

Dannie Abse: Finding His Voice

When readers are searching to praise young poets they often talk of the poet having already achieved their own voice. All speaking voices are distinctive. We easily recognise someone by their voice. The distinction is so common it's not thought noteworthy. But for a poet having a distinctive style/voice is the beginning of success. Often poets serve an apprenticeship in which they try out their voice/s. Dannie Abse is a poet who has written about his search for his voice many times. And what is striking about his development as a poet is how different were the voices he spoke in when he was young. In his teens he was influenced by rhetorical political poetry. In his early twenties the overriding influence was Dylan Thomas. The change between his first book, 'After Every Green Thing', (1948, though the poems were written by 1946 when it was accepted), and his third, 'Tenants of the House' (1957), is extraordinary. It is a change he recognises himself: he includes only one poem from the first book in his 'Collected Poems', five from his second book, 'Walking Under Water' (1952), but twenty from his third. In this collection, there is, and it seems no accident, an 'Elegy for Dylan Thomas' and a poem about the Movement poets, 'Enter the Movement', which is not a particularly warm welcome.

This paper examines those years between 1940 and 1955 and seeks to explore the influences which led to the achievement of the familiar voice. It focuses, as a microcosm of this change, on the poem 'The Yellow Bird', a version of which appeared in 'After Every Green Thing', but which then disappeared until his 2002 'Collected Poems' where another version, much curtailed, appeared dated '1945, 2001'. It argues that Dannie Abse has always been a poet very conscious of the voices around him. That he is a poet who had and has a remarkable ear for the voice that suits him. That his voice is more 'European' than other poets of his generation and that this sound/style has a lot to do with his being a Welsh Jew. That he found in European and Hebrew voices forms that enabled him to speak as himself.

I shall look at: -

Why 3 out of his favourite 10 poets are read in translation; the importance of Rilke, Seferis and Szyborska;

His awareness of the wider European world as he was growing up in the Thirties, especially the Spanish Civil War;

His experience of Swiss Cottage (Tel Aviv as it was called) and German and Jewish refugees in the Forties;

How the link with poetry in other languages comes out of his Jewishness quite specifically (the importance of the Dov Shamir story, the poet he 'invented');

The importance of Midrashic and Hasidic stories on his forms and subject matter;

His importance as an editor, throughout his life, but especially his early days editing the magazine 'Verse' in 1947, then the magazine 'Poetry and Poverty' (1949 onwards) and the anthology, 'Mavericks' (1957);

His commitment to 'Poetry and Poverty' and the reasons for his rejection of the 'Englishness' of the Movement in the Fifties;

The significance of his editing of 'Modern European Verse' (1964) which includes Hernandez, Rilke and Seferis;

The paper will conclude with a comparison of the early and late versions of 'The Yellow Bird'.

Cary Archard (Bridgend)

‘Coming in from the Edge: the Welshness of William Emrys Williams’

My paper for last year’s conference about life-writing in the *Anglo-Welsh Review* drew attention to a number of tropes that featured in assertions of authentic Welshness. These included places of birth and upbringing, rural links, local education, non-conformist affiliations and a desire for recognition by cultural authorities outside Wales. There were related anxieties about over-praising and about stage-Welsh characterisations.

There has been an investment in the notion of Welshness in the lives of writers and cultural figures who have spent their lives outside Wales. I will explore this phenomenon in the particular case of Sir William Emrys Williams (1896-1977) the subject of a posthumously published biography by my friend Sander Meredeen. Bill Williams was editor in chief of Penguin Books from 1936 to 1965. He was also a leading figure in Adult Education, the Director of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs throughout the Second World War, the radio critic of the *Listener* and the *Observer*, the Director for Art of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) from 1939-1942, and the General Secretary of the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1952 to 1964. He was the writer of more than twenty publications on literary and cultural topics. Considering his major contributions to cultural life he has been a largely neglected figure.

Williams spent almost all his life in Manchester, London or Buckinghamshire. Despite this, there are many ways in which Welsh cultural memory is invoked in Meredeen’s biography. These include uncertain claims of origins either in rural Carmarthenshire or in Criccieth, early links to George Borrow, close friendships with figures such as Thomas Jones, the founder of Coleg Harlech, and presumptions about the sources of Williams’s talent with language. His life-long devotion to the democratisation of culture is also related to his Welsh cultural background. Williams was sometimes the object of familiar prejudices about stereotypical Welsh volubility, clannishness and evasiveness.

I will discuss the ways in which Welshness constituted a significant element in Williams’s self-image and how it contributed to the formation of a career that has had a significant impact on cultural life.

Malcolm Ballin (Cardiff)

“Out from gens romulum into the weal-kin”: Relocating and Revitalizing

Modernist Poetics in David Jones’ *Anathémata* and Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts*

I’ve only just tried to call to mind the bits of things that seem to me the high spots of what *I* feel characteristic in the arts of this complex island – it’s to me always a ‘*loving handled texture*’ free flowing affair with a bit of thunder-storm-behind-an-apple-tree – linear – tentative – not large – *packed* with life, a bit of joke – speckled – like a large thrush’s breast & spear points in a garden. All this again is obviously futile but yet you would not, I think, be able to make this list fit say German – French – Italian Art, would you? It’s the work of a motley race with Kent Gardens and Capel-y-Ffin darkness within a day’s walk.

- David Jones, *The Dying Gaul*

The moment advantage has a
part in his studies or his craft,
Only men rejected by men can keep
either truth or beauty in view.
his work perishes.

- Basil Bunting, from *Briggflatts* drafts

In the decades following its publication in 1922, T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* has become an epitome of the modernist sensibility and situation. My presentation challenges the poem's dominance and dictate over the canon of modernist poetry persisting in the academic discourse and general cultural awareness. Focusing on two post-WWII sequences by Eliot's younger contemporaries, **David Jones's *Anathémata*** (1952) and **Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*** (1966), I seek to explore alternative models and inspirative sources of the modernist poetic sequence. Through the constant comparison and contrast with Eliot's earlier articulation of the modern historico-cultural circumstance, Jones' and Bunting's specific foci and methods emerge – while reflecting the elder poet's heritage – as viable and vital transformations of the “high modernist” long poem.

The surviving image of the modernist poetics, consecrated by *The Waste Land*, as most emphatically cosmopolitan, urban and exiled is confronted by the **regional affiliation** of Jones' and Bunting's sequences. The political / poetic prestige of Eliot's **geo-cultural identification** dramatically contrasts with the socio-historical marginality of the north-western territory captured and celebrated in *The Anathémata* and *Briggflatts*. I would like to present this vibrant aesthetic dialectic in a series of four dialogues.

Following the initial reflection upon the precarious academic standing of the late modernist regional idiom, I will discuss Eliot's controversial axiom of poetic impersonality in the light of Jones' and Bunting's geo-aesthetic stand and their inclination towards the representation of a communal experience.

Next, I will focus on the formal experiment of the modernist sequence and the differing geo-cultural motivation behind the fragmented structure of *The Waste Land* and Jones' and Bunting's poems. The latter two will emerge as fully reflective not only of the modern cultural anxiety but also of the shared historical precedent of a civilizational emergency.

The third comparative sketch will explore how Eliot's synchronic and cyclic vision of time and cultural history is revitalized in the region-bound poetic adventure of *The Anathémata* and *Briggflatts* – no less symptomatic of the *tempora pessima, hora novissima* outlook than Eliot's lines.

The final analysis, reflecting upon the troublesome heritage of Eliot's self-exegesis, will assess the specific cultural impulses and textual strategies of Jones' and Bunting's annotation. It will discuss the view and treatment of the paratextual element and border in their poetry as a key act of geo-cultural assertion.

This interactive exploration of Jones' and Bunting's aesthetics testifies that their sequences live up to and beyond – despite the chronic critical neglect and geo-political marginality – the daring of Eliot's radical poetic statement.

This series of reflections will be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation facilitating the communication of the main ideas of my extensive project. This conference presentation will draw on my master's thesis (submitted in May 2007 as a partial fulfillment for the Master of Arts degree in English literature at the University of Northern Iowa, and recently published by UMI Dissertation Publishing).

Lucie Boukalová (Czech Republic)

Margins, memory and the geography of difference in O. M. Edwards

When O. M. Edwards called for a realignment of the Welsh literary canon to embrace the popular in his essay, 'Angen Mwyaf Cymru' ('Wales's Greatest Need', 1909), he employed the internality and externality of the fortress as a metaphor for cultural security and vulnerability. 'The bastion of the nation is secure thus far,' he wrote; 'the poets inside it happily sing odes for one another's hearing. But the danger exists on the ramparts, and the number of those who can fight there with skill is small.'

This paper looks Edwards's use of borders, fringes and margins as expressions of linguistic and literary authenticity. Taking his *Cartrefi Cymru* (Welsh Homes, 1896) as its central text, it explores how the Welsh-speaking west occupies an ambiguous discursive space as both heartland and periphery, central and remote. The paper concludes by arguing the case for a re-examination of the topology of twentieth-century Welsh cultural history.

T. Robin Chapman (Aberystwyth University)

'Describing David Jones'

The artist and writer David Jones was reluctant to call himself 'Welsh': he preferred circumlocutions such as 'an artist of Welsh affinities whose language is English.' He existed on the margins of two cultures, Welsh to his English cousins, but perennially English in the view of many Welsh friends, including Saunders Lewis. Much of his visual art and writing attempted to reconcile this double allegiance, although the truce thus struck was sometimes uneasy. This paper will begin with a sketch of Jones's familial background—his 'claim' to 'Welshness'—and will examine some of the ways in which Jones's endless verbal qualifications functioned to place him at a remove from Wales and Welsh culture, while he simultaneously emphasized the personal, political and aesthetic importance of his Welsh background. In this light, some of the ways in which Jones chose to characterize his ethnic heritage, as well as some of his critics' descriptors ('Welsh artist,' 'Anglo-Welsh author,' 'British writer' and 'half-Welsh poet and painter' being a few of these), will be discussed. How does language shape our notion of identity, for better or for worse? Is it possible to settle on a best description of David Jones's cultural heritage, a shorthand version of his identity? This talk will collect together some of the words and phrases that outlined a life and a life's work lived on multiple peripheries and between multiple categories.

Hannah Dentinger (Duluth)

"Between 'Somewhere' and 'Anywhere': Alun Lewis's Vision of Entrapment and Exile"

In 1938 Alun Lewis returned to his family home in Aberdare after twelve years away at Cowbridge Grammar School, Aberystwyth and Manchester Universities. During this time he followed, as Stephen Knight suggests, a 'trajectory towards colonial respectability' that served to accentuate an intrinsic 'difference' in him. During the years of his absence, from 1926, south Wales had undergone the social and economic dismantlement of the Depression. This had emphasised the idea of Wales as a marginalised colony, now even further detached from the metropolitan centre because

its natural resources were no longer in high demand. In this period Lewis began to be formed as a writer. I am proposing that two of his short stories from the late 1930s, 'Attitude' and 'The Housekeeper', not only reflect his personal divisions but also suggest, through, amongst other things, a relationship to colonization, a liminal national identity.

In 'Attitude', Frieda Thomas has married an English academic and lives in London; however, the Welsh valley in which she was born 'lay always in her mind' and she returns to it 'year after year.' Looking back to when they first met, her husband had asked her, 'What are you?'; she had responded, 'Me ... I don't know. I live in Wales, took History at Manchester, and am now writing a thesis ...' He had laughed at her vagueness and she had become defensive: 'Well, I can't clarify the situation further, I'm afraid ... - except for my name - I know that for certain.' In the character of Frieda, Lewis maps out both an exile's 'colonial trajectory' and suggests the uncertainty of identity which results from a sense of belonging to neither one place nor another. 'The Housekeeper' tackles more specifically issues of entrapment and exile by locating them within a depressed Welsh mining community. Myfanwy, the wife of an unemployed miner, thinks of escaping, to go 'somewhere ... anywhere', but the family is nevertheless trapped in a repeating and alienating cycle of dependence, 'like being caught in a winding belt in the colliery.'

Steve Hendon (Cardiff)

"Wales on the margin: the image of Wales as a periphery in the light of Welsh poetry in English published in Poland in the years 1980-2000."

What determines the image of Wales in the minds of contemporary Polish readers? Is there a place for hybridity, questions of identity, politics, multiple visions of Welshness in the recipients' perception of what Wales is?

In the proposed paper, the approach to the theme of the conference is that of an unintended perspective that Welsh poetry in English might be viewed from in Poland. The paper looks at a selection of Welsh poetry in English as constituting a "margin" or "periphery" in the perception of Polish readers, who are dependent on the publishers'/editors'/critics'/translators' choice of the works available to them. This choice has determined the images that the readers have of Wales and Welsh writing in English. Paradoxically, what constructs the idea of Wales as "peripheral", or "marginal" has frequently come from works or authors that are not labeled with these terms in Wales, yet for the Polish readers the number and selection of published works of Welsh poets might seem to create this impression.

The paper will try to examine if the approach to Welsh writing has changed recently by presenting the recent events aimed at promoting Welsh writing in English, and if so, if it is possible to reject the notions of "margin" and "periphery" in reference to Wales seen from Polish perspective. In other words, it may also provide a "marginal" (Polish) view on the theme of the scale of recognition of Wales and Welsh writing (poetry) in English.

Justyna Jaworska (Lodz, Poland)

‘From Myrddin to Merlin and Back Again’

Cultural border-crossings need not be physical, ethnic or simply national. The figure of knowledge who in western European tradition is called Myrddin, Merlinus, Merlino or Merlin both crosses and encounters many lines of force, and the central theme of the myth is the dialectic of knowledge and power, reinterpretable in many varying contexts. This paper will examine how Myrddin’s original British Celtic status is a volatile and recurrent element that to some degree always empowers Merlin’s many meanings, from exile and prophet to appropriated authority (variously national, poetic and educational) in many of the European language-cultures; and how in the twentieth century, for reasons oscillating between Anglo-American ideology and New Age escapism, he often became Myrddin again.

Prof. Stephen Knight (Cardiff)

Between Above and Below: Coal Tips and Coal Pits in the work of Ron Berry.

This brief paper will consider how Ron Berry negotiates, represents and records the mid-twentieth-century industrial landscape of the Rhondda valleys in the novels *Flame and Slag* and *The Full Time Amateur* and his autobiography *History is What You Live*. Berry’s engagement with the space created by coal mining, a space both delimited and dominated by the collieries and the coal-waste tips – indeed the space between above and below – within the landscape of the Rhondda shall be central to the study.

Writing with an acute awareness of the dangers of both of the mining topographies given his own experience of mining-related injuries and fatalities, and the contemporaneous Aberfan disaster, Berry’s work is far-removed from the slag-tip romance of Richard Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley*. In his consideration of the new landscapes of industry, Berry records the changes and developments from what he describes as his own liminal position, “seldom far from the border between lumpen prole and levitation”. The paper will chart how Berry uses the device of the industrial – and pre- and post-industrial – topographical features to explore the history, development and re-development of the Rhondda of his experience.

Sarah Morse (Swansea)

‘Liminality in Niall Griffiths’ Stump’

Niall Griffiths’ fourth novel, Stump (2003), continues - in the vein of his previous novels Grits (2000) and Sheepshagger (2001) - to document life on the margins of Welsh society. Indeed, Griffiths sees his novels as ‘forming part of a long tradition of experimental, innovative, marginal writing that has occurred in Wales’.¹ In Stump, the protagonist, a one-armed Scouser, is a recovering alcoholic who has fled from his native Liverpool to Aberystwyth. The action moves between the nameless narrator, as he goes about his daily life and the small time gangsters, Alistair and Darren, as they travel to Wales in search of the protagonist.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/literature/pages/niall_griffiths.shtml> [accessed on 5th October 2007]

In *Stump*, all of the characters are situated both literally and metaphorically on the margins. Essentially, it is a novel about England and Wales; how they interconnect, both socially and historically. In *Stump*, however, despite the fact that the two countries are geographically close, they are, culturally and hegemonically, very far away from each other. Moreover, as a seaside town, Aberystwyth occupies a liminal position. It is a marginal space beyond the rules and regulations of respectable urban society, where the characters, specifically, the protagonist, is free to explore a new identity. However, he is forced to battle constantly with his former alcoholic self. His daily fights against alcoholism (vividly depicted by Griffiths) also mean that he lives perpetually ‘on the edge’. In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which both geographical and psychic dislocation in the novel is symbolized by fractured identities, physical and mental disabilities. I will go on to explore how the physically disabled body can be seen to represent the disabled body of the Welsh nation. Furthermore, I will argue that the novel can also be regarded as linguistically marginal. Griffiths writes in three registers; the colloquial language of Alistair and Darren, the epic language used to describe the countryside and something in between, which interlinks the two. Thus, my paper will also be informed by a close reading of the text, looking in particular at Griffiths’ multiple uses of language.

Laura Nee (Cardiff)

Margins and the Metropolis: Marginalia on the pages of *The London Kelt*

This paper will discuss the construction of both Wales and the London-Welsh community through the marginalia of the *London Kelt* newspaper, published between 1895 and 1915, and suggest that these views of Wales and London are representative of debates regarding ongoing at the turn of the twentieth century regarding the position of the Welsh voice in relation to a British imperial mainstream. Though the journalistic and literary content of the *London Kelt* inevitably articulates and reflects this interface between the margin and the metropolis, my paper will argue that the marginalia of the *Kelt* are often as revealing about the relationship between the Welsh community in the metropolis and the Wales left behind. In this liminal space, through the pages of the *Kelt*, the London Welsh can be read as confronting both their Welshness and the often bewildering new metropolis. The paper will begin by considering how advertisements, particularly for medicines, often construct Wales as a moral guardian whose tradition and history will protect its exiled communities in an almost maternal way. The *Kelt* emerges at a time when the interplay between Wales and London was becoming increasingly important: this is the period of Cymru Fydd and the time of important developments such as the National Library and University of Wales, and the advertisements for publishers of Welsh books suggest an attempt to construct a significant Welsh cultural inheritance from this position of exile. Looking at the use of nostalgia in such advertisements in light of Jean Baudrillard’s ideas on advertising I will suggest that such advertisements can arguably be consumed in themselves as a connection with a Welsh culture from an exiled perspective; in the case of an advertisement for cough medicine, the connection with a rural home serves as a means of gaining expression in a new urban environment. By moving on to analyse examples of the numerous promotional notices for concerts and performances by members of the London Welsh – from eisteddfodau and cymanfaoedd canu to concerts and recitals – I will suggest that the London-Welsh community was, in a literal sense, seeking to find a collective voice in the metropolis, often drawing comfort from both the Welsh communities left behind and indeed other Welsh communities in exile around the world.

My paper will conclude by problematising the idea of a unified London-Welsh voice by considering debates between readers in the letters section regarding the responsibility of London-Welsh parents to pass on the Welsh language to their children, and whether or not Cymraeg would be an impediment for their children's future progress. Relating these debates in the margins of the newspaper to ongoing debates about Wales in the mainstream of British politics, I will argue that the *London Kelt* demonstrates the anxieties of the Welsh and London-Welsh communities regarding their position in relation to marginalised Welsh discourse and the mainstream British discourse represented by the capital.

Tomos Owen (Cardiff)

'On the Edge of Traditions: Katherine Philips as Anglo-Welsh poet'

In this paper I propose to explore the poetry and career of the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Philips in the light of her status as an 'Anglo-Welsh' writer. The 'Matchless Orinda', as she was known, is famous for being the most significant early modern woman poet in English. The fact that she lived most of her short life outside of England (although born in London, Philips spent part of her early life in Pembrokeshire and then, after her marriage in 1648, lived at Cardigan Priory), while often noted, has not been considered as fundamentally affecting her work and writing practice. While she has now secured a place as one of the key women poets of the early modern period, her 'Anglo-Welsh' identity has been marginal to the (mostly) feminist re-evaluation of her as a poet of major significance. Philips thus occupies a complex space in mainstream and feminist literary history. On one level, she is central to a tradition of women's writing, yet the Welsh context for her work barely intrudes into discussions of her poetry. For feminist literary historians, Philips has been read mostly in terms of her poems of female friendship and her poetic and epistolary 'Society of Friendship'. The fact that she kept up this 'network' of correspondents 'despite' her 'isolation' in Wales (Janet Todd's term) is often seen as extraordinary. By the same token, Philips's poems relating to Wales are frequently read as symbolic of either covert expressions of Royalist sympathy or gendered constructions of authorial 'retreat' from public life suitable for the woman poet. Thus, the poems are not 'really' about Wales at all, it is implied. In contrast to these readings, this paper aims to make the Welsh context central for a reading of Philips's poetry, and also to an understanding of how she operated as a woman poet writing in English in seventeenth-century Wales. My central point will be that, far from proving an obstacle to poetic creativity and success, Philips's life in Wales directly shaped her poetic career from the circle of friends to whom she addressed her poetry, to the subject matter she explored in her work.

Sarah Prescott (Aberystwyth)

'Us, them and Offa: the border in contemporary Welsh writing'

Offa's Dyke has long been acknowledged as the definitive line separating Wales from England, despite the obscure archaeological evidence about the Mercian king's original intention. However, it is only recently that poets, writing both in Welsh and English, have explored the cultural significance of this medieval earthwork. This paper aims to demonstrate how contemporary poets respond to both the potent symbolism of the dyke

as a lasting reminder of difference and separateness, and the challenge to notions of identity posed by the hybrid and ambiguous nature of the surrounding borderland.

Siwan M. Rosser (Cardiff)

Visions of Wales: Welsh intellectual thought in *The Welsh Outlook*, 1914-1933

In this seminal study of intellectuals in Britain, *Absent Minds* (2006), Stefan Collini is careful to define his use of the term 'Britain' and 'British' in a study, which is mainly but not exclusively about English intellectuals. The use of the term 'British' is justified, he writes, because "[f]or all kinds of intellectual, practical, and political purposes, 'Britain' was the defining entity during [the 20th century]" (10). He does however acknowledge that the understanding of those terms might vary in Wales and Scotland and that

'one cannot simply assume that the forms in which the question of intellectuals has been posed and answered in what is casually termed (at least by the English) 'British culture' might not be challenged west of Offa's Dyke or north of Hadrian's Wall. I can only hope that, in the light of those challenges, better informed historians will in time supply the necessary correctives' (10).

This paper attempts to contribute to the understanding of the self-perception of Welsh intellectuals writing in English at the beginning of the 20th century and thus to enrich the picture that Collini draws in his study.

Occupying a place on the geographical periphery of Britain, Welsh intellectuals also seem to occupy a similar place on the map of intellectual thought in Britain and have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Intellectual thought, usually expressed in ephemeral media such as print or broadcast journalism, shapes public opinion directly and indirectly. Even though their direct influence is difficult to pin down, they are to no small degree responsible for the cultural 'feel' of a place. Welsh intellectuals writing at the beginning of the 20th century discussed and shaped the issues of the day: Home Rule, the role of religion in society, Socialism and class conflict, Wales's role in the First World War and its attitude towards allies and enemies to name but a few. This paper will look at the self-perception of those Welsh intellectuals as it is expressed in the pages of the important Welsh monthly magazine *The Welsh Outlook*, which was published between 1914 and 1933. How does *The Welsh Outlook* attempt to shape public opinion and which kind of public intellectual writing does it support? Who are the writers who contribute public intellectual material to the periodical and what are their aims? How do they aim to educate, inform and entertain the public? Is it a narrow coterie of public intellectuals who mainly talk to their own circle or can a wider impact on contemporary Welsh society be traced?

As I will deal with large volumes of text – namely all editorials and a wide selection of articles in *The Welsh Outlook* – my framework for analysis will be a mixture of content analysis and close reading. Content analysis is an analytical method widely used in the social sciences, media and communication studies, and in other fields that deal with documents (see Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis aims to create a valid framework for analysis, which allows both for quantification of written evidence as well as a more qualitative approach to analysing meaning. Close reading will be the main method of analysing the contents of the chosen texts.

In the first editorial of *The Welsh Outlook*, Thomas Jones writes that “[t]he imagination of our people must be possessed with the vision of a better Wales to the fashioning of which our wills must be strained” (2). It is the aim of this paper to discover part of the story of how Welsh intellectuals contributed to the shaping of that vision.

References:

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Jones, Thomas. “Foreword”. *The Welsh Outlook* January 1914. Cardiff. 1-2.

Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004.

Alyce von Rothkirch (Swansea)

Crossing the Border: Intersecting Identities in the Novels of Hilda Vaughan

As a border country writer, the border is a potent symbol that informs much of Hilda Vaughan’s work. In fact, Vaughan herself literally crossed the border frequently, spending half her life in London and the other half in Wales. But is it any more than just a symbol? This paper will explore the way in which the border establishes identity and difference in Vaughan’s work. It will examine the significance of crossing the border and the effect this has on the characters in her novels. It will look at the way in which Vaughan crossed cultural borders, dipping into other literatures and customs and how the novelist portrays the internal borders of locality, language, class, the past and present, displaying different sorts of Welsh identities. We will see how borders inevitably cause tensions and as they intersect they create fractured, dual and problematic identities.

Lucy Thomas (Cardiff)

Frontiers of Writing: The Fault-lines of *Gwalia Deserta*

Cultural and linguistic frontiers, fault-lines, fragmentation and disputed space are central concerns in this reassessment of one of the canonical works of Welsh Writing in English – Idris Davies’s *Gwalia Deserta* (1938). A paradigmatic ‘Anglo-Welsh’ writer whose work inhabits that hyphenated territory between two literatures and cultures, Davies throughout his life had to negotiate various kinds of edges and boundaries. His place of birth lay close to the riverine boundary between Glamorgan and Monmouthshire (the latter a borderland with a particularly contentious cultural/political history); at its fringes, Davies’s industrialised Rhymney merged into liminal mountain space whose pull – cultural no less than aesthetic – he felt deeply. Moreover, his natal community was demarcated by particular social boundaries (class and religion prominent among them) in relation to which Davies was ambiguously located. His departure for England at the age of twenty-five in pursuit of ‘the long and lonely/ Self-tuition game’ took him to Loughborough, Nottingham and London. There were return journeys, but Davies did not move back to the Rhymney Valley permanently until 1947.

Focusing primarily on *Gwalia Deserta*, this paper problematises the popular image of Davies as ‘the archetypal poet of the Welsh valleys’, and intervenes in

ongoing attempts to rehabilitate his reputation. Rather than reading *Gwalia Deserta* as a ‘document’ of the inter-war depression, it argues that the poem might be encountered as a particularly layered example of life writing and as a fraught construction of ‘history’. Characterised by ironies, instabilities and fissures, this is textual space that is scarred by the geographical, temporal and cultural fault-lines that Davies had to negotiate. The paper challenges the perceived ‘simplicity’ and authentic directness of the sequence, viewing it as self-reflexive, allusive, and knowing. On the level of form, voice and representation, this is a text that rehearses problems of writing and of identity, inscribing traces of the distance – chronological, geographical, cultural and social – from which Davies found himself ‘writing back’. In this sense, *Gwalia Deserta* emerges as a compelling kind of indeterminate – and therefore negotiable – ‘exilic’ text.

Alan Vaughan-Jones (Aberystwyth)

The Marginalised Modernism of Gwyn Thomas

The narrow focus, in Gwyn Thomas’s fiction from the 1930s and 40s, on Welsh working-class reality in the industrialised Rhondda valley, together with Thomas’s well-documented commitment to popular cultural forms, have led critics to exclude his work from discussions of Modernism in Wales. Thomas, whom Stephen Knight describes as ‘the most verbally brilliant writer of Welsh fiction in English’, with the exception, perhaps, of ‘Dylan Thomas’,² tends – unlike Dylan Thomas, now widely regarded as a key figure in the development of Welsh Modernism – as simply an uproarious, local entertainer and powerful socio-political commentator. Using aspects of Pascale Cassanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* as a theoretical framework, my paper will challenge this familiar view, and suggest that Thomas’s 1936 novel, *Sorrow for thy Sons* (1986) and collection of short fiction *Where did I put my pity?* (1946) should be treated not just as representative of a regional, peripheral literature, but as texts that engage, in a very distinctive way, with the wider Modernist ‘crisis of language’ – texts that actively participate in the transnational space of Modernism.

Laura Wainwright (Cardiff)

² Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 93.

By Dannie Abse. (A true incident). "Only a local anaesthetic was given because of the blood pressure problem. The patient, thus, was fully awake throughout the operation. But in those days" in 1938, in Cardiff, when I was Lambert Rogers's dresser"they could not locate a brain tumour with precision. Too much normal brain tissue was destroyed as the surgeon searched for it, before he felt the resistance of it - all somewhat hit and miss. One operation I shall never forget - because of the fingers of Lambert Rogers, rash as a blind man's, inside his soft brain. If items of horror can make a man laugh. then laugh at this: one hour later, the growth, still undiscovered, ticking its own wild time; more brain mashed because of the probe's braille path; Lambert Rogers desperate, fingering still Abse takes as his setting the metropolitan scene"he lives in London"and focuses particularly on middle-class existence, conveying his thoughtful reflections in a forceful voice. The same intelligent, probing spirit is evident in Abse's three novels, his several plays, and his essays. Critics note that Abse's poetic style and themes have developed consistently throughout his career. His early work is more markedly public poetry"generalizations on social themes"and more imitative in style than his later work. The poems in Abse's first collection, *After Every Green Thing* (1949), sh Dannie Abse reads the poem *Scent*, from his collection *Speak, Old Parrot*, which was published in 2013. Life and passions in Abse's work *Jump to media player* The Welsh poet and author Dannie Abse has died aged 91, his literary agent confirms. Arts correspondent Huw Thomas looks back at his life and work. 29 Sep 14.