

# Wordsworth and Welsh Romanticism



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By

James Prothero

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To  
Glyn and Hannah  
for all their help and rescues  
I couldn't have done this without you

and also

In Memory of

Leslie Norris

poet teacher husband friend



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## INTRODUCTION

### “THE MOUNTAINOUS SHADOW OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH”

Alistair Heys writes that for the poet R.S. Thomas the fearful sublime that drives his poetic creation is his “debt to the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge and also to the late Romantic poetry of Yeats.” (2000, 133) Heys asserts that “for Thomas, to write in the mountainous shadow of William Wordsworth is to interpret in darkness”. (2000, 134) This may well be so of Thomas, but in the wider sense, it may well be so for all the five poets and the novelist in this study. One may question if any nature writing is necessarily influenced by Wordsworth just by virtue of it being nature writing in Britain after the time of Wordsworth. But the question could just as easily be inverted. One might well ask the question: what nature writing after Wordsworth can be said to be *not* influenced by “the mountainous shadow of William Wordsworth”?

This study will address the question of what that influence has been and to what degree Wordsworth was influenced by Wales in return. The first chapter will deal with the question of what influence Wales may have had on Wordsworth. The following chapters will deal with Wordsworth’s notable influence on five Welsh twentieth-century poets and one Welsh novelist.

### **The Problem of Defining Anglo-Welsh literature**

This study will look at five native Welsh writers and one adopted son writing in English: Huw Menai, Idris Davies and R.S. Thomas all spent their entire lives in Wales and were Welsh speakers, though Thomas came to the Welsh language late in life. W.H. Davies and Leslie Norris, though born and raised in Wales, were expatriates, spending large portions of their lives in England and North America. Still, Norris’ work is mostly set in the Wales of his childhood and Wales figured powerfully in his imagination. W.H. Davies left Wales behind in youth and did not much

look back. But his exposure to Wordsworth in Welsh schools, powerfully affected the way he wrote. John Cowper Powys, a man of Welsh ancestry, embraced Wales and living in north Wales in the middle of his life and never much returned to England. Though calling him Welsh may be controversial, it is just one controversy in this largely controversial matter of Anglo-Welsh literature, and will be dealt with in the Powys chapter.

Defining Anglo-Welsh writing, a subject of great controversy over the years, is not so easy a line to draw. The matter goes far beyond whether a given work has been written in Welsh or English. For example, of the poets in this study, R.S. Thomas is very clear about his identity as a Welshman and Leslie Norris is not. The controversy over the term “Anglo-Welsh” in language, in ethnic identity, literary influence and cultural milieu in reference to a work of literature starts with Saunders Lewis’ 1939 pamphlet “Is there an Anglo-Welsh Literature?”. Since then the controversy has been discussed by Gwyn Jones, Glyn Jones, Raymond Garlick, and Roland Mathias, as well as many others, to the point where Meic Stephens, editor of *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* remarks acidly in the entry for “Anglo-Welsh”, “There has been much discussion in literary journals concerning the validity and the use of the term ‘Anglo-Welsh’, some would say *ad nauseam*.” (Stephens 1986, 12) It is not the place of this study to weigh in decisively on this question that has been controversial for at least sixty-six years. In light of the fact that no consensus exists, I will hold the position for the purposes of this study that one may be considered a Welshman by accident of birth, whether or not one remains in Wales, or that one may become a Welshman by choice of embracing the culture and living entirely in Wales.

## **Wales and Romanticism**

A more worthwhile question really is why, in Wales, is there a significant response to Wordsworth and Romanticism in the twentieth century? Is there something about Wales or Welsh culture that is somehow more receptive to Wordsworth and his thought? It is possible but hardly tangible. Certainly there are more than these six writers in Wales in the twentieth century, and they were writing in the vein of the dominant, Modern mode of literature, starting with Caradoc Evans. If Romanticism finds a receptive soil in Wales in the twentieth century, so does Modernism and Post-Modernism. John Cowper Powys saw Huw Menai’s form of writing to be a sort of protest against the mainstream, and

for all of these writers, except perhaps R.S. Thomas, that may also be so. Of all the writers discussed here, R. S. Thomas is the one who accommodates both the Romantic and the Post-Modern in his poetry. If one looks for Wales to be a haven for Romanticism, one will look in vain.

However, as Leslie Norris believes, there is an affinity to a type of Wordsworthian Romanticism in Wales. If one broadens the definition of what is an influence to think in terms of Leslie Norris' "affinity", one will find that all of the writers in this study have an affinity for seeing nature not only as a symbol of eternity, but perhaps something more immediate and closer to home. What is interesting about this statement is that Norris was in fact raised not in the hills, but in urban and industrial Merthyr Tydfil. I'm not suggesting that Norris is misled about his own past here, but rather that as a boy in an industrial Welsh town, his focus is on the meadows and hills beyond the town, and that he considers his raising to have really happened in the natural areas surrounding the town. Much the same can be said of the unemployed Idris Davies who went to the hills for solace after being expelled from the mines by economic conditions. Huw Menai, a miner all his life, is also focused to a large degree on the natural world beyond the borders of his town. For these three poets at least, Wordsworth is the poet of the natural beauty away from the industrial ugliness of the mines. Thomas and Powys, though never miners, also strongly reacted against the industrial and increasingly technological world. Only W.H. Davies does not follow this pattern. His influences seem more simple. He carried a copy of Wordsworth with him when he tramped, mainly it seems, because he'd been taught to believe that Wordsworth's poetry was what poetry was supposed to be like. Perhaps he formed this impression in school and never forsook it. For whatever reasons, Wales in the twentieth century has produced more latent Romantics with an affinity to Wordsworth than neighboring England. Leslie Norris in the telephone interview was willing to speculate,

I don't know that it's more really than the general fact that Romantic-feeling poets were heavily influential on the Welsh writers in English, and in Welsh as a matter of fact. And I do see it rather like that. I think the obvious correspondence of *feeling* between the Lake District and Wales, and Wordsworth's great awareness of Wales, as a matter of fact, probably means that that *kind* of feeling influenced us greatly.

Perhaps the problem for Welsh writing in English is the tension of writing in the language that ultimately is that of the conquerors. And the most apparent sign of the conquerors' presence is the increasingly industrial

development of South Wales, which was largely owned by English interests. Seeing matters in this light might cause a similar reaction. Just as Wordsworth reacted to the failure of the French Revolution and the stillborn nature of English political change in his time by returning to the rural countryside away from the increasing industrialization of England, so might these Welsh writers respond to the industrialization of South Wales and the dehumanization of the miners with a returning to the rural countryside of Wales. In a sense, the hilly, upland sheep pastures retained all that remained of old Wales, Wales before the conquest, Wales not dominated by any Edwardian castles, or later Edwardian factories and mines. Perhaps this is the source of Norris' affinity.

### **The Exposure to Wordsworth in Schools**

Another question is: how much Wordsworth did budding Welsh poets read in the early Twentieth Century? The Central Welsh Board exams for the early Twentieth Century show that knowledge of Wordsworth was regularly tested throughout Wales, at the time when five of the writers in this study would have been at Welsh schools. Two of them cite different sources, which suggests that local schools had options in selecting texts. However, the School Certificate Examinations consistently used questions on Wordsworth, which indicates that schoolmasters and heads of schools would have not failed to include a fair amount of Wordsworth. Huw Menai cites *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* as the source of much of his early exposure to poetry. *Palgrave's* begins with Renaissance verse and ends with a section of Romantic poetry heavily favoring Keats and Wordsworth, but which also includes Scott, Byron, Coleridge, Lamb, Shelley, Leigh Hunt and Southey. The selections chosen from Wordsworth tend to favor poems of patriotism, sentiment and honor. A section of "Margaret" is given, but it is a section which constitutes a statement of faith. The final Wordsworth selection is the *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. From *Palgrave* one might get the impression of a lighter, less philosophic and more sentimental Wordsworth than the *Complete Poems* give. These poems seem to have been chosen because the editors deemed them suitable for the moral instruction of the young because they presumably inculcated moral truths. The 1900 School Certificate Examinations specifically tested *Palgrave* books I, II and IV. *Palgrave* is mentioned specifically in the July 1938 as well as 1931 exam. The 1935 exam required examinees to have read *Selections from Wordsworth* and answer questions regarding the influence of the French Revolution on Wordsworth. 1929 required an

essay on Wordsworth’s ideas on the duty of a poet. In varying degrees, all of the tests from 1929 to 1939 require a thorough reading of Wordsworth.

Of course, the question arises, was the literary syllabus any different in England and Scotland? Most likely not in any significant way. But there is a certain traditionalism in writers from Welsh background, in particular Huw Menai, who consciously and admittedly chose to buck the current trend in poetry set by writers such as Lawrence and Eliot, who represented the contemporary transatlantic high literary culture. What this study aims to show is that in early twentieth-century Wales there was in some quarters a disregard for the literary fashions in London, New York and Chicago.

For instance, R.S. Thomas imbued Wales with a mythic and moral significance of his own construction. In this, Thomas shows himself heir to a Welsh mythological heritage, a Romantic quality. Powys too draws on a mix of Welsh myth and history to convey his philosophical interests. To a large degree, except for the vestiges of ancient legend, much of this Welsh Romanticism was created in the language revival in the later 1800s, which also constituted a Romantic revival of Welsh culture.(Williams 9-35) Still, this very Welsh mythological heritage is the setting in which these five poets are mastering their art, setting down their poetic roots. Having grown up in Wales, each of them became poets surrounded by this tradition of myth and Romanticism in a way that would have a very different quality for a poet growing up in England. Powys did grow up in England. And yet he is drawn in mid-life to this mythic Wales to the point of giving up England and moving to Wales for the rest of his life. Wales becomes the setting of all his writing after he moves to Corwen and then later to Blaenau Ffestiniog.

This is the second point worth considering. The testimony of Huw Menai and Leslie Norris asserts that the school texts selected for their study of literature held a substantial amount of Wordsworth’s work. Consider what these Welsh children, exposed by necessity of examination to a large body of Wordsworth’s poetry, would have made of the frequent mention of their homeland. It may have acted as a validation of Welsh identity, or if nothing else, an artistic validation of the beauty and poetic importance of Wales. If this is so, it may also account to some degree for what Leslie Norris calls the “affinity” that he shares with Wordsworth, as well as the enthusiasm for Wordsworth found both in Idris Davies and Huw Menai. Certainly, students in Wales being set serious exams in Wordsworth’s poetry would have read the 1850 *Prelude* and “Tintern Abbey” if they read nothing else of Wordsworth.

## Wordsworth and Joy

Huw Menai, John Cowper Powys and Idris Davies acknowledge their admiration for Wordsworth. For the other three poets in this study, Wordsworth is either an object of mixed admiration and disapprobation or perhaps, as in the case of W.H. Davies, a model of what a poet must be in order to be considered a legitimate poet.

This study will certainly highlight any similarities of imagery, metaphor, and diction, but perhaps the most important similarity to be found is this central Romantic concept of joy. M.H. Abrams has concluded that

“Joy” is a central and recurrent term in the Romantic vocabulary. . . . “Joy” signifies the conscious accompaniment of the activity of a fully living and integrative mind. As [Coleridge] defines the term in his *Philosophical Lectures*, it is the state of abounding vitality—necessary to the working of the creative power of genius. (1963, 276)

Thus, robbed of joy, Coleridge in “Dejection: An Ode” is incapable of creative work. Abrams further notes that for Wordsworth and Coleridge, dejection and joy were polar opposites. “‘Hope’ and ‘joy,’ as against ‘despair’ and ‘dejection,’ was a central and recurrent antithesis in Romantic Poetry.” (1963, 329)

The Welsh writers under discussion in this study for the most part are not Modernists, though they are writing in the Modern period, and don’t exhibit a Modern sense of skepticism and alienation. The tendency of these writers is in varying degrees to reject that skeptical despair, the darker vision of life, and accentuate a Romantic sense of hope and joy. This joy, balanced against alienation and despair, marks Wordsworth’s influence on them. In Thomas’ interpretation, though his view of nature remains essentially Romantic, his view of human nature is pessimistic. Norris and the other poets balance their view of human suffering with the purely Wordsworthian sense of hope and joy.

Whereas Coleridge defined joy objectively in his *Philosophical Lectures*, Wordsworth is more the poet, and though joy is central to him, his understanding of it grows as he develops as a poet. Stephen Gill has made it clear that Wordsworth never succeeded in defining joy, and has documented the course of these changes. (Gill 1967, 208-224)

However, there are certain consistent elements in Wordsworth’s descriptions that recur and give his concept a form, if not a definition. In 1798 in “Tintern Abbey,” he discusses the experience that is his “gift”, that makes him capable of being a poet. Coleridge’s gift is, in Abram’s words, a “state of abounding vitality—necessary to the working of the



creative power of genius”. Wordsworth describes his gift in more emotional and physical terms:

. . . . Nor less, I trust,  
To them I may have owed another gift,  
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened:--that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on,--  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (35-49)

In this powerful description two of the elements are present: (1) the physical elation coupled with (2) the overpowering calm that lets one think one has touched eternity. Thus, with this calm, through the “deep power of joy” the poet is able to “see into the life of things”.

In 1799, the following year, this theme is expanded in the early two-part *Prelude*, which has more concentrated references to joy than the more expanded versions or broadcast throughout the poems in general. By examination of the text of the 1799 *Prelude*, one might distil something close to a definition, at least of Wordsworth’s sense of joy in his early period. Wordsworth’s definition is empirical. Joy is a portion of his experience. He does make a distinction between the “vulgar joy” he feels as a boy at his rowdy play in the natural world of his youth in Hawkshead and its environs (1.413,427) and the joy that is the result of contemplating nature for its own sake. (2.240-2) This constitutes something of a growing up. The young Wordsworth destroyed birds’ nests for pleasure and trees for their nut crops. Wordsworth describes this in the second book of the 1799 *Prelude* in a sequence beginning line 140, where Wordsworth and his young companions enjoyed drifting in their boats under the overhanging boughs of trees, eating a light supper provided by a local manor house. Wordsworth recalls his decision made at this point:

And there I said,  
 That beauteous sight before me, there I said  
 (The first beginning in my thoughts to mark  
 That sense of dim similitude which links  
 Our moral feeling with external forms)  
 That in whatever region I should close  
 My mortal life I would remember you,  
 Fair scenes—that dying I would think on you,  
 My soul would send a longing look to you, (2.161-9)

It is this ability to link moral feelings with external forms that elevates his pleasure in nature to something deeper and more profound. Thus joy is not just boyish exuberant pleasure, but a side-effect, a marker that indicates a kind of spiritual growth or perhaps a spiritual attainment. Later on in part two, after experiencing “Sublimer joy” for seeing Coleridge’s concept of unity in the natural beauty around him, Wordsworth writes:

Thence did I drink the visionary power.  
 I deem not profitless these fleeting moods  
 Of shadowy exaltation; not for this,  
 That they are kindred to our purer mind  
 And intellectual life, (2.360-5)

Thus Wordsworth’s joy, his “fleeting moods/Of shadowy exaltation” are more than the “vulgar joy” of boyish adventures. They are the by-product of the growth of the poet’s mind and understanding, which is why references to joy appear through this poem on the growth of the poet’s mind. They are the result of nature turning the mind of a callow lad into a lover of nature’s beauty, and through that love, into the man he sees in the Coleridgean sense into the unity of all things, into the “one life, and felt that it was joy”.(2.460) For several of the writers in this study, joy to a greater or lesser degree, is likewise the marker of having discovered meaning, as Wordsworth feels he has done in Coleridge’s concept of unity.

The third and final element of joy in Wordsworth is its reflective nature. The realizations of “Tintern Abbey” happen in the context of reflection on a visit five years previous to the moment of the poem’s composition. Wordsworth’s speaker may have left behind his coarser pleasures of five years before and received “abundant recompense”(88), but he has stored that memory and is even storing the present beauties because “in this moment there is life and food/ For future years”.(64-5) Thus the memory of a joyful experience, such as the one Wordsworth and Dorothy are

having that July day in 1798 in the Wye Valley, is drawn upon later and joy has the power to recur in memory.

C.S. Lewis's aesthetic theory will serve to illuminate Wordsworth's idea of joy as expressed in his poetry. Lewis's aesthetic theory at once explains the connection between this emotional-spiritual experience and its physical manifestations as well as the connection between the experience of joy and its recurring nature. Lewis identifies the experience with Wordsworth's joy, and goes further in describing the experience in a way that is very similar to many of the poets in this study.

Lewis identifies "joy" as an experience that is pleasurable, but not strictly pleasure. It is a physical sensation that accompanies an overwhelming euphoria, that comes unannounced, usually as a result of some sudden aesthetic experience. The experience is so powerful, that when it passes, one longs to have it resume. At times, this nostalgic wish for the resumption of joy can bring it on again. Primarily it exists, much as Wordsworth said of poetry, as something that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility".(1988, 740) Thus, the longing for the return of the experience is an essential part of the experience, indeed the core of the experience. Lewis tells us, "All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago (thus the sense of nostalgia) or further away or still 'about to be.'"(1988, 78) Nor is the desired object ever reached, though the desire remains and may attach itself to almost any aesthetic experience. Thus it is ironic but characteristic of this property of joy, that Coleridge is able to create a poem in which he claims that the antithesis of joy, dejection, has destroyed his ability to create poetry. The memory is as powerful or perhaps even more powerful than the original visionary experience.

For Lewis, this joy and longing are transcendental, and he uses the German term, *Sehnsucht*, much as R.S. Thomas uses the Welsh term *hiraeth*, both translating into English as 'longing'. The language that some of the writers in this study, and Wordsworth himself, use for this experience is likewise laced with transcendental overtones. However, as Jonathan Wordsworth notes, the 1799 *Prelude* is "vitally dependent on this double awareness" that Wordsworth is flirting with transcendental claims but never quite stating them.(576) Wordsworth never speaks directly of nostalgia or longing in his looking back to five years before, as in "Tintern Abbey", but there is a definite wistfulness in his tone that indicates the nostalgic experience is occurring.

For R.S. Thomas, this intense physical and emotional experience can be set off by reading a line in a poem about Abercuawg, a mythical Welsh paradise where the cuckoo sings. (Thomas, "Abercuawg") Again, this

experience is usually connected to experiences of nostalgia, or longing for either the past of memory or some state that does not exist. Thus R.S. Thomas goes as far as the Hebrides looking for some longed-for Celtic paradise, and spends much of his energy berating his beloved Wales for not living up to his paradisal ideal of it. This longed for state is both past and future, and thus, the ecstatic longing is called by R.S. Thomas by the Welsh word for longing, *hiraeth*. In this study, I shall show how these three elements of Wordsworth's joy, as well as textual and thematic elements, echo through the work of these six writers.

## CHAPTER ONE

### WALES AND WORDSWORTH

Donald E. Hayden in his *Wordsworth's Travels in Wales and Ireland* has thoroughly documented all of Wordsworth's passages through Wales in a lifetime and I will not attempt to add to that record by narrating any kind of travelogue. Instead, I want to start by focusing on the juxtaposition of the two best-known Welsh allusions in Wordsworth's work. Anyone familiar with the body of Wordsworth's work is certainly familiar with two of the most soaring and memorable passages: the ascent of Mt. Snowdon in the final book of *The Prelude*, and what Wordsworth called his "poem upon the Wye". These are punctuation marks in Wordsworth's career, the first coming at the moment of the publishing of *Lyrical Ballads* and the latter composed initially in the 1805 *Prelude*, right towards the end of a particularly fertile period of composition in Wordsworth's career. Since *The Prelude* was not published until after his death in 1850, it is possible to look at these two events as a start and a finish. He begins at a river valley on the border of Wales and England, in lowlands almost at sea level, and completes his pilgrimage at the highest mountaintop in Wales. Looking at it this way is not only a metaphor for Wordsworth's career but one that portrays that career as a journey from one corner of Wales to the other.

Tracing Wordsworth's feelings towards Wales as a single political or geographical entity is difficult because Wordsworth doesn't discuss it as such. There is a passing reference in the "Convention of Cintra" that lauds Llewellyn the Great and William Wallace for their local loyalties and willingness to stand up against tyranny, but nowhere does Wordsworth show anything like sympathy for Welsh nationalism. (Wordsworth 1974, 1.328) Rather than try to find some elusive Wordsworthian sympathy for Wales, it will be far more useful to explore Wordsworth's imaginative perception of Wales, both in the sense of visual perception of Wales as a favored beauty spot and Wales as a place of mythically historical interest. J.R. Watson in his essay "Wordsworth, North Wales and the Celtic Landscape" writes that "North Wales was a

territory of the mind for Wordsworth, as well as a place to visit.”(92) A look at Wordsworth’s travels groups the destinations into just a few places: France (and beyond to Italy), Germany, London, Scotland and Wales. The trips to London are more business than sight seeing and his sonnet to the beauty of the morning over Westminster Bridge is the exception. The first trip to Germany was anything but pleasant; the second amounted to little more than tourism. The two trips to Scotland resulted in a fair amount of poetry, but nothing as spiritually profound as *The Prelude* or “Tintern Abbey”. There are three discernible “territories of the mind”, to use Watson’s term, for Wordsworth: first and foremost is his beloved Lake District. Close behind is Revolutionary France where he joined an attempt at creating a new human society and fathered a love child. Right behind that is Wales, where he went for refuge or refreshment throughout his life. Truly, where does a poet who lived a “life in retirement” in Cumberland’s fells and vales, go to get away from the disappointments of failed love and failed revolution or the simple grind of daily life? Historically, after both the 1790 and 1792 trips to France, Wordsworth went to Wales to stay with Robert Jones at Plas-Yn-Llan. If he witnessed the death of Gorsas in Paris in October of 1793, as he told Carlyle, he left from Wales to go there and may have returned to Wales from the dangerous venture. Even later in life, though the Wordsworths went for months at a time to live on the estate of Sir George Beaumont, their other favored haven was the Hutchinson farm in North Wales. As his increasingly conservative mind set and the war with France came to close France as a territory of the mind to which he had access, Wordsworth was left mainly with London, Scotland and Wales. London was a place of transacting business, of ‘networking’ to use the contemporary phrase. The two trips to Scotland did not produce any repeat tours, as the trips to Wales did. Scotland became valuable chiefly as the home of friend and colleague, Sir Walter Scott. But the frequent repeated trips to Wales suggest that Wales became his refuge. If Wordsworth did not see it in political or national terms, it was because he saw it as a place for a poet to retire from his life of retirement.

Leslie Norris, perhaps of all the writers in this study the most like Wordsworth in his world view, claimed that he and Wordsworth had an “affinity” for the hill country, and for seeing nature “as a symbol of eternity”.

But there is an affinity, or perhaps a considerable similarity of experience and temperament, which I can recognise. Both Wordsworth and I are hill boys, brought up in very similar environments of open mountains, lakes,

rivers. Both, for different reasons, see the natural world as the moral, perhaps even “religious” landscape, and the industrial world as one in which men walk at their peril, both temporal and eternal. (I moved from the natural world through slum dwellings and the fallen ruins of the steelworks, in opposition, every day.) Both have used nature as a symbol of eternity, or accepted anyway the Platonic idea that it stands as God’s promise and vision of eternity although in my case this is not as strong a premise as it is say in Vaughan and Vernon Watkins.

If, as Norris suggests, the affinity is for landscape, the similarity of terrain between the Lake District and Wales, may have produced in Wordsworth this apparent affinity for Wales. This affinity, as Norris suggests, is something spiritual connected to “very similar environments of open mountains, lakes, [and] rivers”. A scan of Wordsworth’s written work for the word ‘Wales’ would find very few repetitions. However, the letters hold frequent mentions of specific places. More significant, a survey of his poetry shows a tremendous amount of poetry set in Wales.

As Watson suggests, spots of time for Wordsworth often become spots of places as well. If for Wordsworth, Wales as a national or political entity did not loom large, his focus on individual places that made an impression on him looms very large. The Wye Valley above Tintern Abbey and the top of Mt. Snowdon in first light are powerful images central to Wordsworth’s poetry. It is possible to group his poetry containing Welsh allusions fairly close to these two points. There is the poetry of the Wye Valley and there is the poetry of the North. With a few exceptions, the poetry of the Wye Valley, of the South, is the poetry from his early years: The little girl in “Anecdote for Fathers” lives on “Liswyn Farm”, a name that Wordsworth admits in the *Fenwick Notes* that he borrowed from the name of Thelwell’s farm near the Wye River. In the *Fenwick Notes* Wordsworth admits that the little girl that was the model for the child in “We Are Seven” he encountered at Goodrich Castle, again on the Wye River. In “The Tuft of Primroses” Wordsworth refers to imagery in the Wye Valley near Tintern Abbey remembered from his 1793 journey. In “The Egyptian Maid”, Wordsworth sets the tale in Roman Caerleon, for the purpose of establishing an Arthurian connection. Of course, the Wye River Valley is the site of “Tintern Abbey”. Simon Lee is from the “sweet shire of Cardigan”, and the poem is a tale of the rural decay seen in Wales. And though Cardigan is somewhat west of the Wye Valley, it is an early poem from *Lyrical Ballads* and distinctly a poem of South Wales. Though Peter Bell in his wandering days saw “Caernarvon’s towers”, Wordsworth admits that the character and mannerisms of Bell were drawn from an acquaintance he traveled with up

the Wye River Valley. The sole exception is that late in life he wrote a sonnet about the rebuilding of a church on the banks of the Severn near Cardiff.

The poems of the north are set across a wider range of country, as well as being fewer. After the scene of the ascent of Snowden in *The Prelude*, there is the sonnet to Devil's Bridge east of Aberystwyth, a result of touring with his family and Robert Jones. The same is true of the poem written to the two ladies in Llangollen. There are two references in poems about the channel off the coast of Cumberland that mention the far sight of Mona, the older name for Anglesey. If the muses of place sang for Wordsworth here, at Anglesey, it's notable that they also sang there for John Milton, in his poem "Lycidas", which shares the setting of the waters off the coast of Anglesey or "Mona". (Milton 1961, 3) And these lists may not even be complete as it is impossible to trace all the nameless settings in poems that Wordsworth drew from memories of the Welsh landscape in his frequent journeys there.

Ironically, though Wordsworth spent far more time traveling in the north, he writes more frequently of the south. Wordsworth made visits to North Wales in 1791, 1793, 1824, and 1841, the first two alone to visit his friend, Robert Jones and the latter two accompanied by members of his family. He visited Thelwell's farm in Llyswn in August 1798, and of course, there is the journey a month previously he made with Dorothy to the region above Tintern Abbey that resulted in the well-known poem. In the later years he made short visits to the Hutchinson farm in North Wales, such as the one in 1810. His last visit was the trip up the Wye as far as Goodrich Castle in 1841. There really is no strong pattern to these trips, though the trips to the north most often constituted family visits and the later trips to the south tended to be nostalgic, as was the trip to Somerset that generated *The Fenwick Notes*. What really emerges here is the profound life-shaping nature of his 1793 walk through Wales, up the Wye Valley to Plas-yn-Llan, and his march up Snowden with Robert Jones. This was a defining moment for the young poet-to-be, as his memory of it in "Tintern Abbey" and his evocation of the Snowden climb attest. He passes through the Wye Valley, by his own account, ". . . more like a man/ Flying from something he dreads than one/ Who sought the thing he loved." Granted, he is mixing in these lines his memory of passing up the Wye Valley with his boyhood in Esthwaite Vale. Yet, it was this trip up the Wye that held the events that generated the *Lyrical Ballads* pieces, and may have well been the launching place for a surreptitious journey to France that witnessed the death of Gorsas. And though the ascent of Snowden occurred two years previous on the first



trip to see Robert Jones, Wordsworth places it last in the order of events that unravel in *The Prelude*. It is the conclusion of this 1793 trip that results in Wordsworth and Dorothy taking up residence together, first at Windy Brow and later at Racedown, where he finds his vocation as a poet. In *The Prelude*, he finds his vocation as he climbs Snowden, so in the territory of the mind, Snowden, not Racedown is the mythological place of self-discovery. This profoundly important trip of 1793 is the trip that began with his accident with the whiskey cart near Salisbury, and concluded with his taking to his firm legs and “Flying from something he dreads” up the Wye Valley to the refuge with Jones and the moment at the mountaintop. Though this isn’t strictly speaking, biographically accurate, it is the version in his territory of the mind. Wales is for Wordsworth, in short, the place of imaginative self-discovery, away from home, that allows him to come home. It also gives him an image of his vocation in the tradition of the bard.

### **Bards on the Celtic Fringe**

Watson traces the possibility of Wordsworth’s reading Thomas Gray’s *The Bard* and other poetic and mythic sources available at the time. However, Richard Gravil’s study, *Wordsworth Bardic Vocation, 1787-1842*, is extremely thorough in its exploration of this matter. Gravil traces the history of the Lake District and surrounding areas as a British enclave that fell very late to the Saxons. Bardic figures such as Taliesin and others are associated with the ancient British kingdom of Rheged. With Wales and Cornwall, it was one of the places Britons fled the Saxon invasions. Gravil demonstrates that Wordsworth was familiar with this history and then shows how extensively Wordsworth refers to bards and druids throughout his written work, seeing himself as a bard and inheritor of the bardic tradition. Gravil shows that Wordsworth saw the Lake District, with its transition from Briton to Roman to Briton again and eventually to Saxon hands, as a transition of culture directed by Nature to create “a perfect Republic of Shepherds” with a social order made democratic by the enclosure of the surrounding mountains. (qtd. in Gravil 2003, 64; Wordsworth 1982, 67) Gravil traces Wordsworth’s sense of this unfolding history in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. If Gravil is right, the same might be said about Wales, developing in the natural beauty of her enclosing mountains, from Briton to Roman to Briton again, still resisting the Saxon incursion. Wordsworth may not celebrate Wales as a political entity, but he does celebrate Simon Lee and the little girl with piercing insight about death in “We Are Seven”. Wales too is a “perfect Republic

of Shepherds” and simple folk whose wisdom is drawn from their balanced living in harmony with Nature.

Whether or not Wordsworth intended for this concept of the republic shaped by Nature to extend to Wales, in varying degrees the writers in this study have embraced that vision and made it their own. This is perhaps the explanation of Norris’ sense of “affinity”. Norris’ poetry and fiction is peopled with simple folk, most often in rural Wales, wrestling with twentieth-century life from an essentially Romantic perspective. His heroes are characters like Chinner Mason who is poor and most often found in a run down pub, but who understands the land and the secrets of nature. He is a citizen of a Wordsworthian Republic of Shepherds in Wales. R.S. Thomas holds an ambiguous vision of Wales. It is at once a Wordsworthian Republic of Shepherds, Welsh speaking, and yet it is also a vast disappointment to him. Wales fails to live up to Thomas’ idyllic vision of it. His simple shepherd is the recurring character, Iago Prytherch, who is both the elemental earth man in touch with Nature and a hopeless lout, pleased to wallow in his own ignorance.

For Idris Davies, Wordsworth’s Republic of Shepherds appeals to the cast-off miner and union man, who looks on the Welsh landscape despoiled by English mine owners and wishes for a return to nature. Huw Menai similarly translates this Republic of Shepherds into a veneration of the simple man. For Davies and Menai, it might be said that the Republic of Shepherds has evolved into a Republic of Miners. The simple Welsh countryman has migrated to the mines of South Wales to find work. The Republic was forced underground by economic necessity. Still, this finds echoes in Wordsworth in *The Ruined Cottage* and other poems depicting the destruction of simple folk by the industrialized needs of the state. William Henry Davies takes this one step further in portraying what might be called a Republic of the Homeless, exploring the lives, tragedies and virtues of the transients he lived among for so many years in terms of Wordsworthian imagery and meter. Powys, the exception here, insists that Wales be simply ancient and mythic. He does not idealize the simple life, being far more invested in the territory of his own mind. Nevertheless, for the most part Leslie Norris is right about the affinity, though what each Welsh poet does with that affinity translates differently. Still, they are rooted in their school experience of Wordsworth as being the model of what a poet should be, as Norris observed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HUW MENAI

Of all the poets in this study, few, if any, can claim to be as Welsh as Hugh Owen Williams, known to his readers as 'Huw Menai'. Born in Caernarvonshire in 1888, Huw spent his early years in poverty and often without the presence of his father, who went south to work in the Glamorganshire mines. Huw and his mother followed years later, and Huw became what so many Welshmen became, a coal miner. He was a fluent and native Welsh speaker and read Welsh literature. One of the most puzzling questions about him is why he did not, with the exceptions of a couple of stanzas, write in Welsh.

He went through a period as a political agitator, writing for socialist publications in the height of the mine unrest between the wars. This ultimately led to his being sacked. Shortly thereafter, he was married. Some time later, a mine owner offered him a job working as a weigher for the mines and Menai's days of political agitation were over. After this time he began writing prolific amounts of poetry. He lived the last years of his life in Pen Y Graig, in the Rhondda Valley. He was never in exile, except perhaps from North Wales to South; he did not live any real time in England or the United States and never had to rediscover Wales as some of the writers in this study had to. His people are the people of Wales, Welsh miners and their families. Yet, by his own admission, the poet that he liked best was the English poet, Wordsworth. He confesses this freely in the short autobiography he published in his second volume of poems. (Menai 1929, 7-12)

Other critics have claimed an affinity with Wordsworth for Menai. Glyn Jones, in his *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, notes Menai's Wordsworthian tendencies, although he is critical of them. Jones, though he knew Menai, seems to dislike a great deal of his poetry because of its apparent disregard for the trend in English poetry set by T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Roy Campbell. (Jones 1968, 142, 148) Jones writes:

Very few marks of the changes that have taken place in English poetry since *Prufrock*, published three years before the appearance of his first volumes, are to be found in his work. . . . His aim was the old one of moving us, and for him poetry should be simple, sensuous and passionate. His prime concern was with fancy, infinity and open air, with the enigma of suffering and death, with the concept of the solitary human soul against the indifferent or hostile universe. (1929, 148)

Jones quotes Menai's own statement of affinity for Wordsworth from the final words of Menai's introduction to his second volume of verse, *The Passing of Guto* (1929).

. . . my reading of the other great poets [besides Shakespeare], Milton, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, has mainly been confined to the selection of their works which appear in *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*—a book I have very frequently handled during the past eight years. And the poet in this anthology which makes the greatest appeal to me is William Wordsworth. (1929, 147)

*Palgrave's Golden Treasury* is admittedly Menai's entrance into the work of Wordsworth. Thus, Menai's reading of Wordsworth, is a Wordsworth as filtered through the choices of verse made by the editors of *Palgrave*. The dynamic in Menai's poems is his tremendous energy devoted to this positive, faith-filled *Palgrave* Wordsworth, wrestling with Menai's darker experience of life among the coal mines of South Wales. This tension and the way it resolves differently over the four books of Menai's poetry is the force that defines Menai's voice. Using an analogy to Blake's titles, one might say that Menai's poetry depicts the wrestling of his sense of innocence with the realities of his experience. His four books of poetry can be viewed this way, with the first two mainly being his "Songs of Innocence" and the latter two being his "Songs of Experience". However, this generalization has limited use, since both tensions exist in all four volumes of poetry.

The best critical insight into this *Palgrave*/Wordsworth influence is by John Cowper Powys. In his 1944 preface to Menai's fourth and final volume of published verse, *The Simple Vision*, Powys distinguishes Menai's work from the work of his contemporaries, as does Jones. But Powys is far less critical of Menai for being out of step with the work of T.S. Eliot and other modernists. Powys believes that as poetry moved in the direction of Eliot, the popular taste for poetry continued to gobble up bad poetry in the more traditional lyrical style. (Menai 1944, 11,12) For Powys, Menai's poetry filled that gap.

Huw Menai is concerned with poetic and therefore essentially dramatic *feelings*, while the school of writers from whom the conquest of the air is at this moment saving us, though a formidable school and a subtle school, is concerned with pictorial and therefore essentially aesthetic *impressions*. (1944, 12)

This is an important distinction between a very Wordsworthian and Romantic embracing of what Powys calls “feelings” and the twentieth-century distrust and rejection of feelings and replacing them with the more emotionally neutral “impressions”. Powys has struck the heart of the matter here: Menai is not naïve; he simply refuses to make the transition from feelings to mere, allegedly neutral impressionism. Menai is one with Wordsworth in his insistence on a poetry based on the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, from “emotion recollected in tranquility”. (Wordsworth 1988, 740) For Menai, the pose of objectivity on the part of the poet, in the “impressionism” of mainstream twentieth-century poetry, is unconvincing. Muting the emotions does not do away with them, but only conceals them. Menai prefers, like Wordsworth, to speak plainly and without embarrassment of his feelings and his faith.

Furthermore, in 1944 when Powys wrote the preface, he anticipated something like a return to traditional, formal poetry. With the exception of children’s literature, this prophecy has only come true in a small way in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Yet, Powys’ striking and perceptive description of this imagined comeback reveals more of how he categorizes Menai in twentieth-century literature.

All around us to-day there are signs that poetry is returning to simplicity and imaginative naïveté. Our very youngest who are “lispering in numbers” have shaken off their predecessors’ basic principle, namely, that an intellectual poet in our age must first of all be critical, cynical, sophisticated and disillusioned; in the second place must look at Nature with the screwed-up eyes of the impressionistic, aphoristic studio-connoisseur till the virtue of his vision has been corrupted by *virtu*; and in the third place savagely, darkly, frantically strive to adore what is detestable and to damn what is adorable. (1944, 17)

Powys goes on to assure us that he has not defected from the dominant tastes of his time; he claims *The Waste Land* to be the greatest poem of the age and notes with an allusion to Wordsworth’s sonnet on London, “Dull would he be of soul who turned an adder’s ear to an whole epoch.” Yet, he claims, “. . . the relief of escaping from [this sort of poetry] . . . is indescribable.” (1944, 17)

Powys' argument makes not only Menai more interesting for its picture of him as a dissident poet, plunging upstream against the current of his times, but sheds light on Powys' own view of the literature of his age. This very paradoxical struggle of the post-Romantic Romantic is the tension not only underlying Menai's work, but of many of the writers in this study, and even beyond. The post-World War I rejection of Romanticism did not succeed in banishing or reinterpreting Wordsworth and his colleagues, but only in forcing Romanticism to undergo changes such as those one sees in the poetry of Yeats and Heaney, or Dylan Thomas and Leslie Norris. Yet, these later forms often lack the childlike innocence of Wordsworth's Romanticism.

Huw Menai retains this childlike quality. Both Glyn Jones and John Cowper Powys apologize for what they perceive to be the "weak" poems of Menai, those lyrics which do not contain any strong images to somehow justify the traditional and lyrical nature of the lines. If Huw Menai's work does not fall into a category with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, that is not sufficient cause to declare one or the other objectively bad. Even Powys seems to appreciate this when he suggests that Menai's work is for those who do not care for the literary poetry between the wars and need poetry in the lyrical style which they prefer. To be more specific, the poetry of Menai's which both Jones and Powys seem to deplore tends to be the poetry that leans toward simplicity and optimism, traits not fashionable in between-the-wars literary poetry. Menai demonstrates elsewhere in his work that he is also quite capable of dark and brooding thought and atmosphere.

Therefore, I propose to examine the work in Menai's four volumes of published verse, starting with the earliest. I can show that Menai echoes "the poet . . . which makes the greatest appeal to me . . . William Wordsworth", (1929, 12) in his wrestling with the essential Romantic problem of how one is to reconcile the goodness of the world and of God as revealed in nature with death and evil. Stylistically Menai makes a great deal of effort to follow Wordsworth's injunction to write lyrically and "in the language of men", as Wordsworth says in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, (1988, 735) in this case, for the coal miners of Menai's acquaintance. Like Wordsworth, his subject will be the deepest questions of life and death, though Menai will not hold the unswerving faith of the later Wordsworth, but instead wrestle with his darker moments when his faith in the Christian God is at its weakest. Yet, throughout, the difference between Menai and the twentieth-century Romanticism in Yeats or Thomas is Menai's optimism and faith in the ultimate meaning of the universe.