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WALES: (STILL) A PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION? LANGUAGE CHOICE IN WALES AT THE END OF THE ANGLO-WELSH ERA.

Towards the end of the last century the poet R. S. Thomas, addressing an audience at Kings College London, claimed that “my country, Cymru, to be understood presents a problem of translation, and if it is to maintain a separate and valuable identity, it must continue to do so.” In the same address he expresses his distaste for the term “United Kingdom” and his conviction that “no-one who cannot read and speak {Welsh} fluently...{should}... boast that he knows this land and its people.”

Thomas, a native speaker of English, and a self-taught user of Welsh, seems to be questioning the value of English to reflect the reality of Wales, and with it his own status as an “Anglo-Welsh” poet. But Thomas – nominated in 1995 for the Nobel Prize for Literature by the Arts Council of England (as well as the Welsh Academy) - was one of the finest poets working in English in the last century; and his subject matter is unremittingly Wales and the bleak landscape of a dead nation which the Welsh have allowed the English to pillage and destroy:

...I have walked the shore
For an hour and seen the English
Scavenging among the remains
Of our culture, covering the sand
Like the tide and, with the roughness
Of the tide, elbowing our language
Into the grave that we have dug for it.

(*Reservoirs* 1968)

R. S. (as he was known, to distinguish him from his better-known namesake Dylan) was the latest in a long line of “Anglo-Welsh” writers, most of whom (like himself, and like Dylan) were born to Welsh-speaking parents; theirs was thus the generation of language loss, reflecting the drastic decline of the Welsh language through most of the last century.

Thomas’s address to the students of Kings, “Wales: a problem of translation”, was made in 1996. By then, it had become clear that the Welsh language was undergoing a revival, fuelled from the 1980s by an extensive Welsh-medium education programme and the creation of a Welsh language television channel, *Sianel Pedwar Cymru*. This was confirmed in the 2001 census which indicated a substantial increase over the past decade of two percentage points, from 18.5 to 20.5, in the number of people living in Wales who could speak the language¹. But Thomas was suspicious of figures, suggesting that the language, like the Red Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, would have to “run very fast to remain where it is” (Welsh 11).

In some ways Thomas was right. Twenty years on, the language has essentially remained where it was, with the 2011 census registering a slight overall decrease in the percentage of Welsh speakers compared with 2001. But the census also indicates a pattern shift, with more Welsh speakers now living in urban centers (especially Cardiff) and more young speakers. This pattern shift, we will argue, has created the conditions for a new status for Welsh across the principality, and for new forms of interaction between English and Welsh, in the choices made by young bilingual writers, especially that of self translation or re-writing.

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¹ As reported by the BBC on http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/2755217.stm. Last visited 27/03/2016.



In contrast, the Anglo-Welsh tradition which developed during the last century did so independently of literary production in Welsh; Glyn Jones, in what remains still today one of the most illuminating overviews of Anglo-Welsh writing, *The Dragon has two tongues* (1968), refers to the singular fact that two volumes of poetry which appeared in mid century, one entitled *Modern Welsh Poetry*, edited by Keidrych Rhys, the other *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, had not a single poem in common. The reason was not just that the Rhys volume concerned itself with modern poetry, but simply that it was poetry in English, while the Oxford anthology was only in Welsh. It was as if the two strands were condemned not to meet, which made cross-fertilization an improbability and underlined the “problem of translation” which was Wales.

For Jones, an Anglo-Welsh writer was someone “who wrote in English about Wales” rather than a Welsh person writing in English (37); a definition which eliminated the poets Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas, who both came from Welsh families, but which included the modernist poet David Jones, and his epic war poem *In Parenthesis*, rated “a work of genius” by T. S. Eliot². Like Edward Thomas, Jones was born in London, and like him his father was Welsh speaking. But unlike Thomas, the matter of Wales permeates the poetry. *In Parenthesis*, subtitled *seinnyessit e gledyf ym penn mameu*³, recounts the misfortunes of a London Welsh regiment in the trenches of Flanders during the First World War. Unlike Owen and Thomas, Jones served in the ranks, and unlike them he survived the war, but three years in the trenches took their toll in later life, inflicting what has since come to be known as post-traumatic stress disorder. The poem makes numerous references to Welsh history and topography, which, Jones warns, “will only find response in those who, by blood or inclination, feel a kinship with the more vulnerable culture in that hotch-potch which is ourselves.”⁴ Concluding the preface, and underlining the centrality of Wales to the poem, he writes:

To any Welsh reader I would say, what Michael Drayton, in a foreword to his *Poly-olbion* says, speaking of Wales, “if I have not done her right, the want is in my ability, not in my love.” (xxi)

The “vulnerable culture” which R. S. Thomas was later to despair of was nonetheless robustly embraced after the war by a succession of Anglo-Welsh poets, including Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins, and Alun Lewis. Typically, as Glyn Jones (13) points out, they shared with their Welsh speaking counterparts a background of non-conformism, radical politics, and a lack of class consciousness. They came from families of schoolteachers, miners, and ministers of religion. Most, if not all, heard Welsh at home as well as in the communities in which they lived, although the wider community of industrial South Wales was rapidly becoming monoglot English. But they adopted an English which celebrated Welsh, in its substratum rhythms and music. *Under Milk Wood* (1953), Dylan Thomas’s play for voices, is surely the best known expression of this *genus loci*. But the leitmotif of place runs through *all* the Anglo-Welsh poets. Alun Lewis, from a hospital bed in Poona (he died in Burma in 1944 during the Japanese campaign), girdles his beloved in a shared night space across sixty degrees of longitude, and a litany of place names which is the whole of Wales:

Last night I did not fight for sleep
But lay awake from midnight while the world
Turned its slow features to the moving deep
Of darkness, till I knew that you were furled,

Beloved, in the same dark watch as I.
And sixty degrees of longitude beside
Vanished as though a swan in ecstasy
Had spanned the distance from your sleeping side.

And like to swan or moon the whole of Wales
Glided within the parish of my care:

² Introduction to *In Parenthesis*.

³ “His sword rang in mothers’ heads”, taken from the sixth century poem *Y Gododdin*, attributed to Aneirin, which recounts the raid of 300 Welshmen into the English kingdom of Deira.

⁴ From the author’s preface to *In Parenthesis*.



I saw the green tide leap on Cardigan,
Your red yacht riding like a legend there,

And the great mountains, Dafydd and Llewelyn,
Plynlimmon, Cader Idris and Eryri
Threshing the darkness back from head and fin.....
(*In Hospital, Poona 1, 1945*)

Of Vernon Watkins, another South Wales poet who wrote only in English, Raine (1967) claimed that he was preserving the bardic tradition of Welsh poetry; his lifelong friend Dylan Thomas believed him to be the finest Welsh writer to be working in English. Today, Watkins and Alun Lewis have been overshadowed by the larger than life figures of drunken Dylan and R. S. the cantankerous Anglican priest, but their work has a lyrical edge which is as representative of “Anglo-Welsh” sensitivity as any other texts emerging from Wales in the last century. For many critics outside Wales, the term “Anglo-Welsh” is indeed synonymous with poetry, and Anglo-Welsh production might appear to occupy the end of a continuum stretching back to Dafydd ap Gwilym and the great Welsh poets of the middle ages; having effortlessly negotiated the language shift it has managed to keep alive the bardic vocation of the principality. Seen from this perspective there is arguably no “problem of translation.”

But in the production of fiction the problem of translation and language choice becomes more acute. Here too, translation (in either direction) is conspicuous by its absence, at least until the end of the century, as we shall see. Unsurprisingly, the fault line separating the *Bro*, the heart land of Welsh-speaking Wales, in the north and west of the country, from the anglicized south, is reflected in the geography of fiction. Welsh writers from the north, such as Kate Roberts and Caradog Prichard, set some of their finest work in the slate mining area of Gwynedd; Anglo-Welsh novelists from the south, among them Gwyn Thomas, Gwyn Jones, and Glyn Jones (he of *The Dragon has two tongues*), wrote about the coal mining communities of the South Wales valleys. Thus the language their characters use is the language of their community.

This is not, however, the case with the work which is generally considered to be the first “Anglo-Welsh” text, Caradog Evans’ *My People*, a collection of short stories published in 1915. Set in rural Welsh-speaking Cardiganshire, it renders the dialogue of impoverished farm-workers and self-righteous chapel-goers and deacons in a grotesque English which captures stylistic features of the Old Testament and John Bunyan, combined with some of the cadences and syntactical patterns of Welsh, but at the same time it makes extensive use of what Harris (2003:16) calls ‘aggressive mistranslation.’ Thus, in *The talent thou gavest* which recounts the making and unmaking of non-conformist minister, we read:

The next morning at daybreak Eben, a crust of bread and a piece of cheese in his trousers pocket,
was ready to take up his duties. Before he went Hannah addressed these words to him: “Do you see now, little Eben, that none of Shames’s old sheep go astray, for Shames is quick to anger. Don’t you do any evil pranks against him, because it is not meet that Shames shall report us to the Big Man. Earn every mite of the shilling a week he gives you, Eben bach. Do we not need those pennies badly? Last year I sacrificed only three half crowns to Sion. And for sure the Judge will inform the Great Male about me.” (78)

The “aggressive mistranslation” lies in the use of expressions like *Big Man* and *Great Male* instead of *God* or *Almighty God*. These expressions may indeed be calques from Welsh, but the effect is to sabotage the spiritual dimension of both the King James Bible and the Welsh Bible (translated by Bishop William Morgan in 1588); thus the *white robes* of the great multitude of the saved (Revelations 7:9), in Welsh the stately-sounding *gynau gwynion*, are re-rendered as “white shirts” as if they have just been pulled out of the wash tub. More often than not, though, the apparent calques turn out to have been plucked out of Evans’ imagination; Glyn Jones (68) lists a number of “outrageous sayings” which have no basis in Welsh, ranging from Biblical references (*Great Male, Big Man’s Palace*) to greetings (*Glad day to you*), to imperatives (*Hold thy chin, Move your tongue about..*), to terms of endearment and disapproval (*You wicked spider*).



This kind of language was, unsurprisingly, seen as a betrayal of Welsh culture, and “Anglo-Welsh” got off to a bad start in Wales. The leading daily paper in the principality, *The Western Mail*, said of Evans that “he would appear to have raked in the garbage of the countryside for his characters.”⁵ One criticism leveled against him concerned his motives for writing in English – to reach a wider audience and to make money. After all, if his subject was Wales he could have written in Welsh, which was his mother tongue. But there can be no doubt that Evans’ choice to write in English, or rather his choice to convey his subject through inventing a “Welsh English” language, was a necessary part of his artistic vision, and in England *My People* was praised for its realism, satire, and artistic method.

Today the issue of language choice has become a familiar one for many bilingual writers, especially for those living and working in a postcolonial context, and for whom English is a second language. For contemporary writers from (say) India or Nigeria, English is an attractive choice for reaching the world, adaptable enough to carry something of the cultural weight of the message, while ‘still in full communion with its ancestral home’, in Chinua Achebe’s well-known phrase. But in Wales too, a century down the line from the publication of *My People*, language choice has re-emerged with the newly acquired status of devolution, the growth of independent publishers working with both languages, and the coming of age of a new generation of bilingual writers as Wales, too, embraces a postcolonial present.

After a first (1979) referendum which came down firmly against devolution, with only 12% of the electorate voting in favour, in 1997 Wales finally voted for a form of self government which led to the setting up of a Welsh assembly in Cardiff, and devolved powers in a range of areas which included education and language policy. The capital saw an influx of Welsh speakers, as well as an increase in the number of its Welsh medium schools. Typically, most pupils in bilingual schools in English-speaking areas such as Cardiff are likely to come from English speaking homes.⁶ Today Welsh language writers are just as likely to have been born in Cardiff as in the Bro, the Welsh heartland - the first Welsh poet laureate Gwynneth Lewis and novelist Llwyd Owen are examples. Significantly, both also write in English.

This new direction for bilingualism, of English speakers acquiring Welsh, as well as legislation on the status and institutional use of Welsh, has ensured greater interaction between the two languages, and probably contributed to a more relaxed attitude towards language choice. In the context of literary production, this approach has been fostered by media platforms such as the government-sponsored *Llenyddiaeth Cymru /Literature Wales* (2011), the appearance of *Welsh Arts Review* (2012), and the language policies adopted by Welsh publishers. *Literature Wales*, designed to promote Welsh writing in the world, includes a data base of Welsh writers, and includes profiles in Welsh or English, based on the language of the writer’s output. This currently lists 1129 writers using English, compared with 290 using Welsh, a percentage (20%) of the total which reflects the number of Welsh speakers in the population as a whole. However, a considerable number of the Welsh users also feature in the English list, indicating that they also write in English.

Over the last decade writing in English has flourished. A Welsh government project launched in 2006, *Library of Wales*, was set up to publish the best writing to have been produced in Wales since the beginning of the Anglo-Welsh era, much of it long out of print, and to promote it beyond Wales. As series editor Dai Smith writes,

No boundaries will limit the ambition of the Library of Wales to open up the borders that have denied some of our best writers a presence in a future Wales. The Library of Wales has been created with that Wales in mind: a young country not afraid to remember what it might yet become.⁷

Similarly, small publishing houses specializing in English language writing from Wales, such as Seren (Bridgend) and Parthian (Cardigan) are thriving, while Welsh language publishers, such as Y Lolfa (Talybont)

⁵ *The Western Mail*, 13th November, 1915.

⁶ In the largest and oldest-established (1978) Welsh medium school in Cardiff, *Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Glantaf* 68% of pupils have English-speaking parents, who have chosen a bilingual school for their children for varying reasons, ranging from increased job opportunities, to better academic results, to actively engaging with the recovery of the cultural heritage of their ancestors.

⁷ The Library of Wales website <http://thelibraryofwales.com/contact> . Last visited 27/03/2016.



and Gomer (Llandysul) also publish in English. Y Lolfa, established in the 1960s, began life as the unofficial voice of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*, the Welsh Language Society, which organized a series of protests in the nineteen sixties and seventies to secure (amongst other things) bilingual road signs and a Welsh language television channel. The Society, which counted R. S. Thomas as one of its most prominent supporters, remains active today as a pressure group which “campaigns positively in a non-violent way for the rights of people in Wales to use the language in every aspect of everyday life,”⁸ while *Y Lolfa* has (in its own words) “evolved” to include English texts on its list.

The recently established English language *Wales Arts Review* offers another interesting take on the relationship between the two languages, acknowledging the fact that it cannot ignore the heritage of Welsh. Thus we read on the introductory webpage “About Us:”

Wales Arts Review commissions and publishes content in the English language, yet it proudly acknowledges that Wales is a bilingual nation with a richly diverse bilingual culture. We therefore do not restrict our focus to arts and literature delivered only in the medium of English.⁹

In 2014 the review launched a contest to vote for the “Greatest Welsh Novel.” A specially commissioned panel drew up a shortlist of six novels, including four written in English, two of which, Emyr Humphrey’s *A Toy Epic* (1958) and Raymond Williams *Border Country* (1960) sit firmly in the tradition of Anglo Welsh writing, while Bruce Chatwin’s 1982 novel *On the Black Hill*, set in the Border Country between Breconshire and Herefordshire, is in more than one way only marginally “about Wales”. Christopher Meredith’s *Shifts* (1985) recounts the decline of the steel community in South Wales while *The Life of Rebecca Jones* is an English translation of the novel by the only shortlisted woman writer, Angharad Price, *O! Tyn y Gorchudd*.¹⁰ The sixth novel on the list, the winner in the online vote for readers of the Review was the only text offered in Welsh, Caradog Prichard’s *Un Nos ola Leuad* (1961).

Why did the (presumably) predominantly monolingual English voters choose the only novel in Welsh? One possible explanation is that they were familiar with it through the 1995 translation, entitled *One Moonlit Night*. It is one of the very few 20th century novels in Welsh to have enjoyed the wider audience afforded by translation; and it has been very well served by its translator, Philip Mitchell, who in a short note (xi) tells readers that he has relied on two guiding principles, faithfulness to the text “and the hints and allusions which each word carries with it,” and function, in his attempt “to produce a narrative which will evoke in the English-language reader the same strong feelings that the original work evokes in the Welsh reader.”

The novel is set in a slate-mining village in post war North Wales. It is a disconcerting narrative. Ostensibly it tells of the misdeeds of a ten-year-old boy getting up to no good with his two best mates on a moonlit night, but it is far more than that. It ranges through time and narrative voice, through schoolboy banter and dreamlike reverie. By the end of the third chapter it has encompassed madness, sadism, sexual exhibitionism, suicide, and various forms of perversion and domestic violence, seen through the puzzled eyes of the unnamed boy narrator; all in one small North Wales village on one moonlit night. The strangeness is apparent from the beginning, with the reference to a ‘Queen of the Black Lake’ and a disorienting fluidity of personal pronouns casting doubt from the start about who is controlling the narrative:

I’ll go and ask Huw’s mam if he can come out to play. Can Huw come out to play, O Queen of the Black Lake? No, he can’t, he’s in bed and that’s where you should be, you little monkey, instead of going round causing a riot at this time of night. Where were you two yesterday making mischief and driving village folk out of their minds?

⁸ As stated on its English language home page: <http://cymdeithas.cymru/what-is-cymdeithas-yr-iaith> . Last visited 27/03/2016.

⁹ *Wales Arts Review* website <http://www.walesartsreview.org/about-us/> . Last visited 27/03/2016.

¹⁰ The inclusion of a translation from Welsh, at first sight paradoxical, may also be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between the two languages, a vindication of the editorial policy of *rapprochement*, and a comment on the role of translation in the literary representation of Wales.



The Black Lake turns out to be the final destination of the night. Its waters entice the narrator into an awakening sexuality but also to murder and despair; or so it seems, through the swirling mists of narratorial ambivalence. The mismatch between the ingenuous, likeable narrator and the unwinding litany of dark events is underlined in the gulf between the easy past tense narrative and the archaic, prophetic voice of the Queen which intervenes at strategic moments, and which closes the novel:

I swallowed the sun; and took the moon for pillow to my resting-place.
I plundered the stars' number; and with my promiscuous eyes did lure the clouds into the depths
of my kingdom.
I commanded her to come from the firmament and bow before me; she with eyes of bluest blue
who did according to my word.
Therefore with Angels and Archangels and with the entire Company of Heaven.

In contrast with the “aggressive mistranslation” used by Caradog Evans, Mitchell moves effortlessly between the lyrical and the down-to-earth, achieving an authentic-sounding Welsh voice in English¹¹, and a cultural continuum between the two communities.

The date of publication of Mitchell's translation, 1995, is significant. In the mid-nineties, Britain was basking in the *Cool Britannia* image, promoted by Prime Minister Tony Blair in the wake of economic growth and the appeal of a new generation of rock bands of which Oasis was probably the best known; but it was also undergoing a process of pre-devolutionary self doubt. Both phenomena fuelled a debate on the notion of “Britain” and led to a spate of volumes by historians such as Norman Davies (*The Isles*, 1999) and Frank Welsh (*The Four Nations: a History of the United Kingdom*, 2002) which grappled with what it meant to be “British”, and to live in a “United Kingdom” and how Scotland, Wales and Ireland related to this notion.

R. S. Thomas had no doubts. His lecture to the students of King's College in London began:

“I don't know how much it is realized in England how distasteful to some Welsh people the term ‘United Kingdom’ is”. In the following year, 1997, Kate Gramich explored Thomas's entrenched, polarized position in *Cymru or Wales?: Explorations in a Divided Sensibility*, asserting that Welsh writers who use English (the term “Anglo-Welsh” is already outdated, she reminds us) do contribute to the development of Welsh culture, and concluding (110) that

few would agree with Thomas's position; the culture of Wales *is* diverse, and does not consist solely of the Welsh language and literary tradition. There is more than the language to distinguish us, although many feel that the situation of language is now so critical that the only honourable role that Welsh studies can play is as ‘a stepping-stone back to the vernacular.

It was the year of the referendum in which Wales voted (by a small margin) in favour of devolution. The process of change which was set in motion by the vote inevitably brought the two languages closer together, by the physical movement of people, through the media, in the creation of new entities and new buildings. Almost overnight, for a Welsh mother tongue public figure, whether a rock star, or a rugby player, having to choose between English or Welsh was no longer an issue. You could choose both. In the newly developed Cardiff Bay the Wales Millennium Centre was erected with an enormous bilingual message inscribed into the slate of the dome, commissioned from the poet Gwyneth Lewis:

Creu Gwir fel gwydr o ffwrnais awen
In these stones horizons sing

¹¹ Substratum layers of Welsh syntax appear in phrases such as “Dyna i chi be oedd gwyth ynte?”, rendered as “There was a real miracle for you, eh?” (96), instead of Standard English “*That* was a real miracle,” or the all purpose tag “isn't it,” as in “Fairly middling weather we're having, isn't it?” (158).



The Welsh text ('Creating truth like glass from the furnace of inspiration') looks back to the poetic tradition of Wales. The English is not a translation; it sends a message to the world in the lingua franca. Wales, for Lewis, is not a problem of translation, but an invitation to recreate.

The invitation has not gone unheeded. One of the most interesting phenomena of the first decade of devolution has been the emergence of young writers using both languages, notably the novelists Fleur Dafydd, Llwyd Owen, and Jon Gower. The pattern is usually to write in Welsh and rewrite in English. So Fflur Dafydd's 2006 novel *Y Tyniad* ("The attraction") reappeared in 2008 as *Twenty thousand saints*; the winner of the 2007 Welsh book of the Year award, *Ffydd Gobaith Cariad*, written by Llwyd Owen, came out in 2010 as *Faith, Hope and Love*; and Jon Gower rewrote *Dala'r LLanw* (2008, 'Catching the tide') as *Uncharted*. These are rewritings rather than self-translations. As Bassnett (2013) warns, self-translation is a problematic notion from the outset, since "translation" presupposes an original and a translated text. As if to underline the point, *Twenty Thousand Saints* and *Uncharted* have noticeably different titles, to start with.

The process of recreation may take different forms, and be motivated in different ways, from one writer to another and from one text to the next. For Fflur Dafydd, mother tongue Welsh, "it's easier to write about the Welsh language and Welsh identity in English, because the subject matter seems new and fresh in English, and presents a creative and linguistic challenge."¹² The rewritten novel abandons the first person narrative for the third person, and an unnamed protagonist for a motley group of Welsh characters. They have come (most of them) to the North Wales island of Bardsey to dig for the bones of vanished Celtic saints, but they are also in search of their own identities and their linguistic heritage. At the end they go their separate ways; Viv, a self-imposed exile who has been on the island for twenty years, returns to the bright lights of Cardiff and the bright new architecture of the Millennium Centre, "a slumped golden creature on its haunches, with light bursting forth from its body" (242); Deian, the archeologist, driving back to his home in northern England, rediscovers the language of his ancestors in the place names, which he repeats to himself as he passes the road signs, "enjoying the new slick feel of those words on his lips [...]: Pen y Clip, Penmaenmawr, Abergele, Rhuddlan" (247).

Faith Hope and Love charts the descent of thirty-year-old middle class Alun into Cardiff low life. The author, Llwyd Owen, a product, like Alun, of a bilingual secondary school, says he translated *Ffydd, Gobaith, Cariad* for his wife, a learner of Welsh, so she could see what he was "up to". But the language shift gives a new take to the narrative, and means he can experiment with Cardiff voices. Having the right accent is important if you're a petty crook in Cardiff:

'Where are you from then, Alan?' asks Jeff, and I turn to him, trying to emphasize my true accent.
'Caaaadiff,' I say.
'Fuck off!' says Jase. 'There's no way you are. Your accent's more like, I don't know... not proper Caaaadiff anyway.'
'Are you really, born and bred like?' asks his dad.
'I am,' I confirm. 'I spoke some Welsh at home, though. With my mam – it's her first language.'
(92)

In *Uncharted* Jon Gower's main aim seems to be to exploit to the full the possibilities offered by rewriting. As he puts it, English offers Welsh writers "two bites at the cherry," "a chance to revise, winnow or expand"¹³. The novel opens in Buenos Aires as an aged tango dancer pushes his not-quite-dead partner of a lifetime out to sea in an open paper boat from the estuary of the River Plate. Owing much to magic realism, it recounts how the woman-who-sleeps, Marina (as she comes to be known) unwittingly creates a new global religion when she is found still alive, breathing just one breath a day.

The lyrical impulse takes off in the opening lines:

¹² <http://www.fflurdafydd.com/english/home.html> Last visited 27/03/2016

¹³ Quoted in *ClickonWales, The dynamism of switching between languages*, <http://www.clickonwales.org/2010/09/the-dynamism-of-switching-between-languages/> Last visited 27/03/2016.



Listen! Like a million small, slippery wet kisses on muddy shore and hard escarpment, on pebble beach and marshy reaches, the enormous river meets the land and sings to it, a song of life, water to earth.

There is more here than just a passing resonance with the first lines of the most familiar of all “Anglo-Welsh” texts, Dylan Thomas’s play for voices *Under Milk Wood*. It shares the same irresistible forward movement:

Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation Street and Cockle Row, it is the grass growing on Llareggub Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds in Milk Wood.

Uncharted is a story which grows in the telling; fifty pages longer than the prototype *Dala’r Llanw*, it takes on the world but comes home to Wales, as the Marina religion sets in here too, because

in a country which went from being one of the most religious on earth to the most secular in three generations, there’s a spiritual vacuum to match an imploded dark star. So, Marina has a role to play. (166)

In the final pages the topography of Wales takes over, as shrines to Marina begin to appear all over the country, and once again, as we have seen throughout a century of Welsh writing in English, the reader is presented with the poetry of place names:

The shrines grew by accretion, as if several hands were at work on each one. A shrine full of snowdrops near Dafydd ap Gwilym’s grave at the Cistercian abbey at Strata Florida. Another, made of shards of slate, on empty moorland near Cwm Hesryn, land of merlin and grouse, pipit and ousel. Three at equal intervals on a path in Pembrokeshire, the purple pennants always flickering in the onshore breeze. (...) From Moelfre to Cwmrhydyceirw, from Garnswilt to Penmaenmawr, little shrines, mushrooming, in all their frail and fragile architectures. (234)

For “Anglo Welsh” writers through the last century, the Welsh place names provided a badge of identity, a means of embracing the nation and connecting with a disappearing language and a dying culture whose grave (to use the stark image of R S Thomas) grew deeper as they wrote, since they wrote in English. For a new generation of bilingual writers, the outlook has changed. Far from betraying the *hen iaith*, the old language, rewriting in English illuminates the matter of Wales to the writers themselves, inviting experimentation and self-discovery, and reflecting a new self-confidence. More than that, though, writing from Wales today takes Wales to the world, but it is no longer exclusively concerned with Wales. The challenge this change of outlook implies is fittingly captured in the re-titling of *Dala’r Llanw* as *Uncharted*, implying new routes to be taken and new maps to be drawn, a realization that devolution and global issues can go hand in hand, and that the *ffwrnais awen*, the furnace of inspiration, is still burning.

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