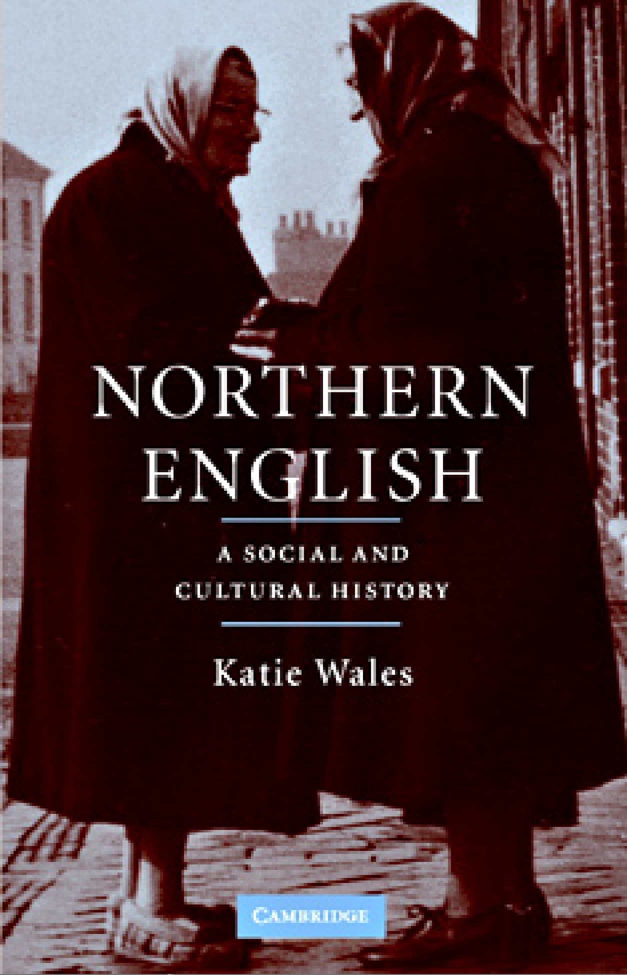

NORTHERN ENGLISH

A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Katie Wales

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Northern English
A Cultural and Social History

English as spoken in the North of England has a rich social and cultural history; however it has often been neglected by historical linguists, whose research has focused largely on the development of 'Standard English'. In this groundbreaking, alternative account of the history of English, Northern English takes centre stage for the first time. Emphasising its richness and variety, the book places Northern speech and culture in the context of identity, iconography, mental maps, boundaries and marginalisation. It re-assesses the role of Northern English in the development of Modern Standard English, draws some pioneering conclusions about the future of Northern English, and considers the origins of the many images and stereotypes surrounding Northerners and their speech. Numerous maps, and a useful index of Northern English words and features, are included. *Northern English: a Cultural and Social History* will be welcomed by all those interested in the history and regional diversity of English.

KATIE WALES is Research Professor in the School of English, University of Sheffield, and formerly Professor of Modern English Language, University of Leeds. Her previous books include *The Language of James Joyce* (1992), *Personal Pronouns in Present Day English* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (2001). She is editor of *Feminist Linguistics in Literary Criticism* (1994), co-editor of *Shakespeare's Dynamic Language: A Reader's Guide* (2000), and co-editor of *Dialectal Variation in English* (1999).

Northern English

A Cultural and Social History

KATIE WALES

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To my parents

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Preface

> It is a universal truth that we have no control over our place of birth but we live with the consequences for ever. (Alan Plater, 1992: 71)

This book is as much a personal journey, as it is a journey in time and space to discover the history of Northern English, itself a story of migrations, emigrations, travel and border-crossings. I was born at the end of the Second World War in Darlington, on the edge of County Durham separated from North Yorkshire by the River Tees. Midway between the glorious Dales and the sea-side, and poised in its dialect between 'Geordie' and Yorkshire English, Darlington was for me the *origo*, the still-point of my personal or 'numinous map', in York-born W. H. Auden's terms (1967: 830), of the North and its ways of speech. *Salve magna parens*. My family rarely ventured north of Newcastle, and Hadrian's Wall was a clear border: for Scotland was certainly perceived as being too far away and too cold, even for us Northerners. J.B. Priestley obviously had similar feelings: north of Newcastle he felt he was 'marooned in Lapland' (1934: 290). For the writer Beryl Bainbridge also, but on the other side of the Pennines, 'the North stretched from Birmingham to Liverpool and then became Scotland' (1987: 15). Rarely did we ourselves venture 'over the top', that is, over the Pennines, to the Lake District; and certainly Blackpool was out of bounds as being 'common'. In the 1920s and 1930s Lancashire folk apparently had misgivings about Scarborough: not that it was 'common' (quite the contrary), but that it 'lay somewhere in the Mysterious East' (Mitchell 1997: 83). Our family holidays were always spent Down South, and so beyond Doncaster on the old A1, our mental boundary of the North–South divide. At the age of eighteen I left the North for London, believing in the Dick Whittington trope, like

Bainbridge and many before me, that its streets were paved with gold. However, I was determined never to lose my short *bath* vowel. After nearly thirty years in the University of London I became the Native Returned, coming back to the North to teach in the University of Leeds, the home of the famous *Survey of English Dialects*, the vision of a scholar himself born in County Durham. Leeds, it must be said, was never part of the 'real' North from my own childhood perspective; but of course, from a southerner's perspective it certainly is; and as a product of the Industrial Revolution and the birthplace of Richard Hoggart, Alan Bennett and Tony Harrison it is integral to the present-day mental and cultural landscapes of the North. West Yorkshire too, like the rest of the North, is in J.B. Priestley's words again 'the region of stone walls'; and to me, as for Priestley himself 'When I see them, I know that I am home again; and no landscape looks quite right to me without them' (1934: 154).

As the North-east writer Alan Plater said in *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1969), 'there is no such thing as cold objectivity, in theatre or anywhere else'. Neither is there, as this book aims to reveal, in media or literary or historical discourses or in perceptions of dialect and accent. Least of all is there cold objectivity in my own narrative, since my own linguistic centre of gravity is the North and especially the North-east. My only defence is that, in order to reclaim the history of Northern English from obscurity and marginalisation, this itself the product unconsciously or consciously of an ideological perspective in the writing of histories of English, it has been necessary, once again, to *feel* what it is like to be a Northerner. To paraphrase a Northern proverb, you can take the woman out of the North, but you can't take the North out of the woman.

The North may be familiar territory to me, but in trying to weave a coherent and plausible narrative of the history of Northern English I have ventured into hitherto unexplored domains. Many puzzles still await an explanation, and many areas still await further research. However, I am grateful to the following people for their patience in responding to my many questions, or for their helpful encouragement: David Bovey, Joan Beal, Helen Berry, David Britain, Malcolm Chase, Stanley Ellis, David Fairer, Alison Findlay, Vic Gammon, Rowena

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Abbreviations and symbols

Cu	Cumberland
DAR	definite article reduction
DARE	*Dictionary of American Regional English*, ed. F.G. Cassidy, 4 volumes, 1985–2002
Du	Durham
EDD	*English Dialect Dictionary*, ed. J. Wright, 6 vols., 1898–1905
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EME	Early Middle English
IE	Indo-European
La	Lancashire
ME	Middle English
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
NATCECT	The National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, University of Sheffield
Nb	Northumberland
NE	North-east
NECTE	Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English
Norw.	Norwegian
NW	North-west
OE	Old English
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition
ON	Old Norse
pl.	plural
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RP	Received Pronunciation
SED	*Survey of English Dialects*, ed. H. Orton et al., 4 volumes, 1962–71
sg.	singular

SW	South-west
US	United States (of America)
We	Westmorland
WGmc	West Germanic
WS	West Saxon
Y	Yorkshire
< >	enclose graphic symbols (letters of the alphabet)
/ /	enclose phonemic symbols
[ ]	enclose phonetic symbols
:	long vowel
ˈ	Main accentual stress or pitch prominence on following syllable

Old English graphic symbols

<ð>	as in *this; thorn*
<Þ>	as in *this; thorn*

Phonemic symbols

/ɪ/	as in RP *hit*
/i:/	as in RP *heat*
/e/	as in RP *hen* (Cardinal Vowel no.2, front mid-close)
/e:/	Cardinal Vowel no. 2 (lengthened)
/ɛ/	Cardinal Vowel no. 3 (front mid-open)
/ɛ:/	Cardinal Vowel no. 3 (lengthened)
/ɜ/	Cardinal Vowel no. 3 (central)
/ə/	as in RP *vanilla*
/ɜ:/	as in RP *bird*
/æ/	as in conservative RP *bat*
/a/	as in German *Mann* (Cardinal Vowel no. 4)
/a:/	Cardinal Vowel no. 4. (lengthened)

/ɑː/	as in RP *part*
/ɒ/	as in RP *dog*
/ɔː/	as in RP *paw*
/uː/	as in RP *food*
/ʊ/	as in RP *sugar*
/ʌ/	as in RP *bud*
/aɪ/	as in RP *night*
/eɪ/	as in RP *day*
/ɒɪ/	as in RP *boy*
/ɑʊ/	as in RP *house*
/əʊ/	as in RP *road*
/oː/	Cardinal Vowel no. 7 (lengthened)
/øː/	rounded Cardinal Vowel no. 2 (lengthened)
/ɪə/	as in RP *ear*
/ɛə/	as in RP *care*
/ʊə/	as in RP *tour*
/p/	as in RP *pin*
/b/	as in RP *bin*
/t/	as in RP *tin*
/d/	as in RP *din*
/k/	as in RP *kin*
/g/	as in RP *gun*
/x/	voiceless velar fricative
/s/	as in RP *sin*
/z/	as in RP *zoo*
/θ/	as in RP *thin*
/ð/	as in RP *this*
/f/	as in RP *fin*
/v/	as in RP *vine*
/ʃ/	as in *RP shin*
/ʒ/	as in RP *genre*
/tʃ/	as in RP *chin*
/dʒ/	as in RP *judge*
/h/	as in RP *house*
/m/	as in RP *mouse*
/n/	as in RP *nice*

/ŋ/	as in RP *singing*
/l/	as in RP *lull*
/r/	as in RP *roll*
/ʁ/	uvular fricative
/j/	as in RP *yawn*
/w/	as in RP *win*
/ʍ/	voiceless labial-velar fricative
/ʔ/	glottal stop or plosive

1 *'The North–South divide'*

1.1 Introduction: an 'alternative' history of English

Imagine a map of England upside down, as if London was not in the South-east, but 'Up North' in the far North-west, where Carlisle should be; and as if Lancaster was roughly in London's present location 'Down South', with Berwick the furthest point south. Even with the map the right way up, and Scotland included, it is hard to accept the fact that, as Cumbrian-born Melvyn Bragg has stated ([1976] 1987: 15) 'Wigton is the middle of the British Isles'. (Pearce (2000: 172 claims Dunsop Bridge in Lancashire for this same 'epicentre'.) For a rich variety of reasons, some of which will be explored in this book, the perceived centre of national gravity, so to speak, whether culturally, politically or economically, is 'Down South', particularly London and its 'Home' Counties, and this is certainly embedded in history; but one of my major aims is to upturn common conceptions of regions by changing the perspective. In focussing on the North of England and Northern English, a region and a dialect with a history that stretches far back before the Norman Conquest, the aim is also to turn upside down common conceptions of the history of the English language by inverting accepted hierarchies of influence and prestige.

By sheer coincidence this same metaphor recurs on the dust-jacket of a recent book by David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (2004). The book's avowed aim is to 'turn the history of English on its head', by placing 'regional speech and writing . . . centre stage'. Crowley (1991: 2) noted over ten years ago how the history of the English language, on the evidence of the many textbooks on the subject, has been a 'seamless narrative' which takes the story actually to be that of 'Standard' English: a metonym for the whole (see also J. Milroy 2002: 7). This is what I would term a 'funnel vision', not a 'tunnel vision' of the development of the language, which has been continually enriched by forms of speech conveniently forgotten or marginalised. Even the four volumes of the *Cambridge History of the English Language* from the Old English period to 1997 have little to say that is not centred on the development of Standard English; nor indeed more recently Fennell (2001). It is essentially the same story that is being told over and over again. Dialects of English, conveniently subsumed under the general term 'non-standard' (and thus labelled *only* in relation to the 'standard', a point to which I shall return), are marginalised and silenced, ceasing to have any significance at all after the Middle English period. At an extreme there is the explicit comment by Burnley, but which is indeed implied in many accounts, that he 'sustains the consensus view of the development of the language through successive historical periods *to the goal* of present-day standard English' (1992b: x, my italics). Such a statement is an inheritance of similar sentiments from language study of the early twentieth century. Here is Wyld's more brutal comment (1929: 16; my italics):

> Fortunately at the present time, the great majority of the English Dialects are of very little importance as representations of English speech, and for our present purpose we can afford to let them go, *except in so far as they throw light* upon the growth of those forms of our language which are the main objects of our solicitude, namely the language of literature and *Received Standard Spoken English*.

Further, given the historical fact that standard written English emerged out of London from the late fifteenth century; given London's influence thereafter on fashionable pronunciation with its associated notions of 'correctness'; and given the basis of 'Received Standard Spoken English' or 'Received Pronunciation' (RP) in the phoneme inventory of Southern English, there has also been a strong bias in histories of English towards both a metropolitan bias, and a southern one: what I shall term *metrocentrism* and *austrocentrism* respectively. So take these statements by Lass (1992: 32): 'English in the *normal* sense means one or more of the standard varieties spoken by educated native speakers . . . These considerations, as well as the weight of tradition, make it *natural* for histories of English to be tilted *south-eastwards* . . .' (my italics). For Trudgill (1999b: 13) and Crystal (2004: 217), it is the dialects in this same 'southeast of England' which rose to prominence, because this is where Oxford and Cambridge, as well as London, were also to be found. In the South-east? Such comments might go unnoticed, so used are we to the absence or 'silence' of dialects in linguistic historical accounts. We are used also to statements like, for example, 'English does not have front rounded vowels.' As Foulkes and Docherty (1999: 12) protest, however, this is really about Received Pronunciation, for front rounded vowels are certainly prevalent in Tyneside speech. Again at an extreme there is the strangely biased view of Zachrisson (1914: 47), which, thankfully, is no longer accepted: 'Northern English is merely a variety of the Standard speech of the Capital. In earlier days London English was the best and purest form of English, and was therefore imitated by provincial speakers.This pure form of English has remained in the North of England.'

As it so happens, David Crystal provided an invited 'Epilogue' to a collection of essays on what is usefully termed 'alternative histories' of English edited by Trudgill and Watts (2002). This must be seen as a watershed for histories of English, which in future, as Crystal clearly recognised, can no longer provide what Trudgill and Watts describe as the same 'system of self-perpetuating orthodox beliefs and approaches . . . passed down from one generation of readers to the next' (2002: 1). Yet it is to be said, my own comments above notwithstanding, that while Crystal's own work (2004) interleaves sections on regional variation in his 'interludes', he otherwise follows the orthodox history of English in the main. It is fitting, however, that a new millennium does appear to be signalling a change of direction in academic discourse towards a more variationist approach. For it is certainly the case, as I shall discuss further in chapter 5, that on the one hand vernaculars continue to be 'threatened' by Standard English but also, on the other hand, there are yet clear signs, especially in the spoken medium, that the ideological hegemony of a 'Standard' is being seriously undermined.

This book, then, is a contribution to the 'Alternative History' of the English language. So far as I know, there is no similar focussed account of the history of a variety of English in England that is not the Standard; and certainly not of Northern English, whose ‘pedigree’ is much older. Even book-length studies of Northern English viewed synchronically are rare. One hundred years ago appeared R. J. Lloyd’s *Northern English* (1899), but a short description only of phonology. Yet Northern history and culture of itself has attracted considerable academic interest (see Musgrove 1990, Jewell 1994 and Kirk (ed.) 2000 in particular), and is the focus of such significant journals as *Northern History* and the *Northern Review*. Interestingly, however, thirty-five years ago Tomaney (1969: 64) complained about the tendency for historians to ‘reduce a complex and variegated history of English to a version of the history of the southern core’.

As I hope to reveal, the history of Northern English certainly raises interesting questions about the notion of a ‘standard language’. One important and recurring theme is that, in fact, Northern English (and its speakers) since the fifteenth century is perceived very much in relation to an Other, the prestigious Standard English, which is perceived as superior: thus, along with other vernaculars, dismissed not only as ‘non-standard’, but also therefore as ‘subordinate’: cf. the *OED*’s definition of *dialect:* ‘One of the *subordinate* forms or varieties of a language arising from local *peculiarities* of pronunciation and idiom . . .’ (my italics). Further, historically also dialects like Northern English are seen essentially as ‘sub-standard’: socially stigmatised and culturally inferior, ‘provincial’ and (in particular) ‘working class’ and ‘uncouth’. As Colls says very strongly (1998: 196–7): ‘In England, to be called a region from some metaphorical ‘centre’ is an act of patronage . . . regions are . . . used to fix a place’s relationship to power rather than geography.’ Or, as Jackson puts it, ‘To refer to a dialect is to make a political rather than a strictly linguistic judgment’ (1989: 159). For Northern English (as indeed for Cornwall English no doubt), such a biased opposition is most likely influenced by the perceived geographical periphery of the region. But in one sense, however regrettable, and however much I shall myself be trying to reclaim Northern English from what are sometimes seen as ‘post-colonial’ phenomena of marginalisation, illegitimacy or subordination, the relationship with Standard English is still part of the modern definition of Northern English, and this 'cultural opposition' in Bakhtin's terms (Morson 1986: 5) has been continuously and dynamically constructed and negotiated over the centuries. However, I have scrupulously tried throughout to avoid using the term *non-standard*, because of its negative ideological connotations.[1] Since the nineteenth century the opposition has been compounded by the intervention of Received Pronunciation, which has deepened a perceived social contrast between working and middle/upper class (chapters 4 and 5). Lying behind the relationship between Northern English and written and spoken standards is the North's general relation to the South, an even more significant, and much older, cultural dialectic, to which I return in the sections below, and which again is a pervasive theme of this book. Despite Jewell's historical treatment of the subject (1994) and essays edited by Baker and Billinge (2004) more recently, this relation, as Samuel had earlier stated (1989: xii), 'remains to a great extent unstudied', especially in linguistic terms.

Yet the reclamation of Northern English does raise other important issues in relation to provinciality, the periphery and so-called 'standard' varieties. Viewed over almost 1,500 years the history of Northern English reveals its own periods of cultural and literary prestige; and also time and again as we shall see, reveals the general fact that community and supra-local 'norms' of language or 'regional standards' exert as much influence as extra-regional, right up to the present day. There is also the fact that, particularly in the North-west and the far North-east, dialect, identity and literary output through the centuries have been shaped as much as by the attraction or pull of a Scottish 'standard' as by an English. Indeed, for some linguists the speech of these regions even at the present day could equally be regarded as Scots (Tom McArthur, p.c.). Moreover, in the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, as we shall see in chapter 2, the North of England, whose domain stretched from Edinburgh to the Humber, remained politically, culturally and also linguistically distinctive, almost another ‘country’.[2] Even after the ravages of the early Vikings in the late eighth century which destroyed the best of Northern arts and literature famed throughout Europe, the North, precisely because of these same Scandinavian tribes who turned settlers, remained distinctive. York became the capital of a powerful Anglo-Scandinavian and ecclesiastical ‘province’ (the antonym of ‘provincial’) with its own distinctive language and laws, and the locus arguably of an important standard or linguistic ‘norm’ within the region’s bounds. Interestingly, Trudgill (1999b: 13) contemplates what might have been, in another twist to the idea of turning ideas upside down. ‘If the capital of England had been, say, York, then Standard English today would have shown a close resemblance to northern dialects of English.’ In actuality, the capital of part of England certainly has been York, and a strong challenger until the Industrial Revolution to London’s dominance; and it is precisely because of this, as we shall see in chapter 3, that Northern English did have some considerable influence on the emerging ‘Standard English’. Moreover, Northern English had momentous effects on the English language in general, since its dramatic sea-change from a highly inflected language to its so-called ‘analytic’ form happened first in the North.

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[1] In the discourse of pedagogy *non-standard* is sometimes synonymous with *ungrammatical* or *unidiomatic*: as in the QCA document *Improving Writing at Key Stages 3 and 4* (1999), where it is equated with a 'poor understanding of written standard English', 'errors', and inappropriate 'informality' (p. 19). Cheshire and Stein (1997) try to distinguish between *vernacular* and *non-standard*, but do admit that their contributors vary in their use of these terms (p. 11).

While it has to be said that this significant shift has been much discussed in histories of English, the idea of a possible catalyst of an Anglo-Scandinavian koiné has been underplayed; and the mechanisms or agencies and motivations for the influence of Northern English on London English have been seriously left unexplained. The so-called ‘spread’ of Northernisms is presented simply as a fait accompli. This does lead to problems of understanding and explanation, and I cannot say that I have necessarily resolved them. Clearly, a scarcity of relevant documents and documentation does not help. Other problems have to do with what I term the ‘anachronistic fallacy’ or what Banton (1980: 21) terms ‘chronocentrism’: the tendency to interpret other historical periods in terms of the values and concepts of the present time, and hence to see language change and diffusion from a modern, and particularly urban, even metropolitan, sociolinguistic perspective. I recognise that my own ideas and approaches are not all of them found in the conventional textbooks, in my attempt to imagine what it must have been like to be a Northerner in a distant time whose mental map of the landscape, its boundaries and trade routes, would have been quite different. One version of chronocentrism is certainly to underestimate the significance of waterways, as distinct from roadways, for Northern success and influence, and more research is needed. For despite the persistent image of isolation, the North's 'water-map' included the great estuaries of the Clyde and the Humber in the Anglo-Saxon period, 'highways to wider worlds' (Musgrove 1990: 45); the ports of Newcastle for coal with a direct sea-route to London, and of Liverpool and Whitehaven, gateways to Ireland and to the United States for exports and a flow of immigration and emigration (chapters 3 and 4).

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[2] C. H. Williams (1993: 176) notes how Northumbria was not fully incorporated into the English state until the 1530s. The prince bishops of Durham used to hold their own parliament and mint their own money.

Other problems of understanding and explanation are connected to the very fact of standardisation itself: notably with the gradual suppression over time of dialect syntax and spellings in printed public documents reflecting local accents in public writing as the written standard grammar and orthography took hold. As Cheshire and Stein (1997: 5) have said, and as will certainly be revealed in chapter 5, it is thus very difficult to 'relate present-day dialect forms to past . . . and to establish historical continuities'. But the general lack of interest in dialect grammar on the part of modern linguists does not help: the codification of the language essentially means the codification of Standard English.

There is the danger, it has to be said, that the suppression of the vernaculars in the written standard belies their strong voice in the spoken medium, however hard to retrieve before an age of technical recording. (But even in this new age, studies of dialect prosody, for example, are rare, as we shall see in chapter 5.) The emphasis on the written standard and the apotheosis of Wyld's mainstream literary standard in our educational system also suppress the flourishing dialect voices in popular literature, both oral and written. This book is therefore a 'cultural' as well as social history of Northern English in the broadest sense in order to bring into stronger focus the North's rich heritage of genres such as ballads and dialogues, particularly from the eighteenth century onwards (see chapters 3 and 4): confirming a continuing sense of strong regional, and also local, identities.[3]

As we shall see time and again from chapter 3 onwards, literature written in 'deviant' dialect spellings has generally been received by readers and reviewers outside the region with either distrust or disgust. It is dismissed as unintelligible, and its authors as uneducated. An author who attempts to represent local dialect is caught in the double bind of having no local 'standard' orthography that is not the mainstream, and so must invent his or her own. Yet dialect spelling provides useful evidence in the reconstruction of historical linguistic features, despite some modern academic misgivings. For while it may be technically inconsistent and potentially an inaccurate guide to accent, we have to recognise, as Murray states (1873: vi), that it is 'in so many cases . . . our only guide to the living organism which once breathed within'. And whilst we must also allow for literary licence in representation, there is no doubt that local authors were generally sensitive to the 'high-frequency variables' (Glauser 1997: 125) or shibboleths of their vernacular, whether pronunciations, lexis or discourse markers, in those genres which attempted to mimic or recreate the informality of everyday dialect in use. Indeed, without such popular literature valuable clues would be lost. While cultural historians of the Industrial Revolution have recognised, as we shall see in chapter 4, the social value of the ballads of the mill-worker and pitman, they await further linguistic and pragmatic analysis; as indeed the songs and play-bills of the Northern music-hall which flourished well into the twentieth century (chapter 4).

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[3] Studies of the history of Northern literature generally are surprisingly scarce, although northern texts have featured in studies of the nineteenth-century regional novel (see e.g. Snell 1998; also Pocock 1978). Russell's (2004) study of popular cultural representations of the North since the nineteenth century unfortunately appeared too late for discussion here. Students of Wordsworth are rarely introduced to the Cumbrian ballad tradition from which he drew inspiration, the focus of 3.4. Despite its title, Craigie's *The Northern Element in English Literature* published some seventy years ago (1933) is mostly about the 'far North' of Scotland and Scandinavia. But his rueful comment on the North's 'absence' in histories of English literature provides a nice illustration of one of the enduring myths of the North, discussed further below (1.3) and in chapter 2: perhaps, he says, it is because the North was 'regarded with the same aversion as the Frisians who gave it the significant name of *de grime herne*, "the grim corner of the world"' (p. 9).