

RICHARD GRIFFIN, THE BUGHOUSE POET

By

Bill Zavatsky

In memory of Philip Lyman

Somewhere back in the seventies, most likely in 1973, on one of my regular visits to the Gotham Book Mart, the wonderful and lamented bookman Philip Lyman, he of the crisp white shirts and subtle ties, got my attention. "I have something you might be interested in," he said in his low-key manner, his head lowered as he looked up over the tops of his black horn-rimmed glasses.

Philip knew that one of the things that interested me was goofy poetry, things like *Larval Forms and Other Zoological Verses* (1951) by "the late" Walter Garstang (so he is billed on the book jacket), featuring poems with titles like *The Ballad of the Veliger* or *How the Gastropod Got Its Twist*. He kept his eyes open for anything he thought might tickle my fancy. That day he produced a hardcover book bound in attractive green cloth, looking as if it had been freshly shipped by the printer. Its gilt title still sparkled: *Bug House Poetry*, with stamped below it, the author's name, Richard Griffin. What have we here, I wondered.

With the closing of the Lambs Club library, books were being sold off, Philip explained, and evidently copies of this book had been stored there. They must have been stored there for quite a while, because *Bug House Poetry* is dated 1917. All I had to do was open the cover and find the photograph of the author, playing a banjo, pipe in his mouth, wearing a golf cap, knickers, and knee socks, with two huge "vinegerones," one crawling up his left leg, the other on the face of the banjo. A vinegerone, it didn't take me long to find out, though I had to go to my unabridged dictionary to hunt down the word as "vinegarroon," is "a large whip scorpion of the southern U.S. and Mexico that emits a vinegary odour when disturbed and is inaccurately held to be very venomous." But Griffin's "vinegerones" look like rubber or papier-maché critters.

All right, I thought. This gets better and better! Then I turned to the text itself. It was evidently a compilation of Griffin's complete works, or something like it. Then, of course, I didn't know that the individual sections had been issued as books: *The Delaware Bride and Other Poems*; *A Tale of Fraunces' Tavern, A.D. 1765, and Other Poems*; *The Dead Rabbit Riot, A.D. 1857, and Other Poems*; *The Melancholy Yak and Other Poems*; and a tailpiece called *After Thoughts* that includes five poems. *In toto*, 293 pages.

The copies of the book were selling for \$1.50, and I must have bought a few that day. Surely some of my friends would go for this stuff, I thought, and I believe that on a later trip to the Gotham, when I saw that there were still a couple of copies of *Bug House Poetry* on the shelf in the poetry section, I snapped those up as well. I still have two copies of *Bug House* left. If I had ten of them I could haul in the big money. Copies of most of Griffin's books in good condition sell for upwards of eighty dollars, and some command prices in the hundreds. For a virtually unknown poet, this is not a bad fate! I wonder who out there in Bookland is reading him, or has he become some kind of rare book fiend (and rare book dealer) phenomenon. The inflated prices suggest that something is afoot. . .

Griffin's poetry immediately struck me as a not-so-distant relation of the Dada and Surrealist poetry so dear to me at that time, and showed maybe even closer connections to the movies of the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, and the Ring Lardner of nonsense plays like *The Tridget of Greva*. There must have been plenty of writers like Griffin playing the silly card, but to have his work (in addition to the masters that I have just mentioned) gives us the sense of a wider playing field, that there were other nuts out there who could lay the groundwork for a native tradition of, what shall we call it to name it as a movement, Bug House?

Griffy (as he called himself) must have published his first book in 1913, this being *The Delaware Bride and Other Poems*. Four volumes follow, until we finally learn something about Griffin himself in the 1922 edition of *Bug House Poetry*, not quite accurately subtitled *The Complete Works of Richard Griffin (Enlarged and Revised)*, for there would be at least one more book, *The Camel's Last Gasp* (1931). In a "Short Account of the Author" by one Guy Barnabas Bone (undoubtedly Griffy himself), we are offered an outline of Griffin's colourful life: family roots in England, his New York beginnings, a move to the cranberry bogs of New Jersey, sent back to Manhattan to work as a clerk on South Street at sixteen, amateur acting in New York City followed by a professional career, subsequent world travel, service in the war with Spain, a turn in the Secret Service during World War I (during which he captured a German spy in a punch-out), followed by buggy days in Greenwich Village. (The National Union Catalogue and the New York Public Library, which owns all of his books, give his birthdate as 1857, but offer no date of death. My guess is that Griffin expired sometime in the mid- or late thirties. My copy of *The Camel's Last Gasp* was signed by him in October of 1932.)

Years ago I did a lot of research on Griffin and didn't turn up much. He must have been a member of the Lambs Club, or why would his books have been stored in the Lambs library? (This makes sense if we remember his acting background.) But the Lambs archives (at the Lincoln Center for the Library of the Performing Arts) are sealed as of this writing. Griffin had donated a copy of *Bug House Poetry* to the New York Public Library, and listed his address ("c/o Frank P Dowling") as 17 Vandewater Street, a thoroughfare which was obliterated by the time that the new central headquarters of the New York Police Department at 1 Police Plaza was completed in 1973. One of the copies of *Bug House Poetry* that I possessed had a sticker in it that said, "Printed by P. J. Kenedy & Sons." Some time in the seventies I talked to one of the sons at the company's offices on Third Avenue. He told me that yes, he did remember his father talking about "a strange old man" for whom the firm did some printing work back in the day. (The Kenedy company did lots of printing for Catholic organizations, including the Holy See, and seems to have closed down operations in 1982.)

Still, we can learn something about Griffin the poet by reading the screed that he published on the title pages of several of his volumes:

I can't find a Publisher who
 Will give me a chance with my ditty;
I've canvassed among quite a few
 In various parts of the city.
I fly to my trusty canoe
 And hustle it through, yes I paddle
Quite over that publishing crew
 In spite of their critical twaddle.
 To Hell with such rank fiddle faddle!

We read it at the head of *Bug House Poetry* (1917), *Fresh Bugs* (1919), *Bug House Poetry* (1922) and *The Camel's Last Gasp* (1931).

Bug House Square, the popular name of Chicago's Washington Square Park, was the location where many orators of all stripes let loose with their pleas and harangues and (I'm told) still do, at least every July, under the sponsorship of the Newberry Library, located across the street, during its annual book sale:

In [Bug House Square's] heyday during the 1920s and 1930s, poets, religionists, and cranks addressed the crowds, but the mainstays were soapboxers from the revolutionary left, especially from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Proletarian Party, Revolutionary Workers' League, and more ephemeral groups. Many speakers became legendary, including anarchist Lucy Parsons, "clap doctor" Ben Reitman, labour-wars veteran John Loughman, socialist Frank Midney, feminist-Marxist Martha Biegler, Frederick Wilkesbarr ("The Sirfessor"), Herbert Shaw (the "Cosmic Kid"), the Sheridan twins (Jack and Jimmy), and one-armed "Cholly" Wendorf.

Franklin Rosemont, Encyclopedia of Chicago History (online)

Griffin could have picked up the title from there, or simply from the slang designation of an insane asylum as a "bug house." (His affection for his totem bug, the vinegerones—to use his spelling—dates from a stint in Texas, or so says Guy Barnabas Bone.)

The following sampler of Griffy's work will have to do for now, until more can be found out about this elusive character, or until a *Complete Works* can be mounted to enshrine an American original who still has the power to send all of us back, laughing or screaming, to the "buggy jug dingley dell." I have selected from the 1917 edition of *Bug House Poetry*.

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