

New Writing North - New Narratives of the North East

IMMERSION

By Lauren Davies

In a North East beach car park in 1989, a bitter wind stings the bare legs of a teenager as he struggles to pull on a stiff, diving wetsuit. He wraps a black and white woollen scarf around his neck and pulls pink washing up gloves onto his frozen hands. He bends to pick up an old surfboard and runs towards the North Sea, following both literally and figuratively in the footsteps of his mentor. The wind chases his heels across a beach hardened by the cold. His toes press into the dusting of frost on the sand. He joins his mentor at the water's edge. Immune to the cold biting their faces, mentor and protégé share a look of anticipation. They see only the beauty of the surf. Dog walkers pass and glance at the pair with looks of bewilderment and disbelief. Surfing? In the North Sea? If God had wanted Geordies to surf, he wouldn't have invented football, man! Miners have for decades laboured beneath the waves, extracting coal from the sea bed in undersea mine shafts. Fishermen sail from the the Fish Quay in the early hours to return with their catch for market. These North East waters have traditionally been used for work, for hard graft, and not for play, but times are changing.

Mentor and protégé stand side by side and absorb the view stretching towards an indistinct horizon. The sea merges with the sky, until broken by the lines of swell pulsing from distant shores. Upon approaching land, it rises up to form waves. Tonally, they are somewhere between soup and gravy, their faces blown smooth by the offshore wind. Plunging together into the North Sea, mentor and protégé paddle out in synchronicity. Duck-diving under an arching wave, they open their eyes and look around. Visibility is poor, but there is an energy in the sea that stokes their inner fire. They push through the back of the wave, return to the surface and smile. This is their playground. This is where they belong.

By day, in the football-mad city of Newcastle, they defy the Geordie stereotype. With their neon surf clothes and long, blond hair, they are outsiders; a splash of colour in a black and white world. Even within the sub-culture of surfing, the North East crew are a radical breed. The sun-kissed surfers of California, Hawaii and Australia know nothing of their existence. In Britain too, they are far from the Cornish epicentre of the sport. Riding North Sea surf is challenging and not

for the faint-hearted. Cold water crashing down from the lip of a wave weighs heavier on bodies already drained of energy by the Baltic temperatures. Yet there is treasure to be found here. Our region stretches beyond the water's edge into the perfect waves waiting to be ridden by those capable of walking on water on a thin slab of fibreglassed foam. Look out to sea, and there is true peace and joy to be found just beyond the busy streets of our towns and cities and the enthusiastic conversations of our proud population. Proud of a Geordie culture that is strong, deep-rooted and with a natural humour. The surfers carry this culture with them into the North Sea and beyond.

The mentor was the first to blaze this trail. His name was Veitch. He had a dream to be different because this was something he had always been. Adopted and with a hearing impediment as a child, he had forged his own path and was uncompromising in the pursuit of his goal. Veitch saw no reason why a Geordie could not become a professional surfer and travel to surf in tropical locations like his Californian counterparts. We are all simply human after all. Impossibility was not something Veitch accepted. He did not fear the unknown, but instead feared regret and mediocrity. Far beyond the norm was the only direction he favoured. He mastered skateboarding as a teenager, opening the door to his natural aptitude for boardriding. He then moved on to riding a surfboard and never looked back. The affinity Veitch felt with the sea made him whole, as though in immersing himself, he absorbed its power.

Veitch took on the Cornish and won. He became British Champion and attracted the sponsorship of Newcastle Brown Ale; fitting for the sole Geordie professional surfer. His sights moved higher still, touring Europe on a shoestring and becoming the European Surfer of the Year. He joined the World Tour and made his mark at one of the planet's most perilous waves at Pipeline in Hawaii, where surfers have been known to enter the water never to return. Veitch took the dimly lit torch of a Geordie waterman and carried it around the globe until it shone. He found his calling by listening to the chorus of the crashing North Sea waves and pursued it with all his heart and soul until he had nothing left to give.

Veitch was a true pioneer. From the moment he stepped into the North Sea as a young outsider with big dreams, a ripple effect began to radiate. Back home in Tynemouth, Veitch's young protégé followed his mentor's success in the magazines and allowed his own dream to grow. If he can do it, so can I... Watching Veitch opened his eyes to the sea being a potential pathway towards a career. It broke down an invisible wall on the tideline and widened his horizons to

encompass international surf spots. At the age of eleven, Veitch's protégé took his first tentative steps into the icy waters.

He could not source the equipment worn by the Cornish and used whatever he could find to mimic the surfers in the well thumbed pages of the magazines; the beaver tail diving suit and the woollen scarf that would never be waved overhead on a football stadium terrace. There would not be a surf shop in his village until he had scavenged many a pair of Marigolds from beneath the kitchen sink. An artist friend of his father's travelling through on his way to somewhere warmer, left behind a surfboard, yellowed by the passing of time. Unlike most beginners, he stood up first attempt and his future was sealed. Looking back, he can scarcely believe the motivation he had to race home from school, don his insufficient gear and dive into the sea to surf until the sunset forced him home. He was driven by the same passion that drove his mentor; a pure love of the sea and of the escapism surfing brought to his life.

His school days became shorter, as he traded the classroom for the beach. His parents supported his absence from lessons when they witnessed his natural ability to ride waves. He had a fluid, graceful style, likened to one of Australia's great surfers. He was driven, but with a mellow nature that seemed to be in tune with the sea. He chased his mentor's dream and made it his own. He became multiple British Champion and signed a sponsorship deal with a world renowned surfing brand to become a professional surfer. He surfed every ocean on the planet, but always held the North East and its waves in his heart. A wave breaking in a Yorkshire cove is still his favourite surf spot. As he matured, he realised he did not have a proclivity for competition. In this he differed from Veitch. True to himself, he carved out his own niche as a soul surfer, chasing waves alone, or with a photographer to capture his career-defining moments. He graced the covers of magazines and appeared in films. The pinnacle came when he pioneered big waves in Ireland and was credited as having surfed one of the biggest waves in the world. The young protégé from Tynemouth became a professional big wave surfer because Veitch had given him the self belief and the license to dream. He had not let where he came from limit where he could go, but, like a salmon swimming upstream to return to the place of its birth, he always returned home to cold water.

Veitch left too soon. In the spring of 1990, he gave himself completely and definitively to the sea he adored. His suicide from the cliffs in Tynemouth devastated a community. The aftershocks

resonate still, but his twenty-six years left a positive and enduring legacy. Thanks to Veitch and his generation, the once counter-culture of surfing has become a thriving community on the North East coast. In Tynemouth, beginners flock to the surf shop and to the schools offering a taste of the escapism that drew Veitch to the North Sea day after day. Gone are the Marigolds, diving suits and scarves. Surfers now have access to high quality wetsuits made from plant extract that is less damaging to the environment than the traditional petroleum-based materials. They wear ear plugs, hoods, boots and gloves, leaving only the bare skin of their faces at the mercy of the windchill.

At the break of day, the sun rises from the North Sea, spilling a wash of vibrant pinks and purples over the surface of the water. Sunsets around the world would struggle to compete with the intensity of colour. The surfers paddle out through mesmerising rainbow waves at dawn, before the clouds blow in and the sea returns to its natural, soupy state. Pushing through the swell, they reach the calm beyond the breaking surf. They sit astride their surfboards to await their first ride. Only the sea birds bear witness to their camaraderie and conversation. From here, the surfers look back at the land with a fresh perspective. They feel privileged to view the city and the coast from this place of tranquility very few will experience. For we have it all. Roman souvenirs and ancient castles are set against the industrial heritage of our ports. The piers at the mouth of the Tyne stretch over eight hundred metres out to sea to the lighthouses that guide the fishermen safely back to port. The impressive ruins of Tynemouth Priory high on a headland, reflect the centuries of stories soaked into our soil. The River Tyne completes its journey at the North Sea, where a stunning coastline marks the boundary of our lands, but not the limit of our influence. Step into the water and the waves dissipating on the long, sandy beaches well trodden by dog owners, host groups of surfers on smaller swells. Dogs turn to look out to sea, their ears alert to the hoots and laughter bouncing off the surf.

The more experienced surfers read weather charts to predict the day and the spot at which the conditions will be most favourable. When a 965 low pressure over Scandinavia combines with a light, west wind and the tide is high, they congregate on an unforgiving, windswept clifftop to survey the waves breaking on a rocky reef below. They are a tribe, swapping tales of their best rides and jovial insults.

Where once surfing attracted the hippie, anti-establishment beach boy, the demographic of the typical surfer, in our region more than most, has entirely evolved. Very few bear the traditional trademark attributes of bronzed skin and dishevelled tresses. Now, in the beach car parks, the man

in his company car swaps his business suit for a neoprene one. The new mother passes her sleeping child to the father so that she may escape to the water between feeds. Young and old, men, women and children, they are united by the same passion for the sea. This is not sport in the traditional sense. Surfing is a lifestyle. It connects people of all ages and backgrounds with a thread of commonality. No matter their ethnicity, gender, or social standing, each and every surfer shares a love of riding waves and a respect for the sea and for nature. Some have the best equipment money can buy, while others have a second hand board and wetsuit that have seen better days. After all, one only really needs protection from the cold, a surfboard and a steely determination to surf these waves.

For some, it is their lifeblood, but those who simply surf to live are a dying breed. Where once young surfers slept in vans, living only on Pot Noodles and the promise of waves, now the need for money to survive turns the majority into those who work so they may surf in their spare time. Many are environmental activists, driven to protect that which enriches their lives. In the Nineties, surfers from Newcastle joined radical protests against sewage outflows in an attempt to change water company policies. Now, they are Charity Trustees and representatives, welcomed into the halls of power at the Houses of Parliament to influence policy change at Governmental level. Rain, or shine, they arrange beach cleans to remove plastic pollution from our shores. They encourage local businesses to win Plastic Free Status from the environmental Charity, Surfers Against Sewage, and educate children in our schools. They are knowledgeable and still pioneering.

Some surfers are beach lifeguards, once managed by one of the most promising young surfers of his generation. Surfing was his salvation from school that was not his natural domain. His community-minded parents ran the beach café and opened the first surf shop in Tynemouth. It drew in more grommets, as the young surfers are affectionately known, introducing them to a new way of life. Many of them surf here still.

On Longsands beach, a surf instructor takes a break from teaching his students to catch his daily quota of waves that motivates him to return to work. His father was one of the original surfers; a cool dreamer with a kind soul who opened the current surf shop and school in order to share the stoke of surfing with others. He also left too soon, but not before creating a haven for the cold water surf crew.

A highly-respected surgeon from the city's hospitals washes off the stresses of his vocation by immersing himself in the sea at the rocky reef. Here, just as in the operating theatre, he is entirely present in the moment. He watches the horizon for the approaching sets of waves and paddles into position. Jumping up and riding the wave that rises up to join him has become second nature. He flies along, now free from the pressures of work and life. This feeling of being present is shared by every surfer around him. A lapse in concentration means that Mother Ocean will win every time. Waveriding carries the surfer away from the mundanities and the worries. It focuses the mind and calms the body, often to the point of a pure, but welcome exhaustion. It is escapism; something we all search for in these times of high expectation and full agenda.

At Blyth, the Battery from the two World Wars, now painted a hint of marshmallow pink, surveys the community of hardy boardriders that congregates here. A six year-old child in a wrinkled wetsuit he will grow into, surfs the whitewater lapping the hard-packed sand on the shore. His father, Veitch's protégé, now mentors him in the silent hope that he will either share his passion, or at least dare to dream, whatever that dream may be. Further out to sea, the older generations gather to trade waves and tales. A pilot boat coxswain from the nearby port clocks off from his shift steering ships into the harbour to play in the waves he works upon. A retired head teacher, still at peak fitness, who lives for the days the swell wraps in from the North, competes against a nimble student on a longboard. An author jumps in for a meditative surf between the morning school run and her work from home. 'It's a lass, man! Must be mad,' gasps an elderly miner walking past with his dogs, as she exits the water and pulls the tight, wetsuit hood from her head.

These surfers have all been punished by the surf; pushed down into the murky depths until their lungs are almost empty. They have also experienced the highs. They know how it feels to paddle into a wave, propelling oneself forward to match its speed and fully committing to taking off from its highest point. On occasion, everything connects perfectly; feet connecting with the deck of the board as one free falls from the lip of the wave, like a bird swooping towards the surface of the sea. Turning the board to carve along the smooth wall of water. The swell continuing its journey towards land with audible force, while the board cuts and glides silently through the wave. The wind blowing away life's cobwebs until, even if briefly, one is free; released of any uncertainty and completely present.

These surfers are the people of our city of Newcastle and of our towns and villages who have made the connection between the land and the sea. Submission to these waters is a beautiful leveller. Here, the surgeon, the surf teacher, the child, the mother, the coxswain, the businessman, the student, the lifeguard, the head teacher, the author and the pro surfer are all equals. They come together to share nature's gift and to connect through a deep-rooted understanding of what draws them into the water. No one is more entitled to the waves than the other. They surf with respect and solidarity, bound by the unwritten rules of the lineup. At the end of a session, they sink down into the sea, both exhausted and euphoric, buoyed by the sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves.

I rinse the sand from the polished teal resin of my surfboard and place it in its rack. Before I peel off my wetsuit, I grab a pen and paper and begin to write. I am the lass, the author, the school run mother, the surfer. Droplets of salt water drip onto the page from my wet hair, but I let the words flow. Inspiration fills the space in my brain too often crowded with overthinking and to do lists. Immersion in the sea washes away the excess noise and leaves space for creativity to grow. For surfing is my meditation. These surfers are my tribe. I came into this community an outsider, but I learned the etiquette and the art of waveriding to the best of my ability, and I was soon accepted. Now, it is my community. These are our waves. I will return to them again tomorrow, the day after, the day after that, and for as long as the swells continue to kiss our shores, because this is a special place.

It is the North Sea.

It is the North.

It is home.

*