Come Together
Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees
Arrow Books Ltd
£5.99 Paperback
Tale told from both sides of the sexual divide. Quite neat really. It's place in the bestsellers list is assured by lots of hype, photos of the attractive authors on the jacket and huge advances that the publishers have to get back somehow.

Harry Potter & The Chamber of Secrets
J.K. Rowling
Bloomsbury
£4.99 Paperback
The Smarties 1998 Gold Award winner in the 9-11 age category. "Harry Potter is a wizard. He is in his secondary year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Little does he know that this year will be just as eventful as the last..."

Eastside Writers Remember
The Eastside Writers Group has announced with sadness that group regular Robert Earnest died in March of this year. Members knew him as an excellent writer of short stories, which he would read to great effect in his distinctive Welsh tones. The subject matter of his stories varied greatly, taking in humour, mystery and tales based on his own childhood. Robert was very dedicated to his work and attended other groups throughout London including the New River Writers.

Mini Review
Beach Boy
Ardashir Vakil
Penguin Books
£6.99 Paperback
Written by the judge of this year's Eastside Stories Bursary, Beach Boy has been a major critical success applauded by the likes of John Updike, Emma Tennant and Salman Rushdie. It was shortlisted for the 1997 Whitbread Prize for a First Novel and was the winner of a Betty Trask Award. The book is based in the Bombay of the 1970s and concerns the growing pains of hero Cyrus. Family, food, sex and elephants. It's all here. Full of vividly described characters and those (dare I use the phrase) rites-of-passage experiences that transcend race, class and country. Basically, it's a well-aimed satire of the (not quite) everyday. Particularly enjoyable are those indications of a quickly expanding internationalism whereby Cyrus devours fried samosas and James Hadley Chase novels in equal measure. Our hero ends up shooting himself in the foot - something that the author can't be accused of.