

The NEHU Journal

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Editorial

I begin this editorial with an apology for the delay in getting the present issue off. Actually it was not planned to be a literature issue, as it has turned out to be, courtesy the hard work put behind it by the Associate Editor. It was meant to be a social science issue that somehow could not happen, though not the least for lack of submissions. There were enough submissions, but they were

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Literature is quite a different cup of tea. It is about creativity, and any piece of creativity is an object of art. Hence at least worth having a critical look at it, if not appreciate it, particularly if the creator is not a celebrated figure. But one must move on with the belief that some of the best creations can come out of the fingers of the most ignoble, the most uncelebrated, the most unknown, and the most unexpected...

NEHU

This issue is dedicated to such a possibility.

T B Subba
Editor

CoEditorial

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Mr. Basil Griffiths is a well known Welsh poet and writer of Pontypridd Wales. He is the grandson of Dr. Griffith Griffiths, the first ever medical missionary in the Khasi hills. After spending the greater part of his working life as a police inspector he retired to become a fulltime writer. His web page is www.scrivener.supanet.com.

The Life and Work of the First Welsh Medical Missionary in the Khasi Hills

BASIL GRIFFITHS

Section I

Introduction

In order to understand the nature of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist (Presbyterian) mission to the Khasi Hills (or Byrniau Cassia as it is called in Wales), it is necessary to understand something of the Welsh nation and the social background of the missionaries themselves.

The Welsh are an ancient Celtic people whose ancestors, up until the sixth century A.D., occupied practically the whole of what is known today as Great Britain. Invasions by peoples from the area of north west Germany, notably the Saxons and Angles (hence the present day name of *Angleland* or *England*) from whose Germanic tongue the present day English language developed; and over centuries this colonisation pushed the native Celts into the mountainous area known today as Wales. It was here on the large peninsula on the western side of the British Island, facing its fellow Celtic land of Ireland, that the Welsh (Celts) took refuge in a mountain fastness, thus maintaining their ancient language, culture and independence until invaded and conquered by the English King Edward I in the thirteenth century. It was

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these invaders that chose to call the Celts by the Germanic term for foreigners - *wallesi*, later evolving into the English term *welsh*. The Welsh themselves used the term *Cymro* (meaning comrades) and their country *Cymru* (pronounced *Kum-ree*).

Laitiam or Free from Weeping
(For Kynpham who showed it to me)

Below the terrible drop
At the gorge's floor
It is free from weeping
For an incestuous moon
Pursuing his sister sun
Or redcoats pursuing archers
In the raping of a land

And those Cymro
In pursuit of souls
Stopping the music
Stopping the dance
While the people
Dry eyed in denial
Carry grief in baskets
As uncaring waves
Breaking the hilltop shore
Though no laughing matter
It is, free from weeping

(Laitiam is the name of a village in the Khasi Hills)

Following the conquest, the last rightful Prince of Wales, Llewelyn Ap Gruffudd, was killed and his head victoriously mounted upon a pole to be paraded through the streets of London. The

English King Edward I subsequently giving his son (later to become Edward II) the usurped title, *Prince of Wales*, a custom adopted by every English monarch since that date.

Despite the oppression of Wales that followed the conquest, its people managed to maintain their sense of national identity together with their distinct culture and language. It is still the case that a Welshman feels resentful at being described as an Englishman: much as a Khasi might feel if referred to as some other Indian community.

Nevertheless the conquest had a devastating effect upon Wales. Welshmen lost ownership of land to become mere tenants of their English masters and were denied the right to trade or even live within the walled towns established by the invaders. In the centuries that followed, the ancient Celtic Christian Church inherited from the Romans, having been abolished was supplanted by the church under the direct rule of Rome.

The sixteenth century reformation in England, the break with Rome, and the establishment of the Anglican Church by Henry VIII coincide with his passing in 1536 an *Act of Union* that made Wales a legally integral part of the English state, which had as its intention to create a united, centralised kingdom through the agency of the English language. The Act forbade the use of ancient Welsh laws, the use of the Welsh language in the courts or by any state official. The Anglican Protestant Church of his creation, with himself as its head ("If a Pope can be a King then a King can be a Pope" he claimed) thus became the official state church in Wales, as it was (and still is) in England. Christian worship outside the Anglican faith was heresy, punishable by death.

The hierarchy of the church was firmly in the hands of the English upper classes. Landowners had the right to appoint the Church Vicar (Pastor) often one of his sons since the position was well remunerated from church monies demanded in the form of tithes (taxes) which had to be paid by an otherwise poverty-stricken

community. It became a tradition amongst the English aristocracy that sons would take up professions either in the army, the law or the church; the arms of the controlling power. As far as Wales was concerned, since the landowner was very often an absent Englishman and his appointed son, with no interest in having to live in backward Wales as a clergyman, then he too would be absent from his parish. There would in any case be little purpose in his presence since his congregation, being Welsh speaking, would not have been able to understand a word of what he said. Often, a curate would be appointed by the absent vicar to carry out his parish duties. Paid a pittance and ill educated, such men often became notorious for drunken and corrupt behaviour.

By the eighteenth century, Wales had become an agricultural and poverty stricken backwater of the British Isles. The Welsh people uneducated, ignorant, devoid of spiritual leadership and, living in a subsistence economy, had succumbed to a moral, spiritual and cultural degeneracy.

It was into this social and spiritual vacuum that the Methodist revival hit Wales in the form of the evangelising George Whitefield, an Englishman and Calvinist, believing in a strict Puritanism together with Calvin's (the Swiss protestant theologian) doctrine of predestination and original sin, whereby at the moment of creation God determined the saved and unsaved amongst the world's population. The latter to form the far greater majority - *many are called but few are chosen*.

The result of the propagation of this new faith in Wales had an effect akin to the application of a lighted match to a petrol soaked bonfire. By the early years of the nineteenth century there had been set up some 400 Calvinistic Methodist (later to be renamed Presbyterian) congregations within Wales. Their activities involved the setting up of schools and preaching that social betterment could only be obtained through education, self-improvement and the living of a frugal and moral life. But above all, the translation of the Bible

into the Welsh language and the advent of mass printing, meant that for the first time Welsh speaking people were able to read the scriptures for themselves, and soon the family Bible (*y Bibl Tyli*) had pride of place in the most humble of homes; read aloud every day and within which all family births, marriages and deaths were meticulously recorded. It was this linguistic association with the Bible that caused the Welsh language to be claimed as *the language of heaven*. What is more, this new literacy led to the establishment of Welsh language newspaper, the writing of poetry, and the reading of literary works.

There were other consequences. The Welsh language already under threat from the dominant English culture was given a new meaning and lease of life, politically the transmission of ideas by way of the written word led to the adoption of liberalism as the main political philosophy of the Welsh; after all, liberal thought stood for the freedom of the individual through his own efforts to make his way in the world, regardless of class or inherited wealth. To a people traditionally exploited as tenants at the whim of the English landowners and made subject to the alien English class system, such ideas made an instant appeal, and what is more, they fitted exactly with the teachings of the pulpits of the Calvinistic Methodist Chapels.

A prime example of the marriage of these teachings can be seen in the life of one David Davies of Llandinam. Born in the meanest of circumstances, a sawyer of wood by trade, he became self-educated and was a fervent Calvinistic Methodist. Following the precepts of self-improvement he rose to become the richest man in Wales; building railways, opening up the first coalmines in the upper Rhondda Valley and building the docks, which created the port of Barry in South Wales. He became a Liberal Member of Parliament and donated vast sums to the Calvinistic Methodist (Presbyterian) Church of Wales. He endowed the University of Wales and it was his grandson, who became Lord David Davies Llandinam, who funded the building of Dinam Hall in Shillong.

Yet these developments had other, perhaps less desirable, consequences. Music, other than that of a religious nature, dancing and ancient customs and practices were all condemned as 'the works of Satan!' Even the novel was condemned as unhealthy reading and, as with poetry, could only be tolerated if considered as *pure*. For the Welsh, a musical, ebullient and poetic people the destruction of much of their culture has been a sad deprivation, the effects of which are felt to the present day.

But much of this lost passion was translated into aspects of Welsh religious life. '*The hwyl*,' a form of preaching which at its climax becomes a cross between song and spoken poetry is a peculiar Welsh phenomenon. The dramatic denunciations of sin from the pulpit can easily be imagined to mirror the forebodings of the ancient Welsh druids of the old pagan religion, staff in hand, declaiming on the mountainside against the backdrop of thunder and lightning. This writer has often felt that in Wales, religion owes more to the Old Testament than to the New. Many Khasi people will have become familiar with those old Welsh hymn tunes, *Cwm Rhondda* (Bread of Heaven) *Aberystwyth* and the many others contained in the Khasi Presbyterian Hymnal, demanding a passionate rendering and stand as a remaining legacy of the Welsh mission.

The ministers of the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales had no manner of gentlemen, not in the English aristocratic sense at least. For the most part they were *sons of the soil*, peasant-tenant farming stock or agricultural tradesmen, all of whom had tirelessly sought their own education to enable them to enter and qualify at the Bala Theological College and thus put the coveted *Reverend* before their name; a social background shared by those Welsh missionaries who made their way to Ri Khasi in the nineteenth century. It has to be said, however, that once having achieved the status accorded to a minister of religion they were elevated in Welsh society to a special position, provided with superior accommodation by the chapels they served and treated with a degree of deference and respect that few others enjoyed.

The Welsh missionaries differed greatly from the more elevated representatives of the British Raj, the army officer, administrator and Anglican priest; all drawn from the English ruling class. As Anglicans they would have viewed the Welsh missionaries not only with some contempt, but have regarded them as very much their social inferiors. The trials of Thomas Jones, the first missionary, *father of the Khasi alphabet*, former farm labourer and sometime carpenter, at the hands of Commissioner Harry Inglis illustrates this point.

In Wales, although there remained much resentment against English domination which gave rise to small scale revolt from time to time, the overall message of the Welsh Nonconformist Church was one of pacifism, an acceptance of the political system however reluctant that acceptance might be: better to pursue enlightenment and social betterment through the liberal ethic of self-improvement, than resort to any form of violence (At the time of the First World War and to a lesser extent the Second, many Welshmen refused to serve in the armed forces on religious grounds). To the Welsh church, revolt became synonymous with *Godlessness* and even the growth of trade unionism was condemned, not surprisingly since much of its revenue came from the likes of industrialist David Davies.

Following the establishment of the Welsh Mission and its success in attracting large numbers of Khasi adherents, it was not long before the administrators of the Raj realised the value of the popularisation of a faith which preached non-violence and the acceptance of authority, alien or otherwise. Hence, by the mid-century the government not only tolerated but encouraged the work of the missionaries even to the extent of helping to fund the mission schools; albeit, while no doubt still maintaining an attitude of haughty social superiority.

There was inevitably hostility towards the missionaries expressed in some acts of violence by the Khasi people in the early days of the mission. Such hostility could hardly have been

surprising. One hesitates to wonder what the native Welsh reaction might have been to a group of Hindu or Moslem coming amongst them, evangelising their religion while at the same time condemning Welsh customs and religion as wickedness!

It would be easy to adopt a cynical perspective toward the motivation of the Welsh missionary, certainly they would have enjoyed a more comfortable life had they remained in Wales, cosseted by the congregations of the chapels they served. There can be no doubt that they were driven by the sense of mission to carry the message of Christianity to what they would have regarded as the lost heathen multitudes. Like all evangelists they held a certainty in their belief, a belief that overrode any respect for the ancient beliefs and customs of those who they had come to save from everlasting fire and perdition. It also has to be remembered that the concepts of the nineteenth century, particularly amongst those who had lived their lives on remote farmsteads in isolated Wales, for the most part untravelled, in many cases not even as far as England, were simplistic in the extreme. They would have suffered a naivety beyond anything contemplated in our modern world, yet they were prepared to embark upon enterprises into the unknown which took them 4000 miles and halfway across the globe, often by sail. A present day journey to the moon might be less daunting.

By the 1870s an argument raged within the Welsh Missionary Society at home in Wales. Should the society's purpose be one of education, health care as some pressed for, or was not the enterprise properly one of simply saving souls and conversion to Christianity? Education to the point of literacy to enable converts to read the Bible was one thing, but further education and the provision of health care by an organisation that was largely funded by the pennies of the impoverished Welsh chapelgoer, was another. This view was allegedly expressed by Reverend T. Jarmen Jones, who claimed in 1876 that not only were Khasi boys and girls not fit for higher education, but also of the Welsh Mission he wrote, "We have come for religion and not education."

The contrary view won. Reports describing the desperate plight of the Khasi people who suffered frequent plagues of cholera, malaria, tuberculosis etc., resulted in the Society becoming convinced that the setting up of a Medical Mission was justified, not only on humanitarian grounds, but it would do much to attract the Khasi people to convert to Christianity. The policy in respect of the provision of higher education also underwent change, even Jarmen Jones coming to accept it as a worthwhile activity.

Section II

Reverend Dr. Griffith Griffiths, the first Welsh Medical Missionary

The pages that follow will deal primarily with the life and work of the first Medical Missionary to be appointed to Ri Khasi by the Welsh mission in 1879, namely the Rev. Dr. Griffith Griffiths. He is chosen not only because he arrived in the area at a time when the mission had been firmly established but because of the author's knowledge of his life and family background. It is also intended to relate his story to the other relevant issues, together with the author's experience of visiting those areas that were the scene of Dr. Griffiths' activities.

Born in 1852 at Aberdaron on the Lleyn Peninsula, my grandfather, the Rev. Dr. Griffith Griffiths was the son of Richard Griffiths, a stern Calvinist sea captain and part owner of a small ship, a native of the nearby township of Nevern, who married Ellen Hughes of Ty Mawr Farm, Aberdaron (her nephew is claimed to have been Charles Stuart Hughes, the American lawyer who became Secretary of State in the Hoover administration, was twice Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and had earlier stood as the Republican candidate for the US Presidency in the election won by Woodrow Wilson).

It was said of the sea captain that he ruled his crew with a whip in one hand and a Bible in the other! Lleyn was the heartland of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism and it is small wonder that the

young Griffith Griffiths grew up as a pious and dutiful child. It is said that as a mere infant he would go to the seashore, at Uwchmynedd bordering the farm, and standing on a particular rock would preach to the seagulls. A rock being known locally as 'pulpit Griffith *bach*' (Little Griffiths' pulpit). Later he was to devour the stories of the intrepid Christian missionaries of the day taking advantage of an ever growing British empire and harbouring ambitions to follow in their footsteps.

But this phase passed and with approaching manhood he turned away from religious belief. His father held hopes that Griffiths, as the eldest son, would naturally follow in his footsteps ultimately taking over the command of his ship, the 'Carmel,' and there must have been no little domestic consternation when Griffiths expressed his determination to leave home to study medicine at Glasgow University.

At Glasgow the young Griffiths was successful in obtaining both his M.B. and C.M. (Surgery) degrees, but it was while still a student that an incident occurred that altered the whole course of his life and which still has consequence in distant Meghalaya; the name since given to the area which includes the Khasi Hills by an independent Republic of India.

Sankey and Moody, the American evangelists were touring Great Britain preaching salvation and Griffiths, attending their meeting in Glasgow, was fired with a renewal of his childhood faith and that of his calling to enter the missionary field. As a result, a newly qualified Dr. Griffith Griffiths made application to the Welsh Missionary Society, which was looking for a medically qualified minister to inaugurate a medical mission as a part of the already established Welsh Calvinistic Mission in the Khasi Hills of Assam.

His application was accepted. But first it was necessary for Griffiths to train for the ministry, and having attended the Theological College at Bala he was ordained into the Calvinistic Methodist ministry at the Sasiwn held at Llansamlet in 1878. He

had now become the Rev. Dr. Griffith Griffiths.

Whilst at Bala a fellow student and distant relative Robert Evans (who became known in the Ri Khasi as *tonic sol-fa Evans*, publishing a Khasi singing manual using the tonic system), had also applied and been accepted to serve in the missionary field. But it was necessary that young men embarking on such an enterprise should be safely married and accompanied by their wives, much as a result of the disapproved love affair of Thomas Jones who had originally established the mission in 1842. Accordingly the two young men set about fulfilling this requirement in a businesslike manner.

It happened that the recently deceased Moderator of the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales, founder and first Principal of Bangor Normal College, the Rev. John Phillips, (typically Phillips, born in humble circumstances, studying at night by candlelight to obtain his education, walked the six hundred miles to Edinburgh, Scotland, to study for the ministry), had left three unmarried daughters. It was to two of these young ladies that the young men put their proposals, both of marriage and that of sharing a life of hardship dedicated to God's work in the missionary field. Whether as a result of 'love at first sight' or in response to a call to do their Christian duty, the two young women Annie and Bulkley Phillips married the fledgling missionaries Griffith Griffiths and Robert Evans respectively (The peculiar name 'Bulkley' for a girl seems to have resulted from a family relationship, on the part of her mother, to the minor aristocratic Bulkley family on Anglesey; involving, I have been led to believe, an elopement by a music teacher with his young lady pupil, a daughter of the Bulkleys).

Their marriage took place at the chapel at Pengarnedd on Anglesey. I still have in my possession a silver plated fork which is the sole remnant of a canteen of cutlery bearing the initials AG (Annie Griffiths), a wedding present from the former sawyer and self-made Montgomeryshire industrialist, Liberal Member of Parliament for Cardigan, owner of the Ocean Coal Company, creator of Barry docks and builder of railways: David Davies of Llandinam.

Following their marriage on 19th October 1878 the couple set sail for India, reaching the Khasi Hills in late December. The young doctor was just 26 years of age. It is difficult for us today to imagine the audacity of such an enterprise on the part of the young Welsh couple. The Khasi Hills were then a distant and largely undeveloped corner of the British Empire; their arrival in Calcutta, the then bustling former capital of British India, amidst heat and poverty, would have represented a severe culture shock; before embarking on the arduous journey across the plains of present day Bangladesh, via Sylhet to Sohra (Cherrapunji) to be welcomed by their fellow Welsh missionaries at the mission's headquarters in that township.

My Arrival

My own arrival, in what had been in my grandfather's (Rev. Dr. Griffith Griffiths) day, an Assam that included the Khasi Hills, was by air from Calcutta. Landing at Guwahati airport, I was surprised to be asked to show my passport, after all was I not still in the Republic of India? An official who explained answered my query politely, "You see this is a restricted area." It was not until I arrived in Shillong the capital of Meghalaya that I understood the full portent of this information.

Guwahati is a predominantly Assamese town, sprawling and chaotic, reminiscent of Calcutta for its poverty. The surrounding area regularly suffers from the devastation of flooding as the monsoon rains pour down from the hills into the mighty Brahmaputra River along which the town is sited. As I had been advised I made my way to the 'share-taxi stand' in central Guwahti and booked my place on the three-hour ride to Shillong.

The cost of this journey like everything else in India is ludicrously cheap to the western pocket: a seat in this taxi (a minibus) for the one hundred mile plus journey was a mere 90 rupees, about £1.50p. but I am over six feet tall weighing seventeen stone, at least double the size of the other passengers who would

be crammed in, four to a bench type seat. I thought it prudent to buy two seats to accommodate my girth!

The driver of the taxi spoke no English and I was grateful to a Khasi lady accompanied by her daughters who acted as interpreter for me. "Where are you from?" she asked. "Wales." I answered. "Are you a missionary?" I was to find (to my personal embarrassment on occasions, especially in view of my ancestry) that, even if not a missionary, Khasi people could not conceive of a Welshman who was not a devout tee-total, twice on a Sunday chapel attending Presbyterian. On the other hand it was refreshing to be in a distant part of the world where I was not reduced to drawing little maps, as I have done so often in other parts of the world, to illustrate the geographical position of Wales whilst insisting it to be a separate country and that I am not an Englishman!

Darkness had begun to fall and the journey was uneventful. The temperature dropped sharply as we climbed higher into the hills. It had not occurred to me that I might feel the cold anywhere in India, but after the heat of Bengal and now some 5000 feet above sea level, I felt the need for additional clothing. Approaching Shillong where, by telephoning ahead, I had booked myself into the Shillong Club, reputedly in the days of the Raj, one of the great old clubs of India, I noticed a great deal of police activity and before long we were being stopped at a series of security road blocks at the outskirts of the city.

I was dropped off at the Shillong Club where I had booked a room. The following day I had some very welcome visitors. Leslie Harding Pde and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih came to welcome me to Shillong. Leslie (known locally as Harding I was to discover) is a former government officer and since retirement, a prolific writer of books in both English and Khasi and Kynpham is a college lecturer and poet; both of whom I had met in Wales when they were touring the country with a group of visiting Khasi writers, poets and musicians. I had the honour of arranging their performance at Pontypridd in South Wales. Their visit to the town had a special

significance: Pontypridd is the birthplace of the Welsh National Anthem, *Mae hen wlad fyn hadau* (*Land of my Fathers*) sung to the same tune as *Ri Khasi, Ri Khasi* (just one of the many connections which still exist between the Khasi people and Wales). It was a moving moment when at the end of the performance, the packed concert room stood enmass with the Khasi performers, to sing the two anthems, in the two languages and in musical unison.

My two Khasi friends at once set about in organising of my itinerary. Their guidance proved invaluable and as a result I was able to pay informed visits to sights of both ancient Khasi and missionary significance. This kindness has been placed at my disposal not only on my first stay but also on subsequent visit to Ri Khasi. I was also delighted to again make contact with other Khasi people who I had previously met in Wales, notably Leslie's son, Desmond Kharmawphlang, a poet and academic.

The Shillong Club in which I stayed was a friendly and interesting place. The legend above the club's main door read - *ESTABLISHED 1878*, the very year that my grandfather arrived in Ri Khasi. However, I had grave doubts that he would ever have set foot in such an establishment, where army officers, British administrators and visiting tea planters would have pickled their bellies with gins, whisky and brandies. Certainly not the place for a tee-total Presbyterian Welshman let alone one of the cloth! I was later to understand that a fire destroyed the greater part of the club in the years immediately after the British left India; all that remained was the club library, which I visited. It was an eerie experience to see hundreds of long-out-of print English language books, decayed and presumably now unread, all dating from the 1920s, 1930s and before. It occurred to me that someone with knowledge of the value of old books might make a fruitful investigation of the place.

The following day I received a visit from Bevan Swer, head of the Khasi Department at North-Eastern Hill University. Bevan had visited Wales the previous year reading his poetry at various

venues throughout the country. In Wales poetry readings tend to take place in public houses (pubs) and Bevan had in fact read at a pub called 'The Wheatsheaf' at Llantrisant, not one kilometre from my home; but alas I was away at the time and unable to attend.

Together with Leslie we set out to visit the tourist sights of Shillong. The Elephant Falls, unfortunately not displaying its full glory due to the season, the Shillong Peak overlooking the whole of the city displaying an impressive and spectacular panorama. We ended our day with a visit to another relic of the 'Raj,' the Shillong golf clubhouse overlooking its immense golf course. I was told that in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Welsh Missionary Thomas Jones over one million Khasis had assembled at the course; more than had turned out to greet the Pope! But for me the building held an atmospheric attraction, one that conjured up ghosts from the past, grandees of the British 'Raj' ex-patriate society, attempting to recreate the golfing upper class world they had left at home.

Mawphlang

'*Don ha pydeng ki dieng martl,*' to the tune of *Gwm Rhondda* (*Lead me O' thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land*). In Wales, the best loved of hymns, sung not only in church but also at international rugby football matches to urge the Welsh team to ever-greater efforts to defeat their English opponents; or whenever Welsh people gather together for a *singsong*. Now I was standing in the church at Mawphlang hearing that great hymn sung so sweetly by a congregation composed of children, their voices displaying all the passion and '*hwyl*' that the piece demands.

There could not have been a clearer demonstration of the legacy of the Welsh missionaries, regardless of belief I could not help but be filled with a deep sense of emotion, made more poignant by the knowledge that I was in a church established by my

grandfather over 120 years ago. I felt dampness in my eyes.

Atop a small nearby hillock, set amongst pine trees, is a dispensary containing what might be described as a mini-hospital. This too was the creation of the Rev. Dr. Griffiths. Like the church, the original building would have been destroyed during the great earthquake of 1897, but its successor is still very much in operation. Visiting the dispensary I was to find patients being attended by Dr. (Mrs) P. Nongrum assisted by nursing sisters D. Dohling and B. Langstieh, the latter having served at the dispensary for over 30 years.

Leaving Ri Khasi

Departing this other land of my fathers
sadness pervades
remembering the chapel of Mawphlang
cloned from *Penmaenmawr*
where the forgotten hymns of home
sound out in conviction
from the hearts of children
Cwm Rhondda, Caersalem,
never sweeter sung
as the salted *hiraeth* of my eye
suppressed in the choke
engulfing my unbelieving self.

Writing of his arrival with my grandmother at Mawphlang in 1878 my grandfather reported, "About six years to these days (the end of February) I passed through Mawphlang for the first time and the place looked very cold, no one to be seen who cared for us."

My own reception at Mawphlang could not have been more different. Together with my ever-willing friend Leslie we had hired a taxi: it was my first glimpse of the countryside outside Shillong. The countryside, with which I was to become so very familiar,

reminded me greatly of my native Wales. Green rolling hills with winding roads passing through small hamlets: I noted the cleanliness of the habitations compared to that which I had seen in Calcutta and Guwahati. I puzzled at the description of Ri Khasi as the 'Scotland of the east,' a country more famed for its craggy mountains than undulating terrain.

However, I have to admit to some apprehension concerning the style of driving that I was experiencing; overtaking enormous lorries at blind bends, on the wrong side of the road accompanied by a furious blowing of the horn, was not the style of driving that was within my level of mental tranquility! Yet, frequent visits and much traveling on Khasi roads has since raised my level of faith in the practice.

We stopped on the outskirts of Mawphlang at the home of some of Leslie's relatives. Here lived Orlando Budon with his wife and small son Ebenezer, as did Orlando's younger brother Desmond Rimaki Sunn. Orlando, a local teacher, was obliged to supplement his income by also working as an electrician, whilst Desmond was studying for his B.A. degree.

Orlando and Desmond joined us as we set out for Mawphlang proper. After a short while we came upon a group of men dressing a recently slaughtered pig. The carcass was being removed of its hair by the passing over its skin of a lighted brand of twigs, whilst alongside lay the innards in the process of being prepared for consumption. Once again my thoughts turned to home where the pig has always played an important part of the native diet, a symptom of poorer economies. The offal in particular is highly prized, the pig's stomach lining sold as *tripe*, its gut as *chitterling*, liver whole or minced as *faggot* balls; to be found on market stalls throughout Wales. Pig's head, as in Ri Khasi is boiled up, but sold as brawn in the form of jellied meat.

Arriving at Mawphlang proper I was shown the notorious

'Scott Road,' the cause of a bitter five-year war between the British and the Khasi people. The actual cause is still a matter of dispute, Khasi verbal history insists that it resulted from a duplicity on the part of the British in the breaking of a treaty, whereby they were given permission to build the road through Khasi territory on condition that previously seized territory be returned to Khasi sovereignty. Yet, according to one British writer, the whole thing was a big mistake arising from false information being spread by a Bengali that the British would use the road to subjugate the whole Khasi nation. Whatever the truth of the Khasi version of events (and there is no evidence to the contrary), it seems highly unlikely that the ever expanding British Raj would not have annexed the whole of Assam, including Ri Khasi, particularly since its conquest of Burma (on the pretext that it had the audacity to tax British goods), was accomplished not so many years later. The then British Foreign Secretary, Randolph Churchill (father of Sir Winston Churchill), proudly declaring that he secured Burma as '*a birthday present for Queen Victoria!*'

In 1879 the road represented the only accessible pathway from Sohra to Mawphlang. Despite its age, and although overgrown, it still appears to be in remarkably good condition. It must have been upon this road, probably on foot, that my grandparents would have arrived at Mawphlang having walked the long journey from the Mission headquarters at Sohra. It was a mere two months since they had arrived in the hills and in all probability, still only able to speak, at best, some rudimentary Khasi; accompanied by bearers carrying what belongings that might be transported in this way. I have no written or verbal record of the circumstances concerning this journey, but standing at the point where the road entered Mawphlang, my mind's eye did its best to recreate the scene. The couple would have been faced with providing the immediate necessities of life, primarily that of finding shelter, and that in the face of what would have certainly been disinterestedness on the part of the inhabitants if not some hostility. In 1875 it was reported

that there was not one single Christian in Mawphlang, which gives no small indication of the task facing the missionary.

But within six years he was able to claim 63 firm converts to the church, which he had established, with many more attending his Sunday services. In addition, the Sunday school under the care of my grandmother was attracting 50 to 80 scholars. At this time he was also concerned to secure funds for the building of a chapel (church), which without pulpit, benches or lamps, would cost one hundred pounds, in today's money the equivalent of Rs. 15,60,000/-. Whilst at Mawphlang I spoke with a member of the church committee, M. S. Kharshiing, who told me that he was researching the early history of the church. I asked him what the current membership was at Mawphlang. "Only fifteen hundred" he replied.

At the time of their arrival at Mawphlang my grandmother was already pregnant and four months later she was delivered of a daughter. The child, christened Eleanor Mary by the Rev. T. Jarmen Jones, lived for just two days. During the twenty-seven years of their stay in the Khasi Hills the couple had eleven children, only five were to survive beyond the age of three years. I also conclude that for over one third of that time my grandmother was expecting a child, a heavy burden considering her involvement in the work of my grandfather.

The loss of this child seems to have dictated that nearly all the subsequent births would take place at Shillong where medical attention would be more available. The following is a record contained in the Griffiths' family Bible of these births, deaths and baptisms, written in my grandfather's own hand. Interestingly, this record shows that the last child born in 1895 was christened by a Khasi minister, Rev. Amirkha Chyne. So it seems that Khasi boys were suitable for higher education after all! Once again, this child died in infancy, having lived for only five months.

Child mortality was clearly a late nineteenth century problem in the Khasi Hills for both Khasi and missionaries alike and when

in later years the medical mission came of age and more facilities became available, there was a concentration on childbirth. One of the last of the medical missions to leave Mawphlang in 1966 was Sister Bronwyn Davies, now an aging lady living at Pontypridd in Wales.

While visiting Mawphlang we took a picnic near the sacred grove, a small wood some 500 metres from the church. The world suddenly became a smaller place when we were joined by Clan Lyngdoh (headman) King Kerious Lyngdoh and Local Lyngdoh and Danny Kharshiing. They informed me that it was Sister Bronwyn Davies who had brought them both into the world and in fact given them their names, *King* and *Danny*. This retired lady had been present at the 'Khasi Concert' given at Pontypridd and Leslie well remembered having met her. A lady named Idiancy Rangslang also joined us; she had been a helper in the kitchen of the dispensary under Sister Davies. It was clear that the Sister was held in high regard by the many people who mentioned her name to me during my visit.

I had brought with me some bottles of beer with which to wash down the food kindly provided by Leslie Pde. In addition, Danny Kharshiing had left to return with some *kababs* of pork meat, the product of that very animal which we had seen earlier being cleaned on the hillside. We were enjoying this repast in the sunshine when one of the party remarked to me, "I wonder what your grandfather might think if he is able to look down from above and see you here at the place where he did so much good work?"

"You think that possible?" I asked,

"Yes."

"Then hide the beer!" I replied urgently.

Yet humour aside, it was a strange feeling to be relaxing at this beauty spot, a place where over one hundred years ago, my infant uncles and aunts might have played their childish games, a

place which had consequences for the nature of my own childhood; brought up in a house in Wales, which proudly bore the word 'KHASIA' on a nameplate affixed to the front wall. A home where I would wonderingly peer at a place called *Shillong* in my school atlas, while sitting on a mantelshelf was a small box with a slit in its top and bearing a fuzzy picture of Khasi children; where small coins were to be placed and bearing the legend *Bryniau Cassia Mission Cymraeg* - 'The Welsh Mission to the Khasi Hills.'

If the conversion of the people of Mawphlang and that of the surrounding villages was proving a slow process for Dr. Griffiths, his medical work grew apace. By 1884 he was receiving the assistance of U Ngorsing, an evangelist, who took over the administration of the doctor's surgery work. He described how in that year he had received over 1000 patients at his surgery, of which only a minority were Christians. Such patients came from as far away as Jaintia and in all there were over 4000 visits by patients who were more often than not accompanied by two or three friends. Thus the evangelist Ngorsing was ever provided with a ready-made congregation to listen to his words. In addition he paid 1021 visits to patients in their homes. On top of all this work, his small hospital having been opened, he performed 60 operations.

A cholera epidemic broke out around this time, which particularly afflicted Mawkdok, Nonglwai, Mawbeh, and most virulently in Kukon where the death rate was highest. U Ngorsing accompanied the doctor on his visits to these villages and has left a record of his experiences. He quotes an example of two cholera suffering villagers left in a house with a dead body, a woman with her baby left in the jungle, another thought to be dead and cast into the jungle where he continued to live for four days without food or water. These instances do not denote hard-heartedness on the part of the Khasi people, but rather are indicative of the fear, desperation and incomprehension that must inevitably accompany an epidemic

of such proportion.

Water-borne diseases were a major problem in Ri-Khasi and it seems that my grandfather had great difficulty in persuading villagers to remove themselves from infected areas. Two stories have come down to me, although I cannot offer verification as other members of my family told them as hearsay and I leave it to the reader (particularly a Khasi reader) to accept or reject them.

My grandfather was a physically powerful man and the story goes that having reached an impasse with a village headman in his demands that the village be removed to another location, he simply picked the headman up and held him over a fire until he agreed to meet the demand.

The other describes a similar situation where (possibly) the breaking of eggs etc. had determined that the village should not move, whereupon he 'put to death' one of the village boys by the administration of chloroform declaring that if the boy came back to life it would be a message from Jesus that the village should move. It must have proved a pretty strong argument when the boy did recover; hence my grandfather got his way.

These stories suggest that, though a firm Calvinist, my grandfather would not be averse, by force or subterfuge, to giving predestination a bit of a nudge now and then.

A fund for the maintenance and extension of the hospital at Mawphlang had been raised which had received Rs. 2784 in contributions. Monies were forthcoming from a number of British people in Ri-Khasi, the individual missionaries themselves contributing generously from their own pockets. The contributions of two British army colonels in Shillong of Rs. 10 each must have resulted in a severe drop in the sales of whisky in the mess that week! Khasis themselves figure as largely as others amongst the list of contributors, albeit with understandably lesser amounts. Collective contributions from many of the communities in other

areas of the hills also appear in the accounts.

In 1888 Dr. Griffiths was joined by another doctor, Arthur Hughes, sent out from Wales and destined to serve at Jowai in Jaintia Hills; thus reducing the workload upon my grandfather since many of his patients walked the long distance from the Jaintia area to be treated at Mawphlang. Dr. Hughes spent three weeks at Mawphlang before moving on to Jowai and reported upon the intelligence of the young Khasi compounders (those living and working within the church compound) expressing surprise at finding them so well grounded in (sic) *Pharmacopeia* and as expert as any dispensary assistants in Wales. He also comments upon the strength of their Christian faiths; making special mention of the preaching abilities of one of them, no doubt the estimable U Ngorsing.

In 1890 my grandfather, together with my grandmother and the children returned to Wales on leave. It was taken as an opportunity to place the eldest son, Arthur in a boarding school at Blackheath, London specializing in the education of the sons of nonconformist overseas missionaries. A school my father John, was later to attend. Dr. Griffiths spent his leave travelling Wales preaching, and raising funds for the Khasi Mission; work that earned him the title 'Griffiths Cassia' amongst Welsh Presbyterians (the name *Cassia* is the Welsh language form of *Khasia* that in turn is the anglicised form of Ri-Khasi.) The city of Liverpool, although in England, lies just a few miles from North Wales and at that time served as an administrative centre for the area. It was here that the Welsh Missionary Society had set up its headquarters. It was also the place where, at No. 73 Botanic Road, the temporary residence of the family, that tragedy again struck in the death of little eighteen month old Annie, born at Mawphlang, and in the birth of another child, Richard who was to live but one day.

In the absence of Dr. Griffiths the work of the mission at Mawphlang was taken over by Dr. Hughes who combined his responsibility with that of his post in Jowai. Dr. Hughes reported further outbreaks of cholera at Kukhon, Sohrarim and in Mawphlang

itself and in addition he was called away to other missionary stations, Mawblei and Nongrang where an epidemic of dysentery had broken out taking the lives of eighteen people. Yet from his comments Dr. Hughes seems to have been misled in his concept of the demonic beliefs of the Khasi people. He makes special mention of operations for the removal of gallstones as being '....a mighty weapon in the breaking down of Khasi superstition and faith in the healing power of demons.' He goes on to say that the disease, common amongst Khasis, was regarded by them as invariably fatal and beyond the power of even the demons. He also reported a marked increase in the number of patients availing themselves of the services of the dispensary.

It was on my second visit to Mawphlang that I arrived unannounced to find that all the adult members of the Church were attending a special service being held at another place. Instead I was treated to a service composed almost entirely of children. I was perhaps fortunate in this respect, not because the elders were not present, but because I was treated to the sweetest harmony singing that I could have wished for, again made more memorable in that the hymns were for the most part known to me from my own childhood. A young man who was the evangelist in charge of the service received me most courteously and I was later entertained at the home of a lady who told me that her father had often spoken of my grandfather. It was here that once again I fell to singing those old hymns together with those present. In particular *Calon Lan* (*purest heart*) sung on the part of my Khasi friends with that same heartfelt emotion that I might find at home.

A subsequent visit to Mawphlang found me at a full service and I was honoured by the singing of a hymn actually written and composed by Dr. Griffiths. I was also asked to address the congregation, my words translated into Khasi by the ever-helpful Harding Pde. On this occasion I took with me a tape recorder, an amateur attempt at recording, and taped the singing. The replaying

of these recordings to friends and acquaintances at home has invariably been met with amazed disbelief.

By 1890 the Welsh Mission was claiming 6190 church members throughout Ri-Khasi, together with what is described as 8926 hearers. It was fifty years since the mission had been established and it was significant that the anniversary saw the ordination of four Khasi native ministers by the church. It was a development that was to have much significance in the years to come culminating in the complete and successful take over of the ministry by the Khasi Presbyterian Church when the last of the Welsh missionaries left seven decades later.

At this time Dr. Hughes continued to 'hold the fort' at Mawphlang and his report for that year describes having performed 176 operations. Many of these operations must have seemed magical to the untutored local Khasi population, especially eye operations, whereby the blind, some since childhood, were able to see as a result. Three such patients he describes as having so recovered as to be able to 'be now learning to read the New Testament.' But Dr. Hughes was clearly a man not without a sense of humour, the eye that he could not cure he replaced with a glass one, and on this subject he wrote, 'In two other cases where "enunciation of the eyeball" was found necessary, artificial glass eyes were inserted by me shortly afterwards. Such a novelty created no small stir amongst the natives, who had never dreamt such things possible. The unfortunate possessors of the artificial eyes found themselves plunged into a whirl of notoriety and to this day act as "walking advertisements" for the credit of the mission hospital. One of them, an old lady, still believes that she could see, if I were only to 'touch some spring or other,' and that I am keeping that in the background as a kind of 'coupd' etat.'

Dr. Hughes also speaks of the training of Khasis in medical work, citing the use of sophisticated textbooks to achieve that task. He also mentions the hope of one of his students to pass the Matriculation Examination prior to studying for his medical degree

at Calcutta University. Clearly, fifty years of backbreaking endeavour was bearing fruit.

Humour as displayed by Dr. Hughes does seem to be a trait amongst Welsh people. My grandmother would relate how in the presence of the gathered village women she would remove her false teeth, whereupon her audience, not having any previous knowledge of removable dentures, would run away screaming and giggling to hide, only to return with requests that she might repeat the wondrous operation.

Upon the return of Dr. Griffiths and family to the hills it was decided to remove the headquarters of the medical mission from Mawphlang to Sohra. The hospital would remain under the care of Dr. Hughes but it was determined that although Mawphlang had been central to the Khasi area, new considerations had arisen in respect of its location.

The availability of Dr. Hughes at Jowai, a scanty and decreasing population in the Mawphlang area due, it was claimed, to the building of a new road between Sohra and Shillong, which left Mawphlang more out of the way. It was also noted that the majority of patients came from Sohra and its surrounding more populated area; all factors which led to the establishment of the medical administrative centre at the mission's headquarters.

Dr. Griffiths after twelve long years of arduous labour and adversity, could contrast his arrival to what seemed a bleak and uninviting prospect, to a Mawphlang which had a thriving and growing Christian community together with a church building and a medical provision that was proving a boon to the diseased ravaged people of the area.

But for me, the memory of Mawphlang is epitomised by the voices of children raised in song. An experience that will echo in my mind for the rest of my days.

Sohra

A Khasi

Sitting,
 high above an emerald chasm
 with cliff faced waterfalls
 tumbled jungle
 in steep descent
 dressing
 the mighty gorge.
 Depth distant
 a ribboned river
 trickles a far off village
 As falling evening
 moves
 encroaching shadows
 across misting hills
 quieting
 a restless spirit.

Sohra (Cherrapunji to the British), one time capital of the state of Assam, wettest place on earth, once home to the Sylhet Light Infantry, wherein stands the oldest Christian church in the Khasi Hills; was the place where in 1842 Thomas Jones, father of the Khasi alphabet, set up the Welsh Mission to Ri-Khasi.

It was also where, in 1892, Dr. Griffiths established the new headquarters of the Medical Mission and took up residence with his family in the Christian quarter of Nongsawlia. It was also the place where my father, born in 1885, spent his early life.

Accompanied by Harding Pde and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, we made for the 'Circuit House' situated at Nongsawlia in what would have been a government administrative

complex and military camp in the old days, though now, but for the circuit house, is a barren flatland.

The circuit house dating from the days of empire, is one of many small government hostels dotted about the countryside, many now in ruins, but they remain in use to house visiting government employees. The building somewhat dilapidated, its plumbing leaving much to be desired, was otherwise adequate for our short stay. A resident caretaker was also responsible for providing our food. Alas poor fellow, he was at his wits end to please me; whatever he provided I found next to uneatable. My Welsh Bangladeshi trained palate (most 'Indian' restaurants at home provide such cuisine) demanded a more spiced and generous curry than the bland and dry fare that seemed to be his speciality.

My first call was to the Thomas Jones School of Mission and Evangelism where I met its then Director, Reverend Basaiawmoit, who doubled as minister of the church at Nongsawlia. The school, dating back to the early years of the mission, has long been a training ground for novice evangelists and indeed those who go on to qualify for the ministry. The school awards recognised degrees in theology and diplomas in mission work. The director was most welcoming and helpful, allowing me access to a document room where I hoped I might find references to the period of my grandfather's involvement. Unfortunately the papers available did not go as far back as the object of my quest. In all probability much had been lost as a result of the great earthquake of 1897 and in its aftermath of disorganisation, when record keeping would have been a minor priority. Both the original school and the church buildings had been destroyed during that cataclysmic event, neither being replaced before the turn of the century.

I was taken to inspect the church, the oldest and first to be rebuilt following the earthquake. As with all the other Presbyterian churches in Ri-Khasi that I have visited, its structure and layout mirrors the traditional chapels of Wales. The large and imposing pulpit towering above the congregation, the '*Siart Fawr*' or big

seat, provided for the leading deacon, side benches for the elders and the rows of varnished wood pews where the congregation can indulge themselves in what Wales' poet, Dylan Thomas, described as 'forth winking hallelujahs!'

My grandfather left Ri-Khasi in 1906 and it is certain that he would have had occasion to preach from that very pulpit of the church at Nongsawlia. I could not resist the temptation to solemnly climb the steps of the pulpit, as my grandfather might have done, and closing my eyes imagine myself looking down upon a long gone Khasi congregation.

Outside the church has been erected a monument bearing the names of those of the Welsh Mission who had served at Sohra, and although having suffered from the vagaries of Sohra's climate, I was able to make out half way down the list, the names of Rev. Dr. G. Griffiths, MB. CM. and Mrs. A. Griffiths.

Opposite the church, on a small hillock, is to be found the Welsh Mission cemetery. Here lie the remains of Welsh missionaries and their children, no doubt victims of the many diseases prevalent in the area. A monument marks the resting place of Rev. John Roberts, '.... and that of little Sioni Bach (little Johny) who died aged five years'. Here must also exist the grave of five months old, Griffiths Oswald Griffiths, last of the Griffiths children born in the hills and baptised by Reverend Amirkha Chyne. I searched the cemetery for the grave but, although there are many small headstones, which would denote the grave of a child, time and Sohra rains have long since washed away any identification.

A visit to the Sohra market followed. I marveled at the variety of wares crammed into the market area; fruits, meats, clothing, medicines, spices and clothes attracting a crush of buyers. This situation presented something of a problem for me, it was impossible to progress through the crowd without a rudely determined shoving and pushing; being over six feet tall and of ample girth I felt myself to be a clumsy bully amongst the diminutive Khasi people. Worse, I

was in constant fear of my size eleven feet treading on some poor little old lady's toes. Yet I did manage to purchase a bagful of Sohra oranges, the sweetest that I have ever tasted.

Outside the market a bewildering crush of buses, lorries, and taxis all indulging in a wild cacophony of horn blowing in a tangled effort to either leave or enter the area; I am sure they must have succeeded ultimately, but how, is beyond my imagination. I was grateful when we entered a small eating-place nearby where I was treated to, my favourite pig's head.

The continued loss of so many of their children must have had a debilitating effect on both my grandparents, particularly so on my grandmother, and if this were not enough the conditions of working and living in Sohra were even more trying than that which had been experienced at Mawphlang.

After one year of living and working at Sohra Dr. Griffiths, having detailed the work of the dispensary, wrote 'Such an amount of work as this in a year means great physical labour and anxiety of mind. If you could see the roads in Cherra, and the paths leading to the various villages round about and the rain through which we must go at all times of the day and night. I think that you would agree with me that it is impossible for me to do *more* work as far as physical exertion is concerned. I do not think that it will be too much for me to say that five out of every seven days are spent walking through the village of Cherra, and when the typhoid fever and the cholera appeared here, I was under the necessity of making two journeys daily during the heat of the summer, besides from four to six hours in the Dispensary.' Yet, at the same time he was able to make his contribution to the translation of the Bible, translating the *Book of Ruth* appearing in the first complete Khasi edition published in 1885.

It was this world into which my father, John Phillips Griffiths, was born on 11th September 1885. He died in 1941 when I was aged nine years but I still have memories of the stories he told me

of his childhood. He was for the greater part of these early years left in the care of Khasi families at Sohra and he would always speak of the loving care and happiness he enjoyed at this time. I well remembered him showing me his three fingers and thumb and explaining, "When I was your age in Khasia, that was my spoon." He would also tell me of sitting on the ground with an extended family of Khasi adults and children eating from communal mounds of rice and meat. He seemed to regard this childhood time as a golden age in his life, in contrast perhaps to the trials that were later to befall him.

The versatility employed by the missionaries in their work was astonishing. Dealing with a young girl whose blindness was beyond medical help, Dr. Griffiths somehow managed to procure the wherewithal to produce brail-indented sheets whereby he printed out the gospel of St. Mark, which the girl quickly learned to read. This speaks as highly for the girl's innate ability as it does for my grandfather's inventiveness; my grandmother also set about teaching her the art of knitting woolen stockings, an activity to which she quickly became adept.

A year later and the workload increased unabatedly. The caseload of the dispensary had become one of the highest in the whole of Assam, 3556 visits were made to patients in their own homes and Dr. Griffiths carried out 51 major and 529 minor operations. He was of course convinced that his medical skills were all a part of God's purpose in bringing the heathen into the light of the Christian faith and spoke of developing the work of hospital in-patient treatment as being an opportunity to spread the gospel. Vaccination against smallpox was also producing excellent result and its reputation was growing amongst the mothers in the villages, once again seem as an opportunity to introduce them to Christianity. Yet the majority of patients treated were not converted and in fairness it has to be said that humanitarian motives seem to have been paramount, the personal sacrifices made to treat the sick, even if motivated by Christian precepts which require a concern

for the needy, are hardly deserving of cynical judgment.

One of the many hazards encountered in the area of Sohra was the presence of leeches and frequent leech bites when travelling in the surrounding jungle were commonplace. In 1896 Dr. Griffiths sustained such a bite that led to a blood poisoning. As a result his health began to deteriorate and he was prevented from carrying out operations that required the placing of his hands in disinfectant that caused his sensitized skin to crack open. Despite failing health my grandfather persevered in his work, continuing to make the arduous journeys to the houses of his Khasi patients that he was obliged to carry a candle by which to work and spoke of constructing a lantern 'by mutilating an old railway travelling lamp.' A further problem was in keeping his instruments and other medical supplies dry when traveling in the heavy rains and resorted to carrying the necessary items in an old waterproof cartridge bag, slung over his shoulder, which he described as being neither 'ministerial' nor 'professional.'

Through it all he continued to use the opportunity of his contact with his patients to introduce them to the Gospel but observed that the people of Sohra had a special ability to put themselves in an attitude of absorbed attention while at the same time paying no heed whatsoever to what was being said to them! Perhaps in the manner of someone who is not wanting to appear impolite when confronted by an insurance salesman, but with faith comes optimism, as he claimed that through medicine and education the Sohra people would renounce their old religion; with the passing of a few older influential people so too would the Khasi religion disappear from the villages. He also held the view that in the ensuing 'crises in the religious state of the Khasi nation' they might turn to the Christian religion. It cannot be said that his optimism was totally misplaced.

But whatever privations and challenges had occurred, nothing was to compare with the disaster to come. In 1897 a gigantic and devastating earthquake struck the Khasi Hills. One thousand five hundred and twenty four people lost their lives whilst

no stone or wooden structure survived. Dr. Griffiths' colleague and brother-in-law, Rev. Robert Evans, writing of the disaster described the scene, "The earth was somewhat like a child having convulsions. It would hurl itself about with indomitable strength, and then quieten down for short while. It roared every shake like a wounded beast in tortuous pain; indeed, it was as if all the beasts of the earth were howling together. The surface of the earth was like the surface of the sea... .. It would have been bad enough to see these waves coming from one direction, but they were being shoved at us from all directions... .. And casting our eyes about we'd see the earth torn open to the horizon, like a great curtain in a strong wind; and the highest hills looked as if they were pursuing each other, trying with one surge to tumble over one another."

At the time of the earthquake my father, who would have been twelve years of age, was boarding at a school in Shillong; I have every reason to believe that his school, having as its Headmaster the Reverend J. Ceredig Evans, survives today as the Government High School, though having been removed to another location. He spoke of making the long journey from Sohra and being carried in a basket by a Khasi man who, on one occasion whilst they were resting in the jungle, save my father's life. A deadly snake was about to attack my father when his protector grasped it, much to the man's own danger, and killed the reptile. It follows that I own my own existence to this man's bravery.

My father would often relate his own experience of the mighty earthquake. He told of having been asleep in the dormitory he shared with other boarders at the school and of having been awakened by a pattering sound, which he assumed to be the noise of pied dogs running by. It was in fact, the precursor to the earthquake and when the floor began to shake he, together with the other boys, ran out into the street where he was to see a fissure open up in the ground, a man to fall in, but grabbed to safety by another before the ground closed up again.

It was shortly after this experience that my father was sent to join his elder brother at the school in London catering for the sons of overseas missionaries. He was fully bilingual at the time, but his two languages were those of Khasi and Welsh; his knowledge of English was minimal! The English public school system of the late nineteenth century was a harsh and often cruel regime; his lack of English was not subject to understanding but rather to a belief in the boy's willful stupidity. As a result the English language was virtually beaten into him. A far cry from the happy Khasi world he had left behind him.

In my home I have the very Bible that my father brought with him at that time from Ri-Khasi. It is the first complete edition of the Bible printed in the Khasi language and published in 1885. I have been at pains to discover if another copy of this edition is still in existence, or perhaps I have the only one. Yet even more curious; on the flyleaf of that Bible is a picture pasted by my father's childish hand, a picture of a cockerel. The same symbol that appears upon the Seng-Khasi flag that now adorns the wall of my living room in Wales, and I wonder if those Khasi families who cared for my father imparted something more than kindness!

The churches, schools and hospitals established by the mission had all been destroyed, as had the homes of the missionaries including the home of my grandparents at Sohra. This disaster resulted in a complete reorganisation of the missions' administration and it was decided that the medical mission would be removed from Sohra and established in the town of Laitlyngkot, some fifteen miles distant and more central to the area.

The move was prompted by a number of considerations; doctors at Shillong had advised that my grandfather's health had so deteriorated that he should return to Wales, advice that he refused to take and it was considered that the climate at Laitlyngkot would be beneficial to him. In addition the medical mission buildings at Sohra were in ruins, without any immediate prospect of rebuilding them. Also the road between Sohra and Shillong had been rendered

all but impassable by the earthquake; a new road was about to be built from Shillong via Laitlyngkot to the plains that would provide for a 'steam tramway' to Sylhet, this latter project never coming to fruition. It was also considered that the site represented a central position in a populated area and that Laitlyngkot boasted a market frequented by Khasis in large numbers.

And so the move was made, but whilst a more salubrious area but as far as my grandfather's medical and missionary work was concerned, it was back to square one.

Laitlyngkot

Laitlyngkot's market day, and the place buzzing with activity. Lorries loaded with produce, piles of the ubiquitous Khasi wicker baskets and the women with their colourful shawls many carrying on their back what appears to the western eye to be pretty, diminutive and wide eyed, doll like, chubby cheeked children. But for the motor vehicles, the scene must be timeless. I was to discover, however, that, this market had a special significance in the work of my grandfather and in which my grandmother played a significant part. Of all the places I visited in Ri-Khasi, I found Laitlyngkot to contain more folk memories and footprints of their presence than anywhere else.

Whilst at the market we fell into conversation with a vendor of clothing, a deacon of the Laitlyngkot Presbyterian Church, who on learning of my relationship with Dr. Griffiths told me an astounding story. He related that my grandfather having been appalled at the prevalence of alcohol being sold in the market agreed that my grandmother should set up a stall to provide tea to counteract the sale of this wicked beverage. The tea became known locally as 'sha Mem'. I asked him if it was still possible to purchase beer or spirit at the market and he told me that it most certainly was not. I thought it wise to keep to myself the information that there was in fact some beer in the market on that particular

day; ironically, it was in my knapsack. Yet it was clear that tea drinking as introduced by my grandmother had caught on in a big way, as I counted no less than five market stalls selling freshly brewed cups of tea and, together with Kynpham and Harding who were again accompanying me, felt obliged to sample the brew.

We were directed to a house situated to the side of the market, behind a cluster of menhirs which were fenced and nicely maintained. Here was the home of Bah Dasik Shabong, a deacon of the Laitlyngkot Presbyterian Church and his wife Riwan Kyntiew a retired school teacher, who, coincidentally had taught Kynpham as a young child. Over tea and biscuits the couple disclosed to me a treasure trove of information concerning my grandfather. Not only were they able to confirm the story of the 'sha Mem' but to my great surprise informed me that the hill on which my ancestor had built the Laitlyngkot Dispensary was still known by the name of 'Lum Griffiths' the hill of Griffiths! I was also told a story involving my grandfather, the contractor and his worker, who were at least nominally Christians, involved in building the then new road from Shillong, passing through Laitlyngkot.

Once again the consumption of alcohol was causing concern to my grandfather, the workers employed upon the work of building the road were, he perceived, over indulging in their drinking habits, practising immorality and what was more, engaging in work on the Sabbath day. Rai Shabong, the first ever qualified Khasi civil engineer and in overall charge of the road building had contracted out the work to a fellow clan member, Tar Shabong, both of whom were also followers of the Christian religion. Dr. Griffiths made frequent representation to these men who themselves were Christian but was rebuffed on each occasion with the accusation that he was interfering in a private affair that did not concern him. Taking the matter to the Presbytery, swift action was taken and the contractors were impressed with the error of their way; an illustration of the authority that the Presbyterian Church was able to exert at that time.

Upon arrival at his new post in Laitlyngkot, accompanied by

his two children remaining in Ri-Khasi and together with a small band of Christian helpers, he was faced with a totally non-Christian population. In addition, accommodation was virtually non-existent, Laitlyngkot having suffered as much as anywhere from the earthquake. His first task was to erect some rough one-roomed accommodation that he shared with the servant girls, the family 'bedroom' being delineated by a series of floor markings drawn down the middle. Later it also doubled in the first few weeks as a place to hold prayer meetings.

A meeting place for services also presented a problem for his fledging mission and the first ever Christian service was held at a government hut on the outskirts of the town, a more substantial government lodging house now stands upon the site of this building, surrounded today by what appears to be abandoned government properties. From then on together with his handful of faithful followers, he repaired the market place where he preached to what must have seemed a totally indifferent body of Khasi market-goers.

By the third week he had erected an enclosure of corrugated iron sheets within which he conducted services at which a small number of local people attended; more out of curiosity than a willingness to adopt Christianity. Despite these adversities, as on previous occasions, faith drove my grandfather with the never flinching support of my grandmother to persist in his endeavours. My grandmother even started a day school that began to attract a good attendance.

I am very grateful for an account, told to me by an 80-year-old lady in Shillong, involving my grandfather and what she claims to be the first Christian conversion to take place in Laitlyngkot. Melys Kharkongor, aged 80 years, an articulate lady still full of vibrancy and charm told this story and I offer it using, as far as possible, her own words.

Melys related that she is the daughter of a twin born of her grandmother in Laitlyngkot. She tells the story of that birth, "Dr.

Griffiths was the first missionary to come to my grandmother's house, and he was the one to make them a Christian. At the time they were not Christian and they didn't want that the missionary came to their house. Many times he kept on going. He said because there was some 'light' in that very house, he kept coming."

It seems that her husband in particular was unhappy at the attention being paid to them by Dr. Griffiths but gradually the wife was beginning to be impressed by the evangelising of the missionary. In the words of Melys, "My grandmother became disturbed in her mind and prayed to God in her own Khasi custom (The Khasi religion hold belief in a one-God, Creator of the universe). She prayed, 'If this Dr. Griffiths came from such a long way, please give me 'light' whether he speaks of the true God or not.'

Being pregnant at the time and desiring the birth of twins she subsequently struck a novel bargain with Dr. Griffiths. "If our saviour is really the true God, then let me have twins and then I will become Christian." The missionary accepted the challenge and regularly visited the house to pray with the pregnant woman that she might be delivered of twins.

The lady, being a tribal midwife had some knowledge of the progress of childbearing and in her eighth month of pregnancy, while taking a bath and examining her stomach, found to her dismay what she perceived as the presence of only one child. Melys relates that, "She was so angry, and in temper cried out 'I was going to follow Jesus but he has cheated me.' Stepping out of the bath she collapsed and her husband found her shaking and convulsing on the floor. Having been put in her bed she recovered and claimed that whilst unconscious Jesus had spoken to her, telling her that she should have faith and thereby she would indeed be delivered of twins.

She told her husband, "I should not put a test to God, I was doubting that there should not be twins. I was doubting but I should have faith and believe blindly, and let me deliver the babies and

then only will I know the truth, but not now.”

Days later the twins were born. As is the ancient Khasi custom, the house became crowded with relatives including the maternal uncle, who traditionally acts as ‘priest to perform the religious rites appropriate to a birth. But the mother demanded, “Stop doing all this, I have found my true God, I am now a Christian.” The relatives became angry and insistent, but she said “No, you will not put the names of my babies mouth” (A reference to an essential part of the ceremony). The relatives left the house leaving the mother to become an outcast from the clan.

Melys describes how that evening Dr. Griffiths came to the house. “My grandmother was so happy and said to him, ‘What you have preached I have found that it is true, I want that you name the babies.’ Dr. Griffiths asked if she wanted Khasi or English names and she said ‘You choose their names, and Dr. Griffiths held them in his arms and gave this one *Glory* and this one *Honoury*; and that was my mother, *Honoury*. My grandfather also became Christian, he was the first deacon in Laitlyngkot. My grandmother was a very good Christian, she became very famous preacher leading the revival.”

Knowledge of what came to be regarded as a miraculous birth quickly spread amongst the community and was responsible for widespread conversions; amazingly two elderly ladies, aged 70 and 80 years respectively, who all their lives had been steeped in the Khasi religion, were amongst their number. A church was built which still remains with a sizeable congregation.

Yet the conversion of Melys’ grandmother and grandfather was to have unpleasant consequences for them. Khasi society is matrilineal; inheritance passes down to the youngest daughter, who has the duty of preserving such clan property and customs. Her uncle, holding a ritual position of authority, and the other members of the clan remaining staunchly loyal to their Khasi religion and traditions were deeply resentful of the conversion. Consequently the mother of the twins, as the youngest daughter, was disinherited

and forced to leave Laitlyngkot to settle in Shillong, where their descendants remain to the present day.

Melys' grandmother died in 1923, her grandfather live on until 1943. Glory died in 1984 and her twin sister, Honour in 1985; the year of their birth being rememebered as being "three years after the great earthquake".

A further difficulty presented itself to the work of Dr. Griffiths in the form of a religious / political dispute that had taken place between the *Syiem* of Nongkrem and the headmen of a number of the populous villages within his kingdom. This dispute was of twenty years standing and had been temporarily solved by government intervention; whilst not permanently detaching the villages, for the time being placed four sordars in charge and answerable to the Deputy Commissioner. The *Syiem* understandably resented this arrangement, erroneously associating the Welsh missionaries with the government diktat. As a result the *Syiem* was currently showing favour to the Catholic Church, with a priest residing at Nongkrem and the *Syiem* urging those villages loyal to him to invite the Catholics to set up schools there.

In these villages, Lyngkyrdem, Nongshken, Pynursla, Nohwet and Mawlynnong, etc there were some Christians and schools, whilst in others neither existed. Each of these villages was divided in loyalty between the *Syiem* and the rebellious sordars, such was the enmity that what one faction would propose the other was sure to oppose. This situation greatly hampered the missionary work, particularly in respect of the setting up of schools as village agreement had to be first obtained to enable their creation. The village of Mawlynnong was ruled by one U Mane sordar, a devout convert and deacon of the church, who had initially been the foremost and most influential of those opposing the *Syiem* rule in the *hima*. However, having fallen into dispute with his fellow sordars, U Mane decided to change loyalty and throw his lot in with the *Syiem*. Despite accusations of treachery by some, it increased his influence amongst many, illustrating that it was possible

to both be a leading member of the missionary church and a supporter of the *Syiem*. His defection resulted in an increase in church membership in the area that surpassed anything that had been achieved previously.

Unfortunately at this time Dr. Griffiths' medical work was still being hampered by ill health. Although having established the dispensary it was without hospital facilities or proper operating room. His hands continued to become unusable when in contact with the necessary disinfectant. Despite these difficulties he reports in 1899 of having performed 67 operations, dealt with 8380 visits by patients to his dispensary and in addition having to travel many miles on foot to give assistance to the sick in distant villages during the frequent outbreaks of cholera. Malaria continued to plague the population and he speaks of dispensing no less than 40,000 doses of quinine; curiously the product of Indian prisons, the 5-grain doses packed by prisoners and sold by the government at one paise each. With all this he found time for preaching both in the newly established church and as ever in the market place, together with administering the activities of the evangelists, church elders, teachers and helpers within the Laitlyngkot mission's widespread area.

The vision of how medical and religious mission becomes jointly and inescapably intertwined is reflected in the story of a widespread conversion of the people of the village of Nongshken which came within the *hima* of the *Syiem* at Nongkrem who, as stated earlier, favoured the Catholics to establish schools in his villages. In the case of Nongshken it was the Unitarians who had managed to find favour and two such teachers had established a school, though my grandfather believed the people really wanted a school brought to them by the Welsh mission. It happened that a case of serious illness in the village called for the medical attention of my grandfather who, having made the long trek from Nongshken, commenced treatment. To the delight and amazement of all, the man quickly responded and became fit and well. As a result the village responded favourably to the advances of the missionary who in true Calvinist measure considered that it was God who had

arranged to have a case of illness in the village to require his assistance, resulting in such a powerful impression amongst the people that (I detect a hint of humour in the following phrase) the 'two Unitarian teachers were *quietly* sent away!'

The story intrigued me and I determined to visit Nongshken. Accompanied by the ever helpful Leslie Harding Pde we hired the necessary four-wheeled drive vehicle and driver to make the journey from Shillong. Within miles of our goal the road became little more than a dirt track and I marvelled at the thought of my grandfather making the journey from Laitlyngkot upon what in those days must have been rough jungle tracks, especially since at the time he was far from enjoying perfect health.

Nongshken it seems, is in fact, a collection of villages that come together to form a small township. We arrived at the outskirts at the village of Mawdang. The Presbyterian Church standing on a hilltop at the entrance to the village and as we approached I saw a group of men waiting on the roadside at the base of the hill. To my amazement I found that I was being met by a committee of church elders, led by Elder Sankley Sutnga, the church secretary, who was there to welcome me. How could they have possibly known of my coming? If I had been in darkest Africa I might have been able to blame the jungle drums; in fact, I concluded that a casual remark of mine expressing my intention to officials at the Presbyterian Synod at Shillong had been conveyed to Nongshken. Yet I still puzzle how they could have learned of the time of my arrival?

The great warmth and cordiality of my welcome was most genuine yet a little embarrassing for me; after all I am no celebrity, I hold no position with the Presbyterian Church, but the reason was to become clear as I learned more of the consequences of my ancestor's activities at Nongshken.

As we climbed the hill towards the church, although not the Sabbath day, its bell began to toll calling its members to attend the church. Standing outside the church in the warm sunshine, overlooking the pretty village of Mawdang, I was astounded to

learn that I was atop yet another Lum Griffiths! It was here on the site of this church that my grandfather had stayed in a hut whilst he had carried out the medical work that was so instrumental in bringing these people to what he saw as *the true faith*.

My hosts were well aware of the story concerning the cure of the sick man at Nongshken but alas, it seemed that there were none of his descendents that I might be able to meet still living in the area. I was given to understand that in the years that followed, Dr. Griffiths had continued to make visits, setting up a school, preaching and providing medical services. The impact of his activities was therefore crucial to the development of well being amongst the people of Nongshken; hence my undeserved but enormously appreciated reception.

The church quickly began to fill up with the men, women and children of the village and once again I had that uncanny experience of hearing those old hymns of home sung with passion by a Khasi congregation. A short sermon and then I was asked to address the congregation, once again my words were so ably translated by Leslie. What happened next put me in something of a dilemma; Elder Sankley requested that I should give *the blessing*. It happens that I am totally 'blessing illiterate,' I had not the slightest idea what I might be expected to say. The thought passed through my head that I might just recite the Lords' prayer in the Welsh language and not even the estimable Leslie could have dealt with that, and everyone else would have had to take on trust what I was saying. I rejected the idea, on the grounds that it would make of me a bigger fraud than I was already feeling. Instead, I whispered to Elder Sankley, "No, please, I would be grateful if you would do it." My refusal was accepted with good grace and I hope not with too much disappointment.

There followed a beautifully prepared meal at the home of Elder Sankley and afterwards we were taken to the main town where we met with elders and members of the other Presbyterian churches at Nongshken. I noted that there were churches of other

denominations in the town but it was clear that the Presbyterian still dominated. Leslie and myself left laden with locally grown fruits presented to us as gifts and I was able to add my visit to Nongshken as being yet another memorable Khasi experience.

As the years went by the demands upon Dr. Griffiths of both his medical and missionary work began to take further toll upon his ever failing health. By 1904 his condition was such that he could no longer fulfil the heavy tasks required of him but he could look back on twenty five years of sustained and fruitful effort. The medical mission that he had inaugurated had, with the addition of other medical missionaries sent by Welsh mission, contributed immensely to the well-being of the Khasi population. By 1922 resulting from the efforts of Dr. H. Gordon Roberts the Welsh Presbyterian Mission Hospital, with 140 beds, Maternity Ward, Operating Theatre, and X-Ray facilities was established at Shillong; still standing today as a monument to the Welsh mission and in stark contrast to the primitive facilities available to the 26-year old Rev. Dr. Griffith Griffiths, way back in 1879.

It was with much misgiving that my grandfather finally left Ri-Khasi to return home with my grandmother and children to their beloved Wales. The Presbyterian churches throughout Wales organized a collection in appreciation of his work for the Christian cause that amounted to a considerable sum; characteristically, he donated it in its entirety to further the work of the Welsh Mission in the Khasi Hills.

In this book *The Story of Our Foreign Mission*, John Hughes Morris wrote of Dr. Griffiths 'His strong missionary zeal, his kindly and cheerful nature, and entire devotion to his work, carried on in the early years under difficulties and disadvantages, denote him as one of the most valued missionaries whom God gave our connexion.'

Book Review

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom (ed.),
Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-east.
NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.264, Rs.230.

For a long time now, the North-east has been the troubled zone, “a seething cauldron” torn by the ethnic crisis, economic failures, terrorist violence and mounting claims of regional autonomy and separatism. Lost in the haze and blur of contemporary history very often, it is usually conceived not so much as a landscape inhabited by real people but only as a fictional metaphor of a world gone awry. No wonder it lurks rather uncertainly at the edge of an average Indian’s consciousness.

On reading this artistically packaged anthology, one is certainly disabused of a number of preconceived notions about the North-east and its rich cultural heritage. A world of eerie contradictions leaps out of these pages as tradition rubs shoulders with modernity, folk rhythms jostle uneasily with the western pop, virgin forests stand a mute testimony to the debauchery of urban life, and recalcitrant nativism co-exists with the ‘otherness’ of the outsiders. This anthology certainly does rip the mask off the multi-layered and complex history/culture of the region, revealing the face of the people and the landscape that is anything but just salubrious and enthralling.

This anthology also has a definite purpose beyond its immediate poetic appeal. If on the one hand it brings the ‘gunshots’ and ‘the bloodstained faces’ of the North-east within earshot distance, on the other it takes us right into the hearts of the people, their dreams and desires, myths and memories, and long struggles through history. By thus bringing us into direct contact with the cultural history of the people, it opens up the possibility of a dialogue

we may have thought never existed. If in our troubled times poetry can synergize this dialogue, it could be said to have achieved much more than it ordinarily does. For such a possibility alone can redress one of the understandable complaints of the editors that, for all the political rhetoric, this remains a “little known and largely misunderstood” region of India.

In all, this anthology showcases some forty-five contemporary poets of the region, reflecting not only myriad styles and trends but also diversity of concerns within “the Seven Sisters,” which, in itself, is no mean achievement. However, the representation of each state is somewhat erratic. Meghalaya, the home-state of the editors, leading the way with as many as fourteen poets; Manipur a close second with eight; Arunachal and Mizoram struggling hard to catch up with barely two poets each. Tripura and Assam have seven poets each whereas Nagaland has only five. If space is a marker of identity, then this kind of unequal distribution does raise questions of internal hegemony of languages/cultures. Especially so, because the editors have chosen not to address this issue.

Interestingly, all the poets selected from Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland have one thing in common: they all write originally in English. While celebrating the “fading voices/of deaf (tribal) women,” Mamang Dai, a journalist who belongs to the Adi community of Arunachal, does not forget to mourn the endless wait of “the silent hillmen” for “the long promised letters/and the meaning of words”(pp. 4-5). Her retreat into personal memories is only a way of reclaiming historical consciousness, and it is on the interstices of both that the political content of her poetry becomes manifest. Yumlam Tana, a teacher from the Nyishi tribe who is almost apologetic about writing in English, is acutely self-conscious about losing his tribal identity inscribed in *Porno* and *Jupung* to *kurta* and *pyjama*. It is another matter that he manages to counterbalance his loss through his universal claim “to the Bible/The Quran, the Gita/ And all human endeavours/In Science, Art and Commerce” (p.13).

Occasionally, he also dips into the archives of Nyishi myths, bringing out poetic pearls of astounding beauty.

Though the personal note dominates the poems of H. Ramdhintari, a poet from Mizoram who now lives in Maryland, U.S.A., she is conscious that "We're at the far end of the earth/ where the touch of the sun ceases to have meanings" (p.197). However, her contemporary Mona Zote, who lives in Aizawl, is more explicitly political as she ominously waits for the "bomb" to fall "on those of us, unaware under/The catastrophe of houses against trees," and is even eager to "leave words too and be/a gunrunner" (p.203). Though both T. Ao and Nini Lungalang from Nagaland are among the better-known and older voices, each bears an unmistakable individualistic stamp. While T. Ao's poems such as *The Epitaph* and *Rumour* pulsate with a definite fable-like quality, Nini Lungalang returns "to where I began," a world throbbing with social and political tensions, often caught through "neighbour's quarrel/over a strip of land" or the personal pain of "I too have a brother slain." Among the younger lot, Monalisa Changkija, a Dimapur based journalist, and Easterine Iralu, a lecturer at Nagaland University, impress by virtue of their uncanny ability to resurrect the social conscience. If Monalisa raises her voice in support *Of a People Unanswered*, Easterine Iralu regrets that "One day, my son/when you come to ask me/what colour was the sky/before it turned grey/I will no longer have the answers" (p.222).

Assamese and Manipuri poets distinguish themselves by their unswerving commitment to their respective languages, though it hardly ever takes the form of linguistic chauvinism. Most of the Assamese poets are fairly young, the only exception being Nilmani Phookan, a much older and well-respected Sahitya Akademi Award winning veteran. In his all-too-familiar romantic world, "the plantain leaf (still) trembles," "distant dreams of trees/move past," and "the afternoon sun melts/into the shoreless waters." Only very rarely does he surprise with an unexpected turn of a phrase or an image, and even when he does as in "In the frost-silent Japanese silk-night/if I could die" (p.57), the burden of existence is not much

lightened. Among the younger generation of Assamese poets, Jiban Narah and Prem Narayan Nath are apparently the only inheritors of Nilmani's romantic sensibility. Jiban discovers his own voice in intensely personal poems such as *Mother* and *Night's Portal*, and despite its long-winded invocations and veiled references to the ethos of the Mishing tribe, his poem *The Buddha* fails to make its mark. However, Prem Narayan has a deeper and richer resonance as he captures "the hum of *raga gandhara*/in darkness" with as much elan as he shows while recording the "rumblings from the earth's womb" that throw up "scores of dead bodies suddenly" (p.50). Nilim Kumar, Anubhav Tulasi and Sameer Tanti combine a certain earthy rawness of passion with more contemporary staccato speech rhythms. If Nilim Kumar questions "where are you bound, brother/with all those dead birds/on your shoulder," Anubhav Tulasi shares his anxiety over a dog "barking long since/Fretting in my blood." But it is left to Sameer Tanti, who has also crafted *The Ballad of Bones*, to state: "How do I hold hunger guilty/Hunger is my mother's first miscarriage/the third world of my agony" (p.67). Although she is the lone woman poet from Assam, Anupama Basumatary is easily the most powerful of all voices in her language. In comparison to other women poets from Nagaland and Mizoram who write in English, it is she whose concerns are overtly and explicitly feminist. Not only is she interested in historicising the silence of women through the image of "the stone-body," but she also speaks of woman's essential exclusion and loneliness in her poetic ramblings *An Evening On the Banks of the Ganges*. Often she manages to transcend the politics of exclusion, thus revealing a strong universal strain in her poetry, which is self-evident when she says, "In the hope of achieving something/Every man is only losing himself" (p.22). A poetic sensibility that sees "a childhood dawn" "in the cluster of mushrooms" is certainly no ordinary talent.

Of the Manipuri poets, again only two are women, and the rest all men. Kunjarani Longjam Chanu and Atambam Ongbi

Memchoubi are both teachers by profession and have published more than two collections each. Kunjarani's "hunters" that "stand in front of you/Carrying poison arrows" and "black maidens" that fall "inside the deep ravines" "along with the white slabs of snow" fester in our memory as much as Memchoubi's *The Goddess of Lightning* and *My Beloved Mother* do. A popular children's writer and a much published poet, R K Bhubonsana, in his rather longish musings *Should Lights Be Put Out Or Minds Kept In The Dark*, exposes in a playfully sardonic manner the designs of the government in perpetuating the people's subjugation by not promoting literacy among them. Yumlebam Ibomcha's *For the Next Birth* and Raghu Leishangthem's *Politician and White Dove* are also poems in a similar vein, though Ibomcha's *Story of a Dream* and Raghu's *The Old Woman's Pitcher* leave a much stronger impression because of their depth of feeling and sensitive portrayal of character/situation. Thangjam Ibopishak, who along with Ibomcha is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning poet, creates unfailing images of the land and its people. While gushing over his land in a manner least bashful, "Manipur, I love your hills, marshes, rivers/Greenfields, meadows, blue sky" (p.88), he does not allow himself to be blinded by the fact that it is also "the land of the half - humans" where "for six months just head without body, six months just body without head" (p.93). The mythology of the land interests him as much as does its poetry or its history. If Saratchand Thiyam, an engineer by profession, stands out by virtue of being able to sing of both *Shillong* and *Africa* with equal ease, Ilabanta Yumnam, a teacher, marks himself out through the tardy, prosaic rhythms of his poetic outpourings.

Of the seven sisters, the only two that betray a baffling sense of linguistic diversity are Meghalaya and Tripura. In Meghalaya, one comes across poets in languages as varied as Hindi, English, Khasi and Bengalee, whereas in Tripura, Bengalee and Manipuri happily co-exist with Chakma and Kokborok. Tarun Bhartiya, who is from Meghalaya and writes in Hindi, appears to have internalised

the ethics of postmodernism, and so celebrates the fragmentation of thought and being with a rare irreverence and panache. Just as he has no qualms about saying that "Cow Mother's thighs should be rubbed with pepper," he's equally blase about sniffing "reality of gunpowder in the breath of reporters" (p.114). Piyush Dhar, who writes in Bengalee, brings a razor-edged sharpness of a typical Bengali sensibility to bear upon his reflections on the mindless nuclear arms race in *Five Pokhran Poems*. There could not have been a more forthright indictment of Pokhran than this: "Infanticide ditches crisscross/your dreamy chest, too, Pokhran;/today your silent sands bury in their voice/an epitaph of vice" (p.121). Of several poets writing in English in Meghalaya none is so cosmopolitan as Ananya S Guha, who is very much at home, be it *In Calcutta*, *Mymensing* or his *Poem for Punjab*. If Anjum Hasan impresses with her deft use of the Japanese form in *November Haikus*, Robin S Ngangom sweeps us along by the sheer force of his haunting images in the searing evocation of the *Native Land*. But this, indeed, appears somewhat pale in comparison with the range, depth and intensity displayed by Khasi poets such as Paul Lyngdoh, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Bevan L Swer. As their effort is to explore the archeology of Khasi legends, folk-tales and customs, their poems often sizzle with a peculiar pungency of a purely local variety.

This variety of localism is also available in the poems of Niranjana Chakma, Sefali Debbarma and Chandra Kanta Murasingh, all from Tripura, though they practise their craft in Chakma and Kokborok languages respectively. While Sefali Debbarma celebrates the local sounds and smells in her intensely personal poems; Chandra Kanta's crisp, compact lyrical meditations slowly bring her into contact with "our beloved soil." In the poems of Niranjana Chakma one senses a definite rage born out of irrevocable 'silence' that most of the tribal communities have come to accept as their *fait accompli* over the centuries. In an intensely moving poem, Kalyanbrata Chakraborti captures the plight of Manirung Reang, "a girl from the hills" who falls prey to "the gun-toting belligerents,"

with only “the birds and the wind” grieving for her. A similar portrait of a “woman suffering this society’s grievous hurt” bristles out of a poem by Gambhini Sorokkhaibam, who originally writes in Manipuri. However, the crowning glory of this collection are two poems by Krittibas Chakraborty, both of which could be regarded as the final tribute to the awesome linguistic plurality of the North-east in particular and our country in general. Originally written in Bengalee, for inclusion in this collection, these poems have been translated not directly from the language in which they were written but instead from Tripuri into English. More significantly, these two poems bring into sharp focus for us, once again, the complex issues of hybridised identity, belonging and homelessness. While wondering with the poet “How long you will burn, Northeast horizon!” (p.247), we feel as though we have come back full circle, once again. With apprehensions about the future of the North-east buzzing in our ears, we return from this mythopoeic journey, sadder and somewhat wiser as well.

Despite the fact that poetry often does not lend itself to an easy linguistic transfer, most of the translations in this collection have been competently handled. Often while reading these poems, one gets the impression as though all of them including the ones not originally written in English have been so written. The use of words or expressions from a variety of host languages, however, doesn’t set up any jarring rhythms. On the contrary, it ties up rather well with the politics of translation that, in any case, should have informed the very spirit of such a collection. By preferring the “foreignising” mode of translation to the “domesticating” one, the editors have not only demonstrated their respect for the notion of linguistic plurality, but also made a significant statement of their ideology and intent. Of course, they deserve a full round of applause for their success in accommodating a vast “polyphony of voices,” reflecting an equally bewildering range of thematic concerns and formal preferences. These are the voices that ought to be heard with passionate concern, even compassion and urgency. More than the ordinary lovers of

poetry across the country, this collection should strike a chord among those who wish to understand the cultural labyrinths of the North-east, and respond to the multiple challenges such an understanding often poses.

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Sujata Miri, *The Broken Circle*, London, New Delhi: Minerva Press, 2003, Price Rs 250).

The *Prologue* starts with the cries of a child. Then screams and protestations, of a mother thrown out and a baby's incessant crying. The beginning of the circle...

The child in Chapter One has grown up into a young woman:

"She had just turned fourteen and there were already two boys who claimed to love her, each proposing marriage..." This is Asha, nubile and full bodied, vivacious and full of beans. It is a delightful accentuation by the novelist as she opens the narrative with the trepidation relating to Asha's awakening sexuality. It is amazingly candid and acerbic at the same time. Every page in the novel is pulsating with warm figures, bristling with a rugged earthiness and racy sensuality.

As you read the novel, you are momentarily surprised by its clinical bluntness. This is solely Asha's story, a tale bold and brash. The setting is Lalchand Basti, the colony that is "home" to the

Nepali community of Shillong. The scene shifts to other localities, Lumphing, to "somewhere less Nepali & more cosmopolitan-Pokseh", then Umpling.

Asha is a wonderfully drawn character, very sensual and irresistible. She can twist men around her little finger, a truth she learns early in life. She is surrounded by her ridiculous Laban *Phuphu* and aunts. Crude, coarse and artless. She elopes, is brow bitten and bundled back home. Consequently a "respectable" marriage is arranged, with Golu Bahadur, a clerk, and Asha is ecstatic "She was one rare bride who thoroughly enjoyed her own wedding. The festivities, financed by her guilty father, were lavish and the meals rich with Nepali, Bengali and Khasi specialities...." Then follows some petty clashes with her in laws and another victim falls to her charms, her brother-in law Deepu. She is aware of her physical allure, and makes full use of it. Her desires are flimsy, but her needs are immediate. Money matters a lot to her, but her obsessive passion for a two timing, scheming older man, the highly exhibitionist Nirmal Chhetri leads her to plumb the depths of despair. She flings herself against him in secret rendezvous which carries her to bliss and destruction. Then follows more intrigues and shady deals of a surreptitious degree racket, where her husband Golu is involved. Then a murder, and the resultant trappings of the uncouth police probings and the emergence of an unsuspecting social worker. The circle widens. She is caught in a web spun by other men in her life and she cannot break free of debauchery and greed as she flaunts and lives as she pleases unabashedly. In her frantic search for physical fulfillment, she ruins her defenseless youngest daughter Lakshmi's vulnerable world too.

It is Sujata Miri at her best. She does not mince words in the dissection of sexual violence and the circularity of the dissolution of a woman's life based on greed and lust. Asha is no Emma Bovary, because she has no saving self-delusion. The familiar locales, Police Bazaar, Laban, Malki, Dreamland Cinema Hall and Guwahati add to the topicality of the issues involved. The reader would tend to

judge everything and everyone in this novel by a relentless straightforward uncovering of actions of a broad sample of men in relation to a woman — an interesting method. This is a world where time is measured with *Chitrahahar* programmes on the TV, as well as revealing some attempt to people with objects, and the need for consumption as an outlet for anxiety: “We are not basti wallahs. You must dress the children well.... Now you have a TV, a tape recorder, a sewing machine, besides the new bed and almirahs. Does anybody else in our family have this?”

The story is tragic to the point of pathos and the indirect narration adds to the callous indifference of the events. Sujata Miri retains a distance that evokes objectivity but also seems disdainful. Asha remains a sad figure and an object of pity.

Neither can we call it a cultural study of an interpretative kind, so any notion of a *final* meaning is always endlessly put off. Probably a little amount of sociological inquiry is inevitably caught up in this ‘circle of meaning’. Definitely the novel betrays very strong tenets of popular pulp fiction, but probably the title bespeaks of the irony where the unity, wholeness, and the feminine spirit or force denoting “the circle” is broken off.

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Selma K. Sonntag, *The Local Politics of Global English*, Lexington Books, New York, 2003, pp152.

This is a book that opens up one’s understanding of the linguistic dimensions of globalization which, in the explanatory words of the author herself, “pushes forward global English hegemony.” In doing so, however, it creates its own antithesis as it “politicizes

the language issue and hence “potentializes” a reaction. The burden is to ensure that the potential of this reaction is linguistically democratic.” Immense scholarship has gone into mapping out the contradictions that are inbuilt in such a situation, dynamic and unique enough to this century, to initiate the kind of academic interest that would garner rich dividends at the political and the personal level.

Sonntag begins by drawing upon the linguist Braj Kachru’s typology of concentric circles as a starting point, for differentiating the cases covered in the book according to the degree of global English usage. She then familiarizes the reader with certain key concepts of globalization, such as hegemony, resistance, elites, subalterns, and liberalization and democratization before launching into a discussion of the complexities of global English as it manifests itself in various countries.

The United States representing an English-speaking core corresponding to Kachru’s inner circle sees language as a neutral tool for communication and not as an identity marker. Language rights have not been established under American law and there are, according to the author, several contending views among Americans on language politics. The overall picture that one has of the American scene is that it exudes both hegemony and democracy in economic as well as linguistic globalization.

Her next case study presents an interesting analysis of the politics of language in France. Whilst attempting to stamp out the Breton language, the French state puts forward the “same arguments and logic for its battle against global English that the Breton nationalists use against French linguistic hegemony”. This transference between what she calls “local and global of oppressor and oppressed” is characteristic of the local politics of global English in France. Language politics in France remains a confrontation between regional languages and French linguistic hegemony. This has, however, been compromised, not only in global terms as English becomes the sole working language in Francophone countries, but

also internally in France. Sonntag views the local politics of global English in France as being post-modern by virtue of the shifting roles of hegemon and register .

Chapter Four looks at the subaltern language politics in India which has influenced the dynamics of English language usage in the country. Sonntag follows what she calls the “messy local politics of Indian democracy” from its colonial resistance in the 1920s when Gandhi convinced the Congress to organize along regional language lines, to the kind of vernacular language politics dominating the states of Bihar and UP in recent years. Perceptively so, she arrives at the conclusion that, in India the politics of the English language is essentially local. Although English was introduced by a global power, it has become part of the local, political and linguistic landscape of the country. The global face of English in India is Indian English. It has become synonymous with the elite class but it has also been appropriated by subalterns. And as a final comment she remarks that the subalterns can become the new local elite in India. However, the only valid conclusion that she can really come to is that, amidst reigning discordance there are truly multiple voices in India worth listening to, and she observes that some of these voices are subaltern ones.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, Sonntag compares the language politics of South Africa and Nepal, countries that are in democratic transitions. South Africa is part of Kachru’s outer circle, an “official English” country, whereas Nepal is a “marginal English” country. In South Africa, English has been the language of liberation and democracy, hegemonic and liberatory, elitist and democratic. During apartheid, South African Blacks used English as the language of protest and resistance despite the different language policy preferences of various segments of the liberation movement. Multilingualism in the post apartheid years is valued by Black South Africans in the informal and private sphere. But in the public arena, the majority of Black South Africans would opt for English. However, the political debate on linguistic democratization

and globalization in South Africa is not yet over since the new South Africa reflects the tension between the ideal of pursuing a truly transformative South African political project and the reality of seeking improvement in a majority of South Africans.

There are several points of similarities between South Africa and Nepal but the important difference lies in the fact that English has never played the role that it did or currently does in South Africa. As in South Africa the democratic transition ushered in a new multilingual policy where the Nepalese were assuredly tolerant of global English. In South Africa multilingualism advocates actively resist global English. There is an emerging position of global English in Nepalese society which hints at a class based struggle as the more likely future for Nepal.

Sonntag concludes with a salient observation that global English represents the possibility of globalization from above as well as from below, especially in terms of a democratic subaltern resistance to linguistic hegemony.

Each case study presents the human face of a political conundrum, where the choices to be made are sometimes dictated by the linguistic policies of a larger community or as in the case of South Africa, chosen by the people themselves. Needless to say, it is a book to be read not only by language scholars but by all and sundry as it brings into focus the linguistic complexities of globalization. Sonntag has succeeded in employing the tools of culture, language and history to conceptualize a situation that is necessarily global.

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Robbins Burling, *The Language of the Modupur Mandi (Garo), Vol. I: Grammar*, NJ,: Bibliophile South Asia in association with Promilla & Co. Publishers, New Delhi, 2004. Pp. xiii + 406 (hardback); Price: Rs. 750.00.

This is the first descriptive study of the grammar of the "Mandi" dialect of Garo spoken in Bangladesh. The book under review is divided into fourteen chapters: (1) The language and the people, (2) Segmental phonology, (3) Juncture and prosody, (4) Morphophonemics and variation, (5) Core grammar: an overview, (6) Verbs, (7) Optional verb affixes, (8) Nouns, (9) Nominals, (10) Numerals, (11) Minor parts of speech, (12) Complex noun phrases, (13) Subordination, and (14) Restructuring. Besides these fourteen chapters, the book also contains three appendices: (A) Texts, (B) Questions for study, and (C) Glossary of linguistic terminology; references, and two indices: index of affixes and index of topics.

In the introductory chapter of the book, Robbins Burling (henceforth RB) outlines the goals/scope of the grammar of the Garo spoken in Bangladesh. He mentions three groups of people the book is intended for. The first group comprises the people "...whose goal is to learn one of the Garo dialects". "The second group is professional linguists and Tibeto-Burmanists". And the third group of people consists of "...people who speak Garo as their native language".

Although the book is a descriptive study of the grammar of the dialect of Garo spoken in Bangladesh, the author has successfully tried to compare some of the structures of this dialect with those of the Garo spoken in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Each section of a particular chapter has been assigned "one of three levels, elementary, intermediate, and advanced". In addition to assigning each section to one of three difficulty levels, the author has labeled the levels as A, B, and C respectively.

An inexperienced reader may find it confusing about the fact that similar things are not discussed under the same topic

(e.g., noun phrases are described in chapters 5, 8, and 12; different types of postpositions have been described in two different chapters, viz., chapters 8 and 9; etc.). Also, one finds a lot of repetitions (e.g., the minor word classes have been discussed twice in chapters 5 and 11). We perhaps cannot blame the author for this. RB clearly states in the introduction to the book that "...Do not try to work straight through the book from the beginning to the end. You would get hopelessly bogged down. This is not that sort of book" (p.6), and that "...As such, I have permitted myself a good deal of repetition" (p.7).

In the first chapter of the book, RB talks about the concepts the "Mandis" (of Bangladesh) have about the "A'chiks" (of Garo Hills in Meghalaya). He points out that the Mandis identify their dialect as "a form of "A'beng" and that Mandi has several mutually intelligible dialects spoken in Bangladesh. According to RB, the Garos of Garo hills are "less often bilingual in any language than those who live in Bangladesh..." (p.15), and Mandi is heavily influenced by Bengali.

The second, third, and the fourth chapters are dedicated to the description of the phonology of Mandi. The phonological description is quite adequate. The *glottal stop* or "Raka", one of the prominent phonological features of Mandi/Garo, has been dealt in detail (pp.32-41). The description given is clear and comprehensive. It would have been better, at least from the point of view of a linguist, if the author had presented a detail description of the phonetic and phonemic aspects of the various segmental sounds, viz., consonants, monophthongs and diphthongs; consonant sequences/clusters; distinctive features of the segments, etc.

The section on morphophonemics (pp.71-76) gives a concise description of some prevalent morphophonemic rules in the language. Though some interesting morphophonemic rules of the verb patterning in the language have not been dealt with in detail, such patterning is covered in other places. This section presents a

beautiful description of the variations found among the various dialects. RB finally describes the changes in pronunciation due to the linguistic influence of Bengali and English on the Mandi language. For instance, the phoneme /s/ never occurs in word- or syllable-final position in older Mandi, but the "...Bengali borrowings have established /-s/.." (p. 87), and, as a result, now we find words like *dos* 'ten', *bas* 'enough', etc.

The fifth chapter attempts to provide a brief overview of the "core grammar" of Mandi, and describes the structure of simple sentences, verbs, noun phrases and minor word classes.

The description of the verbal structure of Mandi has been presented in chapters six and seven. The distinction between a "verb base", a "verb stem", and a "verb" (sic) is important in Mandi, and RB has explained the distinction very clearly (p.107). RB points out (p.112) that the Garo dialects do not have separate transitive and intransitive verbs. The transitive verb-forms are obtained by adding the causative affix *-et-* or *-it-* in Mandi and *-at-* in A'chik (Garo). The suffixes like sentence completing suffixes, tense-aspect suffixes, imperative suffixes, subordinating suffixes, nominalizing suffixes associated with verbs (pp.120-136), and adverbial affixes such as progressive *-ing-*, *-eng-*, *-ong-*; negative *-ja-*, etc. (pp. 139-153) have been discussed in great detail in these two chapters. One wonders why RB includes the 'causative' affix, *-et- ~ -it- ~ -at-*, which is generally associated with verbs, among the adverbial affixes. A detail study of the auxiliary verbs, conjunct verbs and compound verbs would have increased the usefulness of the book, especially for the language learners.

The eighth chapter deals with the nouns in Mandi. In this chapter, RB discusses the "category prefixes" (classifiers) associated with nouns, formation of plural, case markers, and final noun suffixes. I feel that some of the so-called final noun suffixes, e.g., *-sa ~ -ha* 'only' (p.205) should have been described as emphatic particles.

Chapter nine is on nominals, and describes the pronouns, question words, postpositions, and borrowed Bengali case markers and postpositions (such as *a-ge* 'before, ago', *po-re* 'after' etc.). The description of case markers and postpositions could have been presented along with the brief description of the same in the previous chapter. Also, the nouns and adjectives could have been described in this chapter as they, too, are nominals.

The Mandi numerals have been described in the next chapter (chapter ten). RB identifies *gip-a* as the ordinal numeral marker. Thus *sa* 'one': *sa-gipa* 'first (one)', *gin* 'two': *gin-ipa* 'second (one)', and so on.

The numeral classifiers (pp.247-256) such as *ak-* ~ *sak-* 'people', *mang-* 'animals', *rong-* 'round', *kol-* 'holes', *king-* 'thin flat things', etc. have been described under the headings 'core classifiers', 'shapes, materials, places', 'pieces, parts, groups, bundles, loads', 'containers', etc.

In the eleventh chapter, adverbs, locative words (e.g. *-cheng-* 'before'), defective nouns, "*gi-type*" adjectives, courtesy expressions, interjections, conjunctions, reduplication, echoes, etc. have been described as minor parts of speech.

The next chapter presents a brief description of the structure of the complex noun phrases in Mandi.

Chapter thirteen describes the structure of subordinated sentences in Mandi. Instead of having a separate chapter just on subordination and briefly mentioning the word order, the author should have discussed various processes like coordination, passivization (described in chapter fourteen, p.340), interrogation; negation; conjunctive participle construction (RB gives just one example without having mentioned the construction on p.346 in chapter fourteen) etc.; structure of conditional sentences; relative-correlative constructions (described in chapter fourteen, p.333) in one place, and he should have devoted a complete chapter on word order in Mandi describing the order of noun and adjective,

postpositions, noun and genitive, adjective and numerals, etc. The last section of the chapter talks about the equational sentences (p.329), but it does not consider the existential sentences.

In the last chapter titled 'restructuring', RB talks about the relative-correlative construction involving *je* and *ba* in great detail. Here, RB notes that *je* occupies the same position as the demonstrative pronoun in a noun phrase. Although *je* has been borrowed from Bengali, Mandi/Garo has "...not borrowed the full complexity of the Bengali relative system" (p.334). The *ba*-relatives, according to RB, "are less common than the *je* relatives". The other constructions discussed in this chapter include "balanced questions", passive, comparative with *-kal-* and *-bat-*, postposed noun phrases, postposed subordinate clauses, and subject fronting.

Appendix A contains four Garo folk-tales with interlineal translation. These tales "are taken from a book written by Kohima Daring called *Mandi Di sarangna Golpo: Stories for Garo Children*" (sic). Appendix B contains questions for study based on the contents presented in each chapter. In Appendix C, RB provides readers with a very useful glossary of linguistic terminology.

The sections dealing with various aspects of syntax are not comprehensive in scope. A separate section on word-formation in Garo/Mandi would have enhanced the beauty of the book. The way this book uses certain grammatical terms leaves the reader uneasy. One such term is "balanced questions".

One of the most distinctive features of the book under review is the overall approach used by the author to describe the categories and structures at the levels of syntax, morphology, and phonology. Various grammatical constructions (e.g. imperative, negation, etc.) and categories (subject, case suffixes, etc.) are described in terms of their form as well as their pragmatic function(s).

Additionally, the author's discussion on the interaction of grammatical structure with contextual factors such as the variation of styles and the social class/status of the speakers, etc. will be

valuable particularly for sociolinguists. This book is the first descriptive grammar, which includes analysis of syntax, morphology, and phonology of Garo/Mandi in one place.

On the whole, the author covers a wide spectrum of topics related to grammar of Modhupur Mandi (Garo). This is a good and worth reading book with lots of information on the grammatical structure of Garo, though there are a couple of small lapses that may be ignored when compared with its merits. RB deserves praises for writing a commendable book on the grammar of Garo providing the findings hitherto unexplored. RB has made an invaluable contribution to the Tibeto-Burman linguistics. This book will also be useful for the teachers/learners of Garo as a second language.

The efforts of the author are laudable and the book is worth collecting for the people interested in the study of languages and cultures of tribal population of India and its neighboring countries.

The printing of the book is clear and quite pleasing to the eye.

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