*The few meetings and conversations I've had with Graeme Miles over the years were seemingly very casual but clearly some of our parallel life style and interests left a mutual mark. I was, however, astonished and flattered to receive an invitation from Graeme to present him with the EFDSS Gold Badge — the highest award that the society gives. So, along with others here tonight, it is my great delight to applaud one who has dedicated himself to create such an extensive and incomparable body of work.*

Throughout the past some of the best commentators, celebrators and chroniclers of regional culture and history have often been outsiders originally not from the region they are commenting on. Our celebration this evening is exactly for one such.

Celebrated and well established as an artist in the North East, Graham Miles is highly regarded as a local bard uniquely documenting Teesside, its people and particularly its landscape – he was in fact born in Greenwich in 1935. Four years later, his father, a naval medical officer in Chatham, took a job at the newly opened ICI and the family moved to Billingham.

Graeme's enthusiasm for the wireless and his predilection for the work of Charles Chilton on the Home Service gained some disapproval from his parents who were more orientated toward the Classics. More so, his early enthusiasm, like many of us here tonight, for the programme "Country Magazine" and later "As I Roved out" was thought odd. He recalls taking delight in hearing the songs of the Copper Family and these programmes were inspiration for his later work.

At school he says he 'tolerated subjects' he was good at geography and history… but, surprisingly, only had 'an aptitude to' rather than 'ability at art' He did ,however, discover a love for words. A love that led to him to write a poem which would later become well known when set to music.

During the early post-war period – a time of extreme austerity - one of his early observations of real life was that of a cry of a particular local street seller "with a melodious voice" – selling easily available fuel. So when asked to write a poem, he based his on this seller's cry… 'Sea Coal!' He recalls receiving good praise for this at school - he was then aged just 14.

Leaving school, his fascination with words continued; this time with the shape and rhythm of lettering and went to work at Northern Display in Middlesbrough - a signwriting company where he painted posters, vans and fascia's. He says he liked the discipline that the shapes of lettering demanded.

Dissatisfied with the work he eventually joined West Hartlepool Art School. As a "reasonable draughtsman" he would have sooner gone to technical school but his

parents preferred Art School instead!  Art School: - an institution that expands ones imagination and introduces one to a wider yet uncertain world. As a skilful draughtsman, from 1951-55, he revelled in figurative art,  life drawing and landscapes – with a brief excursion to pottery and puppetry!

Although he 'dabbled' earlier with attempts at writing "folk style" songs, it was in 1954 when a fire at a West Hartlepool Match factory fuelled his interest.  He enthusiastically recorded this topical event in a 12 verse lengthy ballad …. with spoken parts as well!

National service intervened, and in October 1955  he was conscripted to the Royal West Kent's – his service mainly spent in Luneburg, Germany. Here he began to look at things differently and declares he survived simply by "keeping a little bit " to himself … "It was a threat at the time, a horror doing it – but I wouldn't have missed it."  As soldier of the Queen he learned little … only that her Majesty didn't employ very good cooks!

He returned to Cleveland, after being demobbed, and briefly worked for his previous employer as well as doing some freelance illustration work. He also consciously started to work on more rural reflective songs turning out verses and scansions just " as ends in themselves." Fortunately for us, many of them were kept.
An attempt at novel writing was also found to be "far too cumbersome " but it was The Radio Ballad, 'The Big Hewer' in 1958,that Graeme identifies as a turning point. It got him going and he never looked back.

By now his artistic skill had led him to employment as museum assistant in Middlesbrough Museum, illustrating and recording items that were in the collection – "arrow heads and molluscs" a task that he enjoyed and enabled him to develop his illustration technique.

An extraordinary story shows his resolve. In the early 60s, at a time he wished to develop his commercial art, he had seen and admired drawings by Felix Tolpolski as introductory credits to the John Freeman TV programme "Face to Face".  Graeme, with portfolio of drawings, travelled  to London, found Topolskis. address  and simply knocked on his studio door.  Although he spend some three hours with the artist, it was clear that there wasn't the mutual regard for Graeme's work – a certain lack of enthusiasm suggested he might be wasting his time and  should simply "to forget it" Fortunately, Graeme didn't and this  multi-talented man  has produced some wonderful art work of Teesside and the surrounding area.

He recalls visiting the  Newcastle Folk Club where he heard the likes of Ray and Archie Fisher, … and, of course, Johnny Handle. An introduction to songs that were specifically regional - songs of a place - led him to seek those from his own domiciled region Teesside. A library search produced nothing, so this extraordinary individual decided to rectify this and set out to deliberately create verses of his own.

A desire so strong -in order to obtain authentic background material - in 1961 he purposely left the museum and went to work in heavy industry.
Although relatively small of stature - he firstly became an iron moulder's labourer in Anderson's foundry, six months making drain pipes and heavy castings; this was followed by working on the canals as a surveyor. A lengthier period found him employed shunting and plate-laying on the Railway, quarry working and amongst other jobs, later became a 'rough painter' for ICI. Ironically, he got the sack from this job as his rough painting was not good enough!

True, it was relatively easy in those days to get work but this took a great deal of risk, belligerence, determination. Some might say it madness - to actually move from the relative comfort of a museum to manual and physically demanding work simply to experience things he might write about. Fortunately, he found the mental and physical world quite separate and his tenacity and self-possession led to an extraordinary corpus of work in both song and art work. With his little red note book, gathering words, phrases, stories, Graeme's solitary and risky endeavour has given us a significant insight into the working and social life of the people of Teesside.
It also presents a sad reflection on changing times; the loss of industry, streets, docks, pubs and community. Ordinary men and women are shown to be the most extraordinary of creatures – as is Graeme!.

It was whilst Graeme was working on the Railway, that the legendary BBC producer Charles Parker - just finishing the last of the Radio Ballads - came across him. The story that Graeme, disciple-like, simply downed tools and went to write songs at Parker's request is almost legendery . He did, apparently, give the necessary one weeks' notice.

Charles was exploring the industrial workspace for poets, artists, songwriters - creative working people - for the remarkable Centre 42 project. .So Graeme went to Birmingham and stayed a short while in the Parker household. He fondly remembers the generosity, commitment and support of Charles – not to mention his integrity, kindness and genius. His forays with Parker recording actuality to create song text were inspiring and illuminating, as was working with Peggy Seeger who helped with some of his tunes. Several of Graeme's songs were later used in "Landmarks" - six half-hour TV programmes by Philip Donnellan – that traced the human condition from the cradle to the grave. Graeme stoically recalls that his songs were only used in programmes about old age and death!

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His contacts with the folk song revival continued with visits to clubs around the country and especially visits to the Troubadour in London – one of the most celebrated in that period. He was always to return to this beloved Teesside and in 1966, engaged as publicity officer for the local Co-op Society, he remained for 14 years.

He continued writing songs but, in 1972, Graham in his tidy way, decided that he written the number that he had set out to do and quietly and consciously ceased writing them. Thankfully, he continues to paint, draw and still writes but as verse to be read - not sung

Having written over 500 hundred songs, he recorded over 200 for Peter Kennedy's FolkTrax cassettes. Needless to say this was not a successful venture – financially or artistically – as Kennedys' production was not exemplary and the domestic recording [as Graham puts it] led to "a rather lavatorial sounding performance".

The North-South divide probably delayed wider recognition of Graeme's work but it was performances of Graeme's songs by others that brought his songs to a larger public: Teeside Fettlers, Vin Garbutt, The Wilson Family, The Liverpool Spinners, Jinksy's stack, Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger are among those who have performed his songs and a whole CD of his work. "Where Ravens Feed", was created by Martyn Wyndham-Read.

A collaboration in the early 70s with Robin Dale, a great local photographer, led to a series of slide shows with Graeme's words. These were inspiring and ultimately led to the publication "Soundscape" in 2001. This was a testimony to the changing world, the love and feeling for North East England in Robin's photographs and Graeme's words, tunes and drawings.

In 2007, a selection of his songs, words and illustrations were published in "Forgotten Songs Remembered" and, two years ago, Whitby Folk Week celebrated Graeme's work when a great number of the booked artists performed a stupendous concert of his songs. More recently, local performers have formed The Ironoplois singers and, as well as a double CD, perform a stage presentation "The Songs of Ironopolis" – a journey through the industrial landscape of Cleveland. Similarly, a show "Purple Acres" has verse and song with a narration performed by Graeme himself.

I am indeed honoured and pleased to present this award to an extraordinary human being. We discovered recently that we do share a number of coincidences in our early life so I'm delighted to say we may now add the Society's Gold Badge!

The award is presented on behalf of the folk world; the numerous friends; singers of your songs – but especially on behalf of the people and landscape of Teesside that you so definably celebrated: ….. the Farmers, Fisher-folk, Foundry men, Stonebreakers, Sailors, Squaddies, Miners, Moulders, Railway workers, Poachers … Pretty Megs, Wild Dogs and woeful scarecrows!

I'm proud to present this to a kindred spirit - Graeme Miles