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# Obituary – Phil O’Keefe 1948-2020

Obituary

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A brief appreciation:

I want no part of being young, do not want the wisdom of a sage  
while there are songs still to be sung, new words to Grace the page  
a better age I’ll never find  
'cos I was born at the right time.

Excerpt from lyrics of “Born at the Right Time” (Billy Mitchell)  
in the album “Here Comes the Neighbourhood” (Lindisfarne, 1998 <https://www.discogs.com/Lindisfarne-Here-Comes-The-Neighbourhood/release/4638878>).

Proud Geordie, musical to his core, Phil sang with the lilt and power of Lindisfarne ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm\\_KZSYSiGc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm_KZSYSiGc)). One night in an empty seminar room at the Institute of Development Studies in Nairobi, he composed a song, a lament, for people suffering from drought in eastern Kenya. Phil’s heart and mind were open to the suffering of those who went out daily to find wood with which to cook their food, to families sheltering as refugees from war or flood-ravaged villages and to future generations who will be affected by climate change. He wrote and sang about such suffering and what should be done about it for nearly 50 years.

As late as 2017, Phil strolled the aisles at a session of geographers’ annual meeting in Boston crooning workers’ anthem as he played his mandolin: warming up the audience and reminding the younger generation that struggle, suffering and joy were actually unspooling then/there and here/now in the streets outside the windowless conference room. He never tired of stomping out the rhythm of “The Blackleg Miner” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9eDa1dQ2mQ>).

As one of Phil’s favorite folk vocalists, Billy Mitchell, sings, Phil was “born at the right time” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1Ea4svBok0>). He was born and raised in the Northeast of England before the neoliberal destruction of shipbuilding and steel making. He was nurtured in a working-class family, a community where you still took a lump of coal and bit of salt to your neighbours’ terraced homes and drank a glass of whiskey to their good health for the New Year. His young mind was sharp, so he narrowly escaped capture by the Catholic priesthood after years of Jesuit schooling and a stint in philosophy at the University of Bristol. Thank gods, as it were, Phil never abandoned the pub culture and music of Tyneside for the elegance of the Gregorian College in Rome. Instead, he moved to the University of London and did his PhD field work in Kenya, taught in Sudan and developed a lifelong love of Africa, where he focused on many studies of energy and development policy over the years as well as evaluations of humanitarian assistance. Born also in time to join in the critical spirit of May 1968, Phil one of the founders of radical geography during his stint at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he took over editorship of *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* for several years [1].



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Phil's in his own words

I'm a radical Geordie,  
who, like many Geordie men,  
has had a chance to roam the world for work.  
My work was radical because it focused  
on giving ordinary people a better environment,  
a way of producing nature that benefitted their households.

[Source(s): "Memory Book", unpublished, 1 October 2020, courtesy of Dr. Di Jelly]

Returning to the Northeast and Northumbria University, Phil's research, editing and writing, took the suffering and struggle he had observed and abstracted/refined it in terms of class, exploitation and oppression. "Vulnerability is a class concept", he wrote. At the end of his life, Phil returned to "The Concept of Nature in Marx" and was in conversation about the articulation of capitalist, state socialist and tribal modes of production. Could they have played a role in the emergence of the SARS-CO-II virus?

Over his long career, Phil dug deeply into a series of linked subjects: land use, environment and development, wood fuel and energy for development, the evaluation of humanitarian action, climate change and the social construction of disaster risk. Indeed, a persistent theme was natural hazards and disaster risk. He was a persistent critic of buzzwords, such as "sustainability" and "resilience," and the myth that disasters are "natural" or that capitalist accumulation "lifts all boats" and many others. He wrote and edited books for students, monographs for researchers, reports and evaluations for policymakers.

Phil's huge output – his role in many co-authored and co-edited books, the reports and results of projects, and scores of articles and book chapters – drew mixed reactions. With a personality so large, so much life energy to burn, publishing for so many different audiences, he could be read by some as saying "too little and too much" in a phrase sung by Lindisfarne (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyyDCHRnIJU&list=RDP82uYBZJEzM&index=7>).

As Lindisfarne also describes so well, Phil "travelled the world [...] heard the noise that destroys and commands," and now he has "run home"; he is the "running man, running for home" where we will all join him soon enough (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOlxRkdzjCA&list=RDP82uYBZJEzM&index=2>). We miss him, but "it's all right, Lady Elenore" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILp9MyKURo4&list=RDP82uYBZJEzM&index=3>).

Ernesto "Che" Guevara said that "the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality." One feels that love in Phil's oeuvre, teaching, politics and personal life, as his many friends and beloved wife, four children, his two brothers and his sister will always remember.

### **Selected publications**

Gakarara: A Study of the Development of Underdevelopment. PhD University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (1972).

Taking the Natural Out of 'Natural' Disaster (1976).

Land Use and Development (1977).

Environment and Development: Community Perspectives (1979).

Energy and Development in Kenya (1984).

Wood, Energy and Households: Perspectives on Rural Kenya (1984).

Regional Restructuring Under Advanced Capitalism (1984).

Southern African Development (1993).

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Tears of the Crocodile (1993).  
The New Forester (1995).  
The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Development (1995).  
Disaster and Development: The Politics of Humanitarian Aid (1998).  
Negotiating Poverty (2001).  
Redefining Sustainable Development (2001).  
Rio Plus Ten: Politics, Poverty, and the Environment (2003).  
The Fuelwood Trap (2009).  
The Future of Energy Use (2010).  
Managing Adaptation to Climate Risk (2013).  
Cities demanding the Earth: A New Understanding of the Climate Emergency (2020).

**Note**

1. E. Sheppard and L. Shaun (eds) Book Review Panel: T. Barnes and E. Sheppard (eds), *The Spatial History of Radical Geography*, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Review of Books* 8:4, 236–258, doi: 10.1080/2325548X.2020.1781463 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2325548X.2020.1781463>.