

Living with our Landscape - Community Engagement

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In this paper, I am going to concentrate on the closing paragraph of Father Dorian Llywelyn's contribution to *Y Ffwrwm*¹ publication, *Arian Byw / Live Culture*. Having expounded upon the legacy of the Picturesque movement of the 18th and 19th century, and the consequential ambiguity of terms such as 'land' and 'landscape' within a Welsh context, he closes with this challenge: '...To deal with the specific means involving oneself in mutability and transience: it means dealing with the current situation honestly and creatively.' In the light of both the work of *Y Ffwrwm* and my own praxis in the Welsh-speaking communities of the west, I will attempt to make visible the 'specific' before outlining the consequences of working 'honestly and creatively'.

According to Prof. Suzanne Romaine², language is a '...drawing together of specialized knowledge'. Therefore, a vocabulary is '...a list of things that people of the same culture talk about'. In Wales, it is apt that we turn to our poets to glimpse both the depth and context of the culture's knowledge and vocabulary. Waldo Williams' *Preseli*, having named the individual mountains...

'Foel Drigarn, Carn Gyfrwy, Tal Mynydd...'

... proceeds to describe them not in picturesque or aesthetic terms, but with respect to their significance to the core of his being...

¹ *Y Ffwrwm* is an independent think-tank focussing on developing positive responses to the crisis facing Welsh communities. 'Arian Byw / Live Culture' is a bilingual publication featuring papers from its inaugural conference.

² Former Merton Professor of English, Oxford University, co-author of *Vanishing Voices* (OUP) and presenter of the first of *Y Ffwrwm*'s 2005 Public Lecture Series

'Mur fy mebyd...
 Wrth fy nghefn ym mhob annibyniaeth barn.'
*'Wall of my boyhood...
 At my back in all independence of mind.'*¹

At the closing of a lifetime, T. H. Parry Williams forecasts that Snowdon and the mountains surrounding his Rhyd-ddu birthplace will shudder and reverberate with the news of his death...

'Fe ddaw crawc y gigfran o glogwyn y Pendist Mawr
 Ar lepen yr Wyddfa pan gwffiwyf ag Angau Gawr.'
*'The raven's screech will call out from Pendist Mawr
 On the slopes of Snowdon when I grapple with the giant that is Death.'*

In his closing stanza he explains that such drama will take place not because of any significance on his part, but because of the mountains' significance to him...

'Nid creu balchderau mo hyn gan un-o'i-go'
 Mae darnau ohonof ar wasgar ar hyd y fro'
*'This isn't a madman's grandiloquence, -
 Parts of me are here, there and everywhere of this place, my land'*

This is the culture – in its vocabulary, in its context, in its appropriations – telling us who we are, where we are and even how we are. For Welsh culture² is in essence a synthesis of land and people; a distinct culture that perceives landscape not from the

¹ Translated by Tony Conran: Bloodaxe Book of Modern Welsh Poetry (Ed. Menna Elfyn and John Rowlands)

² As expressed in the Welsh language, but not exclusively so

objectified viewpoint of the picturesque, but rather as a subjective experience, integral to the process of being. For, as the anthropologist Professor Tim Ingold¹ maintains,

'[Mankind's] experience of the world is not one of looking at it but of being within it.'

English speakers, on hearing the name Trefin², might well recall a small Pembrokeshire village, bordering the coastal path mid-way between Fishguard and St. David's. (The nearby harbour of Porthgain, with its famous 'Shed' restaurant and Sloop Inn, might well come to mind as well.) However, for the Welsh speaker, the name will instinctively invoke the words...

'Nid yw'r felin heno'n malu
Yn Nhrefin ym min y môr...'³
*'Tonight, the mill is not grinding
At Trefin, at the water's edge'*

It is key to understand that this poem 'Melin Trefin', celebrating the ruined corn mill situated just south of the village, is part of a wide poetic canon that forms the Welsh-speakers' cultural sat-nav. (From 'Aberdaron' to 'Pwllderi', from 'Ewenni' to 'Eifionnydd' the Welsh speakers' inherent atlas is the work of its poets.) English speakers stopping at Trefin, in search of the coastal path, will be directed by the properly bilingual sign posts. However, for the majority of Welsh speakers, such

¹ Professor Ingold, of the University of Aberdeen, presented the fourth of Y Ffwrwm's 2005 Lecture Series in the village of Llanddewi

² I am well aware that the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, in collaboration with CCW and Menter Iaith Sir Benfro (Pembrokeshire Language Initiative) set up the Ogam project as a means of developing cross-over working between the indigenous culture and ecological concerns. However, for one reason or another the initial encouraging practice has long come to a halt.

³ 'Melin Trefin' by the former Archdruid Edgar Phillips

signs will be of no use at all. What they will be searching for, first and foremost, is not the 'Coastal Path / Llwybr yr Arfordir' but the ruined Melin Trefin. No such sign exists.

This lack of provision is deeply significant. It reveals a series of assumptions, based upon an historic and monolithic presumption of landscape as amenity. It begs the question: for whom? Until relatively recently, the sign 'Coastal Path' would have been in one language only. However, what Melin Trefin indicates is that the movement towards bilingual signage has not made any significant contribution to a prime cause of the crisis of identity facing Welsh communities: cultural invisibility. The assumptions perpetuating and exacerbating this situation are...

- that the two languages of Wales are but representative variations of one common, uniform culture;
- that its landscape contains but one (the same, uniform) culture; variations within one experience;
- that whilst the objectification of landscape is acceptable, the subjective (indigenous) experience is not. Indeed, the implication – intended or otherwise – is that it is irrelevant.

Here, we have arrived at the specific. For, as 'Melin Trefin' shows, the reality consists of more than one experience, a fact that places before the process of political devolution the challenge and opportunity of cultural revolution. For breaking the monolithic thought barrier would quantum leap us over the largely bureaucratic exercise of bilingualism into the blue sky and green fields of biculturalism (our specific and meaningful multiculturalism).

Since devolution, various honest attempts have been made at working creatively in rural communities¹. However, they have had little impact, principally – despite their best bilingual efforts – because they have operated on an urban, and inappropriate, mono-cultural basis. The rhetoric maintains that communities come first. In effect, the cultural assumptions (of rural as empty space; devoid of ambition and creative activity; of money and big spending being the answer to everything) ensure that they actually come quite a way down the list. To move away from such a London/Cardiff-centric, rural as peripheral, standpoint a meaningful change of language is required. ‘Country-side’ (note the implied peripherality) needs to become ‘cefn gwlad’ – country as back(bone); the source of strength; the essential element.

Carrying the meaning of ‘foreigners’, the name ‘Wales’ describes an outsiders’ objective view. As we have already seen, the Welsh cultural perspective places people within the landscape, not outside of it. Thus it is important to note the depth of meaning contained (and maintained) within the subjective ‘Cymru’. A conflation of ‘cym’ (together) and ‘bro’ (one’s homeland community) it defines the nation not only as a federation of communities but also as a country that is intrinsically un-centralised. There is no centre and periphery; only community; each and every community.

From a ‘Wales’ perspective, the normative appeal of monoculturalism is largely attributable to an historic objectivity coupled with a perpetual momentum of ease of use and regulation. It is monolithic, uniform and uncomplicated. Above all, it conforms nicely with the straight-line dynamics of centralized non-creative control as exemplified by the paradigm of the three year - target/start – monitor/middle - outcomes/end - project. (Communities with imagination need not apply.) In

¹ I include the post-industrial valleys within the rural context

comparison, working with the communities of 'Cymru' requires a multiculturalism that recognises nonconformity as the rule, rather than the exception; that accepts the complexity of ever-evolving boundaries of self-definition (live communities are continuously changing shape and size); that invests trust and confidence over and above irrelevant and impractical measures of time and money; that enters into the multi-layered multi-circular dynamic of what Raymond Williams describes as the 'process of community'¹

And this is where we need, and can, be specific. For to unlock the potential of a radically Welsh multicultural approach we need to be specific in our definition of 'community'. Once again, making the indigenous culture visible will help us see these very real communities. The ample thesaurus denoting 'community' available to the Welsh speaker ('bro', 'cynefin', 'milltir sgwâr', 'cymdogaeth', 'cymdeithas' and even the devalued 'cymuned') serves to emphasise the central importance of community within the Welsh experience. It also means that Welsh speakers have a specific place and dynamic in mind when they talk of it. Whilst English speakers generally struggle to define the word, Welsh speakers will quickly (if not instinctively) offer words such as 'perthyn'(belonging), 'ymddiriedaeth' (trust) and 'cyfrifoldeb' (responsibility) – the three basic elements residing within the omnipresent prefix of 'cyd' or 'cym' (together) that represent the collaborative dynamic of 'cymdogaeth', 'bro' or 'cymdeithas'.

Developing an engagement with such a potential of creativity requires an honesty of purpose. For 'belonging' in the context of Welsh communities entails a commitment that is total, not arbitrary, and demands a partnership of equanimity rather than hierarchy. And central to the circuitry of energy at the heart of community is the

¹ Culture and Society – Raymond Williams, Hogarth Press (1958)

powerhouse of leadership – community-recognized (not necessarily democratically elected) cultural activists who draw their base energy from the silver thread of heritage and tradition that has powered the process of community through generation and (re)generation.

Engagement with the specialist knowledge and specific tension of discussion that is Welsh communities cannot be planned either on, or from, a map. It requires field work that places us inside the culture that is inside the landscape. Such exclusive targeting ensures a cultural inclusiveness that allows us to see Melin Trefin as well as the Coastal Path. It will also allow us to develop sign posts and pathways between the one and the other.

In *Vanishing Voices*, Professor Romaine (with her co-author, Dr. Daniel Nettle) gives a detailed analysis of the recognized correlation between the threat to both bio-diversity and linguistic diversity. Closing her *Y Ffwrwm* lecture at Aberystwyth she said: 'Linguistic diversity and bio-diversity are interdependent. They both face the same threat. In both cases, the answer is the same: empower local people.'

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