

Particles and Waves: Poetic Responses to Place - Psycho-geography
and/as practice

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Abstract

Utilising a range of psychogeographic practices, this project comprises a hybrid creative response to the natural landscape of West Wales, using the River Towy as a focal point. It is concerned with an exploration of the importance of identity, and with themes of the spiritual, land, gender, culture and history. The work's originality results from the application of predominantly male urban writing practices in a rural Welsh environment from a woman's standpoint.

The journey recounted in the creative piece is understood essentially as a transformative, personal process of a transcendental nature, whilst also exploring and depicting the nature of the differing stages of the river and those who live in or come to the specific locations, including Carmarthen, the Cambrian Mountains, Llandeilo, Llandovery, and Llansteffan. It is informed by the belief that some places are imbued with energies that may cause specific types of human interaction and responses. The project was developed through investigative visits to predetermined sites at significant positions and with notable histories, in order to ascertain and record what might be felt, observed and experienced, leading to site-specific writing.

It is formally diverse, including short essays, prose and poetry of various kinds, the use of found texts. It is presented as a 'scrapbook' and makes creative use of the interplay between text and image. The multi-layered approach assumes that myths, fiction and fact are all of equal importance and intuitive skills are acknowledged as essential. The work, thus, is informed by recent developments in psychogeography, i.e. 'mythogeography' or 'deep topography'. The writing is experimental and influenced by the zeitgeist preference for abbreviated/truncated writing. The methodologies of this practice-based project include auto-ethnographic responses and an exploration of psychogeographic literature and practice. The creative piece is supported by a wide and deep contextual background, which has informed its development.

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Particles and Waves



Alison Clare Scott

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By chance on a map: by way of an introduction

There was no obvious reason why I chose to visit Lynmouth. I'd never been there before, no one else had recommended it to me, I couldn't remember it ever featuring on a travel show. I found it by chance on a map, knew it was on the Devon coastline and the route to reach it looked a reasonably easy drive.

A bed and breakfast was selected through cheapness and Tripadvisor, not because it had any other interest. That was discovered on arrival, when we were given our room: this was the place Shelley had stayed with his first wife, Harriet. Pencil line drawings of them hung in a room that had been dressed anachronistically.

It was easy to see the appeal of the area to Shelley, being situated on the coast, divided by a river that courses around and between rocks and boulders, tumbling down the slope to the beach, where it joins the sea. The sheer wooded inclines around the harbour ensure a sense of isolation and of possible adventures; smugglers returning from the high seas, bringing contraband to hide out in the woods that stretch from the shore, up the steep hills and over onto the moors above. The cliffs that tower above the sea, where breezes vibrate the turquoise waters under a warm sun on the best days, are difficult to climb, yet stimulate the desire to explore and immerse oneself in the scenery. Lynmouth's seclusion, its wildness and its antiquity are a draw to intrepid walkers, those who like the rural and those of a romantic nature.

As we rambled around the harbour, gaining our bearings, a feeling of strangeness overcame me. A strong sense of otherworldliness rose like a sea mist, obscuring the simple enjoyment of our visit to this quirky fishing village where tourist souvenirs beset every shop on the little street that runs up from the landing point. It seemed to me to be more than the ghosts of sailors greeting their families on their return or women waiting forlornly for those who never came back. It was almost as if I were looking at a distorted mirror reflection of uneven proportions, that slipped in and out of my view. The local artist, whose studio occupied the space of several small shops, was clearly making a good living depicting landscape views of Lynmouth from varying angles and his work did not suggest the incongruity that I was sensing.

The more I wandered the streets and negotiated the demand of the climb to higher views above the harbour, the more I felt an uneasiness, even a sense of oppression. While I observed other visitors to the area, I could not detect a similar response, but then I am used to being different.

My companion is useful. If I am straying too far from reality, he will bring me back to the joys of the breeze, warmth of the sun, the effect of a view. The feelings I was experiencing were further reinforced by his agreement that the layout of the village somehow didn't come together; that the notices posted in various shops, referring to the 'disaster of 1952', suggested a place that had not come to terms with its history.

We happened upon the ‘Flood Memorial Hall’, that advertised a small exhibition of the local history. It was a room situated in a stone building on the first floor above a bus shelter with floor to ceiling windows. We mounted the stairs on the outside of the building and entered; it was at this point that I began to make sense of my feelings.

In the centre of the otherwise bare room was a large glass box at waist height which encased a scaled model of the town and landscape. It was a miniature scene that showed the fishing town as it had been before the flood, with a written account of the tragedy and personal reminiscences. On the walls there were newspaper cuttings, pictures, images of houses that had been swept away by the river and details about individuals who had been unfortunately caught in the path of the torrent. A reporter in the *Western Morning News* had written the week after:

Superlatives are too puny to describe the calamity, which has befallen Lynmouth and Barbrook. Deaths on a wartime scale, destruction at Barbrook worse than in the heaviest blitz, hundreds of residents and visitors personally ruined and destitute - the story stuns the human mind.

I could see accounts of those who had survived the ‘avalanche’, the torrent of water that had poured down the gorge, sweeping away a bridge, a chapel and houses, like a tsunami, washing away human lives, carrying trees and rocks from the moors above and depositing them as high as the roofs of the houses, obliterating the paths:

As we watched, we saw a row of cottages near the river, in the flashes of lightning because it was dark by this time, fold up like a pack of cards and swept out with the river with the agonising screams of some of the local inhabitants who I knew very well.¹

It was clear from the memorial that the effects of 1952 did not remain in the past, that it was a current trauma for those who lived there still and for those who had moved away, but who still maintained contact. The exhibition conveyed the impression that this was a recent event of a few years ago, not sixty. Like a cloud of wood smoke it tainted the breeze, leaving a taste on the tongue.

I was completely unaware of this history, being born after the event and not having taken any interest previously in the north coast of Devon. The nearest I had come to Lynmouth was my consumption at the age of ten of the Victorian novel, *Lorna Doone*. Set in the seventeenth century on the moors of Exmoor around Lynmouth, the story has an intricate plot, is a romance and of the pastoral tradition. The hopelessness of the situation of the hero, John Ridd, and heroine, the struggle to resist the fates that drive them apart and the depravity of the lawless villain, Carver Doone, rose in my memory as we wandered for the first time around the town. The tension of its drama, the expression of the depth of its despair has some parallel with the emotions I experienced when visiting the Flood Memorial Hall. It was easy to feel empathy for those whose lives had been destroyed, because the personal accounts in the exhibition were so vivid. It was possible to draw comparisons with accounts of the 2011 tsunami in Japan and the ways that we are able to revisit the event via YouTube or television documentaries – for me too horrifying.

Nonetheless, I was aware of a sensation almost as soon as I arrived and this was not gained through the normal channels of communication. I make no claims to be a clairvoyant, but I am able to ‘read’ the land. I believe intuition is a faculty that we all potentially possess to a

greater or lesser degree. I am aware that I have ideas in common with the Romantics. I think that sites hold more than the energy of the geological strata of which they are composed, although I am unsure whether, for instance, granite may produce a different effect than, say, limestone, which can influence human behaviours. I do know that indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia have identified specific places as ‘sacred’, as described by the mystic Joseph Rael:

Our elders used to tell us that all holy sites are endowed with ancient wisdom. These centres have innate powers.

I think that it is possible for different areas to hold differing types of energy, leading to varied effects on human activity and feelings.

I am convinced that the feeling I experienced at Lynmouth was the ‘emotion’ of the land. I would go so far as to say that it is suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, which would account for the sensation that the flood had recently occurred, where the trigger event is repeatedly relived and flashbacks recur. The anxiety and sense of isolation that were amongst my responses may also be a result of this, although one might also wonder if my own state of mind – which was similar – enabled me to connect with the feelings.

Aberfan, too, seems to hold the trauma from the damage of the disaster in 1966, when the village lost its children so tragically by a landslide from a coal tip. Those who experienced it have still not recovered from the experience nor the loss. I have met a journalist in his eighties who was young when he was told to cover the story and says, still, that it was the most terrible experience of his career, which damaged him forever. The memorial garden is peaceful, but the air remains fragile.

Alongside the damage to the Lynmouth’s psyche were the threads of previous, happier states that were reminiscent of a piece of music by Bach, and with a greater connection with the Romantic poets, like Shelley, and a reassurance of the wealth of experience in nature and the transcendental possibilities that Coleridge found here too.

Shelley came here from Wales with his young bride, Harriet, with whom he had eloped to Scotland, causing him to be disinherited by his father. While in Wales he began *Queen Mab*, which included his political messages about social injustice. He was enchanted by his first sight of Lynmouth, describing it as a “fairy scene” that was scattered with a profusion of roses and myrtle; although he did not stay long, having to run away back to Wales after producing revolutionary pamphlets with a declaration of rights. Coleridge undertook a walking tour of Wales and then moved to Bristol, from where he travelled to Exmoor. He, too, was drawn by the landscape, although it was the view across the sea to Wales, the wildlife, the watercourses and forests that drew him. Lynmouth was part of a walking tour that he undertook with Wordsworth.

In Wales I had been seeking alternative answers to my status and that of the world, which was shifting into a less compassionate society. Lynmouth seemed to offer me a sweetness of space within a wilderness when I first arrived, with the undertones of a grimmer recent past emerging as I engaged more with the village. I could connect with the Romantics of the nineteenth century, in contrast to the reason of Enlightenment - the preference for use of feeling, imagination and intuition, a sought relationship with nature and the landscape, a transcendent view of existence, an experience and understanding of the negative aspects of

life and a knowledge of emotional and psychological states. I was seeking new dialogues with the past, with the present and with literature.

I have experienced the effect of the energies of place closer to home. Carmarthen is a town of strong energy. It was once the effective capital of Wales and home to the power behind the Tudor throne. It was run by two large and powerful church houses, the priory at one end and the friary at the other and it is said that kings have been buried in the grounds of both. Whilst the negative effects of the expression of the energy can be seen in its description by historian, Peter J. Goodall, who wrote of the town:

Carmarthen with its history of drunkenness, violence and debt was home to not one gaol but two.ⁱⁱ

The Demetae tribe lived here before the Romans came and conquered. They were known for their drunkenness and aggression in battle. They were the Celtic tribe that lived in what is now defined as Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, the capital of which was ‘Moridunum’, Carmarthen. They were under the authority of the Druids, ‘priests, prophets and bards’, who were the teachers, judges and advisers of the tribeⁱⁱⁱ. Prys-Jones described the tribe as ‘a pastoral, pagan and often warlike people. They fought among themselves as well as against Irish and Roman invaders ... and were knit together by bonds of kinship within the clan’^{iv}. Little seems to have changed, sheep and cattle continue to provide a main source of income and prosperity. The aggression directed within and without continues to be a problem for the Dyfed-Powys police force in the evenings, mostly at weekends. Although during the day there is a veneer of gentility.

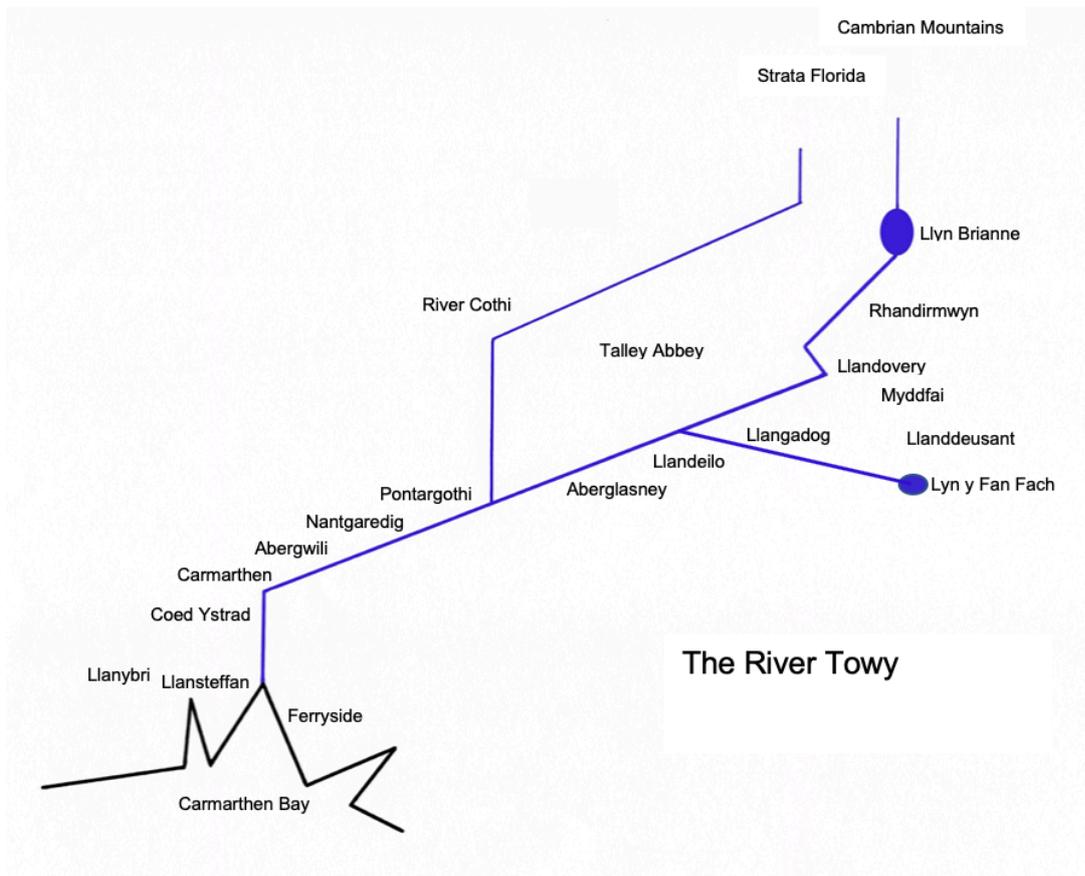
And then there is the magical dimension. Merlin is purported to have been born just outside Carmarthen and some explain the Welsh name ‘Caerfyrddin’ as ‘seat of Merlin’. There is a hill at Abergwili named ‘Merlin’s Hill’, with traces of an ancient hillfort at its summit. The ancient text, *The Black Book of Carmarthen* is partially prophetic and includes a dialogue between Merlin and the Welsh bard Taliesin, son of Ceridwen, he of Celtic mythology. Gerald of Wales, wrote in 1188 that Merlin was born in Carmarthen. Is Merlin an embodiment of wisdom, a representation of figures who provide this in our society? I wonder what aspect of Carmarthen drew me to the town originally.

Another place where there is clear evidence of the effect of inherent energies is Strata Florida, which I happened upon one day, some time before the archaeologists had begun to investigate and it was turned into a site of touristic interest. One Sunday, I had decided to take a day out and explore the land above Lampeter, travelling in the manner of a psychogeographer, without specific intention or plans and open to any experience that might arise. I drove towards the mountains from Tregaron and had to pull over when I noticed an archway standing prominent in a field. I felt drawn to it, so clambered over the fence into the field, through the archway and into the space where the abbey would have stood. Once there, I felt surrounded by a peacefulness and experienced a state of bliss. I could have stayed there forever and the arrival of death would have been a completely natural and expected experience somehow. Since then, unprompted, similar feelings have been described by others when they visited the site.



This collection is part autobiography, part history, made up of my stories and those of others, affected deeply, as I am, by places, and situated mostly along the Towy valley. It is a celebration of how things are found by chance, or not, on a map.

Journey along the length of the River Towy through the heartland of Wales



Brecon Beacons

Dawn

The night sky lightens
Clouds part to let colour through
Birds yell their stories

The reasons why

I was at the sea edge calling
words of encouragement
while you were wordlessly drowning,
ensnared
by the nets they threw to catch you, meant
to hold you, threatened always in Sioux Falls.

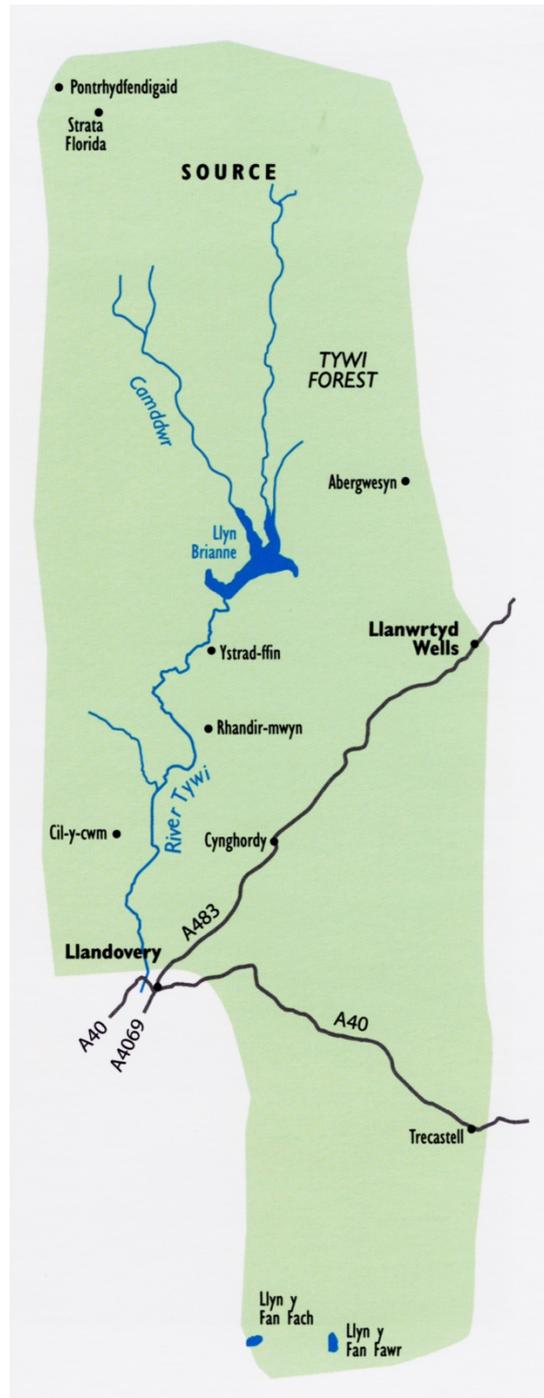
Your own boat becalmed, leaking water,
you sank slowly as we watched helpless,
the harsh ridges of stones beneath my feet,
while I was waving, clouds in my head.
We think now how it might have been sorted.

You escaped then and settled for ever
In a churchyard sheltered under the sweet child
green beech leaves dappling
the white wood anemones,
surrounded by bright yellow celandine.
I recited A E Housman in your memory,
your presence tickling my pain like a feather,

‘Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough.’

You left me nowhere to hide,
no more afternoon tea,
no one waiting by my bedside,
The only route now to western hills.

The Source of the Towy to Rhandirmwyn



A tired bee loads up
From nectar's source, sweet transport
To hexagon hives

It is the week between October and November, the holiday when we rejoice in death. Life's sightless endings and the space of afterlife, carnivals in the lunatic nights of moon-driven frenzy, stepping through the veil into the realm of spirits and lost souls. The last stage of the cycle, when life returns into the earth and will slow to an eventual standstill. When we throw our 'selves' into the cauldron, in order to be remixed, reformed and to return one day, resurrected to new hope and new visions.

Houses are lit by distorted faces carved into glowing orange-orb pumpkins, an artifice of spider webs strung across windows, with cats and bats placed in unlikely symmetry. Skeletons dangle, bones swinging in the wind of celebration. This is the time to confront our fears.

The fair's in town. The town where I have lived over twenty years, the town I still can't call my home town. Stakes driven into the ground, pinning the tents to the scrubby land on the edge of the market place, tatty signs flapping in the wind. I wander through the crazy, contorted lanes between the garish lights, the loud, loud thumps of pop music, the smells of candyfloss and burgers, watching families stumble onto rides, shrieking to one another, eyeing up the spaces for the next go, always on edge in case they miss their chance.

There are black-outlined cartoon monsters at every turn, glaring from a height just above my head. Ghosts of the past whisper at my ankles, some that I have brought with me, some that are rising from this scruffy, hard-caked piece of earth on which I walk. A sharp movement jostles my elbow, reminding me that nowhere is safe. A mist-floats up from the menacing river below. This is a Scooby Doo scene, a world of endless known and unknown, real and unreal threats, that wake me in the cold, dark hours of the early-morning night and follow behind me, tapping my shoulder from time to time.

A man is walking in my direction, his arm around a woman, controlling her direction of movement. Although he smiles, I feel the will that is being exerted. He senses me watching and turns, moving them closer to me, until he is so close that his face is inches from mine. He turns away from her and his face contorts into a smug sneer, meant only for me.

I watch pairs stumble out of the dodgem cars, almost shoved away by the will of those who have pushed forward ready to take their place. A screaming child tumbles out from the rotating cage and spews nearby, the breeze catches the vomit and I watch drops fly to the space beside me. Jumping away in disgust, I feel a jerk in my soul. This is not my place, not where I belong.

The next morning, the cold air cuts my face and fields are sharp-edged with a frost of wintry white and I know that I need to step away from the regular, to allow my 'self' to experience the metaphysical attack from Ceridwen's wooden spoon as she beats the mixture to create a new dough.

Participles

On the grey-green mountain
Rain is the warp,
I am the weft,
A white thread
Shaping a pattern
Of tree lines
Interlaced in a blanket.

I weave down through
The wisdom of brave oak,
The protection of sacred ash,
The complication of hawthorn,
Around broken boulders,
Snaking through valleys,
Entangled in the river's memories.

I travel wild,
The wind is keening,
Unravelling the spool
With each movement
I pull the shining thread
Into the exiled future,
Entwined in a remote land.

Origins

At prehistoric Crug Gynan
earth's milk is birthed
through springy bog,
breaks through auroch bones,
black silver
seeping between hare-brown stones.

A nascent trickle in
Cambrian mountains,
primeval flow
through ancient Briton lands,
blessed by Bronze Age cairns
and dairy cattle histories.

First pooling at Llyn Brianne,
it pours into the prince-like,
playful river,
past the cave of Twm Sion Cati,
son of a Welsh motherland,
giggling at his rogue reputation
in this wilderness,
laughing on
to the first village, Rhandirmwyn.



Between the lines

For who dares undo the parcel
At the point of love, forsaken and afraid,
Strip the husk and pare the rind off:
Life is no passing memory of what has been.

THIS is the hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Fall, hands a-clasped into instantaneous ecstasy,
With joy you realise for the first time,
Hope is the thing with feathers.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
Imagine that moment:
A she bird dawned, and her breast with snow and scarlet downed,
Seeing you, as you always wanted to be seen.^v

'When going from one reality to another it is often necessary to traverse a desert. If you are blessed, there will be a narrow path in which to tread. So it is when you make a pilgrimage to the sacred heart of Wales.'^{vi}

She of the clover-white footprints and waist-length silver hair waits for me at Strata Florida in her rickety van, carpeted with old muddy smelly jumpers for the dogs to lie in comfort in the back. She has insisted that she interviews me before she will take me to the interior, to the hidden sites where the Towy is said to emerge from the unmapped marshy turf.

She has long ago given up waiting for her true love to defeat her giant father and gallop away with her to a new kingdom. She knows that this is the stuff of myths and that her reality is independence, the joy of making her own decisions and following the scent of prehistory. There is an acerbic glint in her eye as she observes me suspiciously and questions my intent. She is not going to waste her time, if this is a jaunt into the hills without a serious question.

I explain that I am looking for the source of the Towy because I want to find the way that it enters the world, and as I do so, I hope to experience its energies as it emerges and see if there is any intimation of the power that develops as it takes its course. It is a somatic undertaking. I tell her that I am wondering if the water I will encounter will be carrying in it the memories of its ancient life, the earliest times, the earliest people and wildlife and whether I will be able to sense this, make a connection with the lives that came before and better understand the power of the Cambrian mountains and the water that flows from it. I wonder, too, how the energies in the water relate to the sites that it touches as it moves through and beside them.

Clearly my answer is satisfactory, for she nods her head towards the passenger door and I climb in and we set off. She tells me that the site of this monastery was designed to mark an astronomical event on specific rare dates when the moon rises and the sun sets at the same time along the nave of the abbey, bringing together the animus and anima of the site and of those who worshipped there at that time. The association of mother with moon and father with sun predates Christianity and locals stubbornly continued this belief.

Olwyn is an archaeoastronomer and I am learning that she understands the numinous quality of the place and knows of the situations of standing stones, prehistoric monuments in the mountainous landscape around us.

The tarmac road disintegrates as we climb up into the mountains and the van lurches uncomfortably over the uneven dirt track. She has with her an old ordnance survey map marked with paths that no longer exist, and soon we have only an approximation of where we are. She knows the area well and knows where the Towy must surface. She pulls over at a place where the track offers a parking bay and we step out to look down over the edge towards the sea. She points out the site of Strata Florida below us and some Bronze Age cairns, which she interprets as sites of religious significance, part of the sacredness of the place. From this vantage point we can see across to the sea and mountains in the distance which she tells me are the peaks of Snowdonia.



We keep climbing, trying to follow the map, although we know that its reality is not what lies before us. We let go, peering ahead, choosing the tracks with the smallest rocks to travel over and, as we reach the top, it fades out to a flattened space between two black pools. She points out an area of stones that she believes are cairns that were built close to the source of the waters that will flow together to become the start of the Towy. She comes here often on her own, aware of the precarious nature of the land and yet driven to make the connection that only iterated visits can. She knows the land, as we might know another in an intimate relationship, and she breathes with it.

She clambers over a fence and starts walking towards the water and I struggle to follow, limping across the tussocks, only too well aware of the treachery of the marshy ground, finding my foot sinking into squelchy wetness if I rest my weight for any length of time. I have visions of a Lorna Doone scenario, where I sink up to my neck, struggle without her assistance because she has gone too far in front, and then I am gone, sucked below the surface, the mud and grass closing silently over my head.

Then as I rest uneasily by a small, scrubby tree, it all suddenly shifts and I can feel the whispers of winds around me, the presence of something more than this immediate time-bound moment. I can feel the presence of otherness and intuitively know that she is right. I can almost see the red deer coming to the water to drink, the horned stag bending his head to the black liquid. I can feel other animals around me, a bear and a fox, a mountain lion and I am sure that they were here before. She has gone on ahead deep in her own thoughts and journey, and she has done this knowingly, so that I will take my own direction, make my own discoveries, and connect with the spirit of the place, the genius loci as some might say.

I have arrived at the source of the Towy and am witness to the sacred moment of the arrival of its waters at the start of its journey, and mine.



Palimpsest

The door has long gone.
It used to fit into
the shape that is
the jawbone of a whale,
now framing
fields encircled by

mountains, where
river waters rise
as childlike streams,
all the excited skips
of anticipation,

cutting a brook's
route beside the place
where friars prayed,
a Welsh eagle diving
to capture a vole.

How little did the door
hold back when it was there?
Children screamed as they
were torn from
their motherland's lap,
from ancient lullabies.

“Cariad”,
in a pain-racked whisper.
Bonfires of books.
A heavy fog
of lost futures
obscures the present.

Wood rotted and crumbled,
stone walls fell away.
Ghosts of the dear
departed now in
'hedd perfffaith hedd'
peace perfect peace,

neat lines on polished granite.
There is an unbroken
stillness, 'llonyddwch'.
Freedom has no threshold
in these rustling pastures.

At Strata Florida - the setting sun shining in through the west end door on March 10th 2014, which because of an adjustment to the calendar in the 18th century is in the same position as it was on March 1st, St David's Day, in the 12th century. In 1184 the year the abbey church was founded.

This sunset happened as the full moon rose and it seems that the nave was aligned accordingly with the male /solar energy penetrating the nave (as it still does) and the female/lunar hovering above the place of the altar.

The abbey itself lies on an alignment between ancient prehistoric sites, some of which are visible on the skyline and this runs NW-SE, in the direction of midsummer sunset and midwinter sunrise.^{vii}



Holy Grail

Cup made from wych elm, heals the sick, the holy grail? Kept at Strata Florida, taken to Nanteos mansion (nightingale spring) by a group of friars. Sacred land. White friars. Rhys ap Gruffydd - leader, Dafydd ap Gwilym – bard

Following the tracks of his hero, the Welsh leader, Rhys ap Gruffydd, he has made the decision to visit Strata Florida, believing that he, too, is a chosen one, destined to exert power and influence that will extend through Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and beyond to Cardiff, striking down the arrogant English. A long-awaited revenge for his country. Glowing with the sense of infallibility from his recent promotion to senior management, he feels that he can do anything he wishes. He has arranged to meet her here, because they can feel free from discovery, far enough away from the office and her friends.

He feels a tingle of anticipation, imagining her beneath his hands, caressing her supple flesh, hands on the curve of her waist, smelling her hair and hearing her soft giggle, the sound that captured him at the exhibition a year ago, her exhibition. He loves that she dresses with such sweet style, that she has such beautiful long fingers. He likes that she is so spontaneous, her captivating smile, how she is so relaxed and charms people. He feels that he can have whatever he wants now she has moved into his life. She will leave her partner and he will leave his wife and their new life together is at his fingertips. She is everything he has dreamt of, wished for, needs.

He has chosen the site where Dafydd ap Gwilym is buried. A man after his own heart, an adventurer, who had a long-term affair with a married woman. He enjoys the thought of sex in the woodland at the edge of the monastery fields.

*Digrif fu, fun, un ennyd
Dwyn dan un bedwlwyn ein byd.
Cydlwynach, difyrrach fu,
Coed olochwyd, cydlechu,
Cydfyhwan marian môr,
Cydaros mewn coed oror,
Cydblannu bedw, gwaith dedwydd,
Cydblethu gweddeiddblu gwýdd.
Cydadrodd serch â'r ferch fain,
Cydedrych caeau didrain.*

It was sweet, my love, a while
To live our life beneath the grove of birch,
More sweet was it fondly to embrace
Together hid in our woodland retreat,
Together to be wandering on the ocean's shore,
Together lingering by the forest's edge,
Together to plant birches – task of joy –
Together weave fair plumage of the trees,
Together talk of love with my slim girl,
Together gaze on solitary fields.

He is on the road towards Pontrhydfendigaid. Not far now. He meets the bend where his colleague crashed six months ago, an ending that he feels safe from; for he is touching the stars these days. Nonetheless, he slows down. Thoughts about this morning's team meeting rise; he analyses the conversation, the meanings below the surface, who is to be trusted. Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. His daughter on the phone last night, "Dad, I can't believe you couldn't come to my play tonight. Why do you always have to work?" He feels the guilt rise like bile in his throat and remembers last night's pleasure with Eleri. Oh, Eleri, what a glorious Welsh name. Irresistible woman. Playing with each other in his office, half listening for the cleaner. An edge on the excitement. He couldn't be sure he liked it. It seemed to increase the pleasure for her.

He turns right onto the road that takes him there and chooses Vivaldi's exquisite Winter as he approaches the site, feeling elation and the pain of utter joy at the start of the piece.

*A chof fydd Forfudd f-eurferch,
A chyffro saith nawtro serch.*

and Morfudd my bright girl will be in mind,
and the thrill of all the escapades of love.

He pulls up beside the archway, all that remains of the abbey, and sits listening to the music, watching the sun on the mountains. The clouds move across the sky. As the music becomes slower and sadder, he feels his mood sink and uncertainties creep in.

He parks the car and looks around for hers. Not there. She is often late, so no worries. He checks his mobile. No signal. He will have to wait for her to arrive. Just sit in the car and wait for her. He's not good at this. One flaw in their relationship, is her lack of awareness of time, while he is always careful, timing all his activities, always precise. Until he met her, he was always where he said he'd be when he said he'd be there. He plays his daughter's message again, "Dad, I can't believe you didn't come." He stops there. Not good to dwell on it.

He wants her to arrive now and pull up in her ridiculous Daihatsu. He prefers his classier Audi, except she told him recently that it was a sales rep's car. He is looking forward to the surge of emotion that he gets when he sees her for the first time in the day, the thrill that is usually followed by the wish he could touch her in front of all of them in the office.

They have an agreement. They will both make their separations in the same week, and he has already been searching for flats where they can start together. He wishes she would look at the details, always too busy, and then giving him the look that melts him. He loves the comfort she gives him after he emerges from a fierce tussle in the management meetings. He always seeks her out, 'happens' to meet her in a café and the moment she turns towards him with the glisten of her smile, it works on him. When she places a hand on his arm, he can feel her warmth through the fabric of his jacket and he feels complete.

He barely thinks about the effect of his leaving on his wife. It is as if she were living on the other side of the world and nothing of her can reach him, he is as remote and peaceful as Strata Florida. She's a tough nut, she will have her family to help her. He has to be true to himself and with Eleri by his side, he will be the hardest negotiator out. When the dogs turn on each other at the order of the CEO, he will shred the others with swift clever answers.

Where is she? He recalls how she looks towards him in private moments when others have briefly turned away and he tingles with joy that she is his.

He watches a funeral car pull up beside the wall of the churchyard and notices a tall copper beech, purple leaves shining in the sunlight by the chapel entrance. The time is getting on and he has to get back by five for an evening meeting – the others will all be there, on edge, keen to impress.

He wonders if she has really given herself fully to him yet. If she would just arrive. They unload the coffin and begin to carry it towards the church, sombre and black-coated, the end of a life. And how did it end? He feels a state of completeness here, and it would be with just her and him. Briefly, he breathes deeply and savours the peace in the air around him.

The wait has gone on long enough and he really has to return to work.

He drives unwillingly away from this piece of heaven and as he does so, his phone pings and vibrates. A voicemail. From Eleri.

Twm Sion Cati

Following the river through the hills and to Rhandirmwyn. Taking the tarmac road by the side. The silence as the water gathers in a black mass behind the concrete dam and the release of only a trickle, tipping hundreds of feet down the sheer straight man-made slope to the land below, flowing on to rockier terrain. The awe-fulness of the dam – holding energy back. From the dam - letting it out in controlled bursts.

The liquid notes of the moving brook by the edge of the land and bird song from the sanctuary.

I hear his laughter first, then see a movement up the slope above the river. He climbs between the two rock faces, out of his cave, skirts the boulders around the small entrance and runs down to the river. When he comes down he is near enough to see, brown curly hair below his ears, weather-burnt face and the twitch of a smile at the corners of his mouth - partly sly, part mischief; it's as if he knows I am watching him. He splashes his face, looks around, over his shoulder and listens carefully before climbing back up skilfully over the rocks.

I want to follow him, to feel his recklessness. I want to cross the cold river, feet placed carefully on the stones, not sliding, feeling the push of the flow downstream and then climb out onto the land on the other side, having traversed the boundary of the clear water. Entering the otherlands. In my mind I am pushing forward and upwards, negotiating terrain, slipping on moss, grabbing a bare branch to pull myself higher, moving up towards the red kites flying above me. Feeling his pull, chasing the dream of him, to find myself as one of the band.

Robin Hood games of reparation calling us, Bonnie and Clyde recklessness. Taking the horse from the fat self-satisfied farmer and riding across the moors of Cambrian mountain confusions. Galloping to find the shelter of stone-walled, tin-roofed cabin, building a wet-log fire, filling the room with smoke, coughing and laughing. The sense of being an avenger gives me purpose, strength in movement, setting aright a world that isn't fair.

Then I am back again on the road beside the river in my VW camper, dreaming of lines that take me across continents, to find Uluru and its sanctity known to an ancient people. Touching the songs and secret knowledge of history.

**A Portrait of the Bard as a Young Man –
a Triptych**

Mother, Twm Shôn Catti, girlfriend

*The day he was born
My life stopped.*

*My old steed dropped dead last night;
maybe I drove him too hard,
crossing the mountains.*

*He always thought for himself,
Strong in mind and body.*

*I love his twinkling eyes,
his thick, curving eyelashes,
his long fingers,
The thought of the warm bed with
Gwenllian pulled me forward,*

*I fell into my baby the first time
I held him in my arms and
we became two travelling together always.*

*I could see me throwing
the stone against her shutters,
The way he climbs up to me
And grasps me like
A drowning man.*

*Never a wife, only a mother,
And I am his bookend.*

*Then she opened up
The gold light from her bedroom
And I shimmied up over
the stones of the wall,
Clambered over the sill;
I love the way he calls out “Gwenni”,
then murmurs my name
softly into the blanket
until he sleeps twined round me.*

*Twm is his own,
Shôn after his father
John Wynne of Gwydir
Catti, his gift from me –*

I know my 'Da would rather him,
the gentry's bastard,
than squire Graspacre.

This morning I chose
a broad-backed grey gelding,
taking his horse and his daughter
in one night and day.

I love the way he brings me
St David's Day daffodils he's found
- my adventurer -
not vagabond.

Tregaron mart days'
Dread for me,
"He's going to end up that one
On the end of a rope."

Silver and I cantered in
my hermit direction.
I slip through the V crack
of two rammed boulders.

I know the whispers,
That he's had others.

I am the favourite
Schoolmistress and weaver,
Catti of Llydiard y Fynnon
Remembering my mam
whenever I fell,
hands under my armpits
raising me back up with
words of confidence.

I don't want to hear that small fear
That gnaws at me,
To be left alone
With unborn life that kills
and white roses grow
in the ground above me.

I can do anything,
Singing my tunes to the stars.

He hasn't left me behind,
For I roam uncensored with him,
Both watching
A buzzard circling above



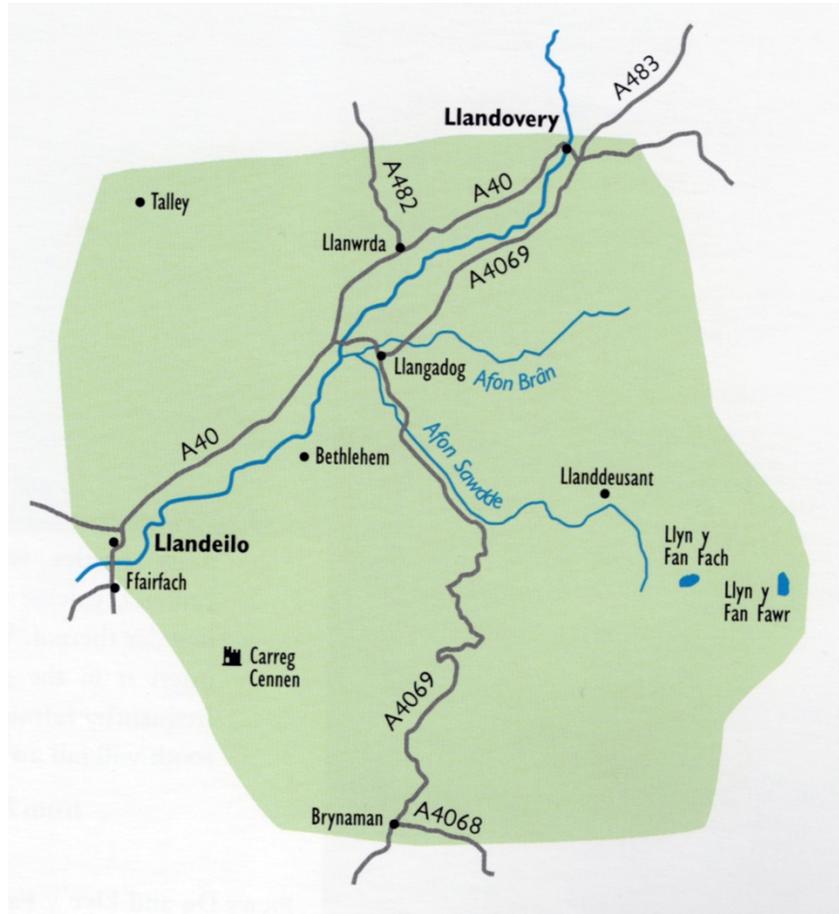
Sally

A vibrant silence
Trembles through the air,
Catching the pain
At her fingertips,
Drawing her closer
To touch feathered bark.

Mildewed form crumbles
Beneath her feet,
Shrinking into dust,
Merging with the thick earth.

A lifeless limb
Points towards the sky,
Her thoughts are flags pinned
Along the empty branch,
Hopes of survival
From the ruins of war.

Llandovery to Talley Abbey



Intermezzo

Naked branch posture
Freeze Saturday Night Fever
Stark stabs on skyline

I drive from the Cambrian mountains towards the bold, black A40; the Brecons, purple in the distance, watch my movement. Dark, silent witnesses. Red kites hover in the cloud-flecked sky, waiting their moment to drop, to invade life, spike it, and rise again triumphant. I know that I don't have much time before Christmas and am aware of the need to meet the demands of family, to connect with all my past generations and feel how I am the meeting point of so many histories in the different blood lines that flow within me. Aware even more of all that my children have woven within them from their life with me, how much I can't repair. We can only unravel what we hold in the moment now and knitting it together again takes us flowing forward into the future.

I arrive at Llandovery / Llanymyddfri, an ancient market town, where drovers found an inn to rest on their journey; that runs only the length of one narrow road, along which vehicles travel, going from mid to south Wales. I park, stepping from the car onto land that is as hard as any concrete; yet I have the feeling that just the particular twitch of a finger will see it all disappear, leaving piles of dust as the only evidence. As I stand and observe, I hear Welsh is the language that they are speaking. A muddy vintage Land Rover passes with sheep and sheep dog in the back. Shoppers are dressed in jeans, walking boots and jumpers.

I can feel that the activity of centuries is being repeated around me.

The town seems to be wedged into a separation, a fixed point of time, in a bubble of Welshness. Although we all know that time is relative, this is the antithesis of that fluidity. I have entered a place that grabs onto things and holds them in a tight grasp.

Llandovery College has sat since 1847 centrally on the junction of the roads that run around one end of the town to Carmarthen, to Swansea to Brecon, to Builth Wells, to North and South and West Wales and even on to the border with England. I can see through the cast-iron gates to the coloured lights on the imposing Christmas tree in the grounds by the chapel, which have been switched on in the gloom of the wintry afternoon and add to the presence of the estate behind the high stone walls.

The West End Café has looked like this since the 1950's, formica-topped tables in pastel colours, photos of the town on the walls, bacon sandwiches with cups of tea, Welsh cakes, bara brith, customers in leathers and motorbikes stacked outside, up to fifty at a time. It is the place for travellers on two wheels. Warming in winter or to cool down on dusty hot summer days.

There is a baker's, a bank, a shop selling hippy clothes, secondhand clothes and furniture, an estate agent, pubs and several other places to eat, including an Indian, a Chinese and a Fish and Chip shop.

They are on the main road that leads to Brecon and beside the car park, next to which is a mound, where the ruins of the castle stand and a stainless steel monument to Llywelyn ap Gruffydd Fychan. He was executed here six hundred years ago by a Tudor king, Henry IV. His ending and his commemoration are held as a cause for anger by some who choose to look back over their shoulders and who assert their roots and oppression as a reason for that anger.

I have heard that the current Prince of Wales owns a farm between here and the village of Myddfai, where the skilled physicians used herbs to heal. Looking from the town towards

that village, I take a moment to consider levels of therapeutic intervention, from talking therapies, acupuncture, homeopathy, osteopathy, as opposed to allopathic medicines.

My eyes are drawn to the mountains behind the town and I feel the solidity of their rock, which seems to place their feet in the town. This place offers an unmoving state, an alternative to the speed and change that rushes almost everywhere else. Here is the place for stability, and to take stock from the land. The stillness from which I can light a candle and summon the light again.

Mother's End

I'm so tired, but I have to keep going. So much to do here. But I will have to set off for Birmingham today and go check up on her. See if she really has bought food and cooked it and is eating it, or if the confusion has made her do nothing and she's just making it up. I just wish she would hurry up and die. I'm fed up of travelling all the time without a break, no time to sort affairs out here at home. It's no wonder I've come down with such a bad cold. My throat's killing me.

I can't forgive her for how she didn't look after my father. I can't forget all those miserable Christmases when she wouldn't light the fire and said I didn't deserve to have a Christmas dinner. The way she told my sister she was useless.

Damn that phone. Is it an order this late in the day? No chance of filling that and getting off to Birmingham and back before Christmas day.

'Hello Mr Stevens? I'm Judy Miller the hospital social worker at Birmingham City Hospital. Your mother had a bad fall this morning and she's being kept on one of the wards now. We are concerned about her state of mind. Are you aware of any issues?'

'Yes, well, she hasn't been right for a while and point blank refuses to go to the doctor. What can you do? I know she's not right, but she won't have any of it and I can't afford for her to go into a home; I'm too far away to look after her myself. I do keep visiting to check up on her, but it's too far to be there more than once a month. My sister is nearer, but she doesn't like her and won't have any truck with her kids.'

'We are rather concerned about her and she keeps asking for you. How soon can you come up?'

'I was planning on coming this evening any way. It's not an easy drive you know. Being a Friday, I like to wait until after the rush hour. No point getting caught up in traffic.'

'She is certainly weak and seems pretty shocked by the fall. It would help if you could come earlier. She keeps asking for you. I could see you tomorrow morning to discuss her care plan.'

'I can't come earlier. I have business to sort. There are people here who need me. How much will this care plan cost?'

'It depends Mr Stevens on what she needs. I have undertaken an initial assessment, I don't think she's well enough to stay in her own home unless she has a full-time carer.'

'Well I can't afford that and you can't ask me to give up my work. I'm needed here. She'll just have to wait. I've got a bad sore throat and cold. I wouldn't want her to catch it. I might have it leave it until tomorrow. Give it a chance to clear.'

'I must advise you that you need to come. Preferably today. We need to make assessments with your input and she really is unwell.'

'I'll let you know.'

That was a small typhoon. The sun has gone behind the clouds. My armoire, my antique clocks, my Buddha – don't let them be ruined. My room seems to have gone darker. I need to get out, go down the High Street, turn right and over the bridge, stop to look at the water running away. Then keep walking until I'm in the mountains. Just a few miles up the road. Enough to feel the wind and watch the stream for a bit. Get a bit of exercise. I need this before I have to face the cold woman. She doesn't need me. She never did make any sense.

The point of origins

She lived in this large Victorian house
The centenarian grandmother
Her home from when she was a young child
Heated only by her open fire stove
Her life's tale in a hundred almanacs
Keeping the laughter, none of the tears

The war brought her losses and many tears,
No father, but a women-filled house.
Austerity filled those years' almanacs,
Taught endurance by her own grandmother,
Keeping the fire burning in their home's stove;
Told her she was the responsible child.

Which was her favourite almanac?^[LSEP]
Was it in one of the years as a child?^[LSEP]
Or latterly as a grandmother?^[LSEP]
Was it the time with the fewest tears?^[LSEP]
Or when folks said they had the grandest house?^[LSEP]
Was it the times they cwtched up to the stove?

The importance of warmth from the stove,^[LSEP]
Memories organized by almanac,^[LSEP]
Safety and space provided by the house,^[LSEP]
Here everything she gained as a child,^[LSEP]
Comfort and solace to mop up the tears,^[LSEP]
All this again when she would be a mother.

To her surprise she became grandmother,^[LSEP]
Clinging to the warmth of the stove,^[LSEP]
Choosing to disregard her own tears
Beside a pile of dusty almanacs,^[LSEP]
Hearing the happy whispers of a child,^[LSEP]
Through the empty rooms of the house.

She learned how life is paid for in tears,
Knew which she preferred of the almanacs,
Was grateful to have been a grandmother,
Knowing family life centres around the stove.^[LSEP]
Would have liked to start life over again
Still living in the home that is this house.

The grandmother's life measured by almanacs?
Not life by the stove, comforting the child,
Drying her tears, love warming the house?

Moments in a life

A step on the stair
The sound of the footfall
Touches her lightly,
Reminding her of past lives.

Time when she skipped
Clutching a posy of daisies,
A lightly poised toe
Practised in ballet class.

Time when her heel kicked
The door shut with a clatter,
A solid black boot and
Kohl-rimmed eyes.

Time when she temptingly
Crossed one leg over another,
Her stiletto shoe dangled,
Waving a call of seduction.

Time when she chose
Delicate crystal slippers,
Petite steps glittering on the path
To domestic commitment.

Time now when all's said and done,
When she listens only for quiet,
Hoping the ghosts leave her,
Both feet planted squarely on hard ground.

Pamela

The day we wed
my mother
stood at the front door and said
“You’ve made your choice.
You’ve made your bed.
Now lie in it.”

Peter, my artist, travelled to London
illustrating record sleeves,
while I trained as an SRN
at Middlesex Hospital
and waited for babies to come.

On paydays we caught the bus
to Marble Arch for brunch
at Lyon’s Corner House restaurant
and watched Ivy Benson’s band.

But babies were not to be.

I met John
and married him
five days after he asked me,
for a different life altogether.
I didn’t understand the language.
I couldn’t even speak the place names.

Now I am eighty and more years,
I hear the ghost of
his deep voice and his laughter
echoing along the corridor.

And I have just a sister
who is my only family,
who has cancer,
and I can’t get back to Kent.

Wintry storms

It's hard to see beyond the gloom of the shadowed townhouse, winter coated, closed in, closed up, clinging on to warmth, taut hands, tense, tight nails, grasping after currents of warm air as they escape, climbing between the window cracks out to freedom, to the melee of cold breezes. Dim lights flickering with the breathy howl of the ice meister, as he attacks the corners, the corridors, rattling the doors, trying to break in and break down. The middle-of-the-road middle-class radio conversation in another room entertaining and including the table and chairs, a solitary ticking clock, an audience of kitchen furniture.

Leaving behind the humdrum, unrecognised comforts of neatly piled orderly existence, I step with decision outside, look up beyond the rooftops feeling the hurricane of other lives swooshing round the corner, attacking my knees, tugging my coat, shoving my thoughts flattened against the wall. I see a kamikaze crow flapping like a black rag, tossed over the chimney, beyond my eyeline.

Rain stinging the daycare mind, battering the support thinking, drenching hope and heartfelt highs, exposing the barren lows like the skeletons of galleons, ribs protruding through the white wave-beaten sands in an almond shaped memory.

Snowfall

I long for the snow
A thick icing layer over
The sharp-edged town
Muffling raw nerves and sounds
Street lights in the stasis
Twinkling tangerine sparkles
The halt to the warfare
Of daily commerce
A briefly revived virginity
The purity of a bridal gown
Rustling in sweet anticipation

Crossing the Veil at Winter Solstice

The grey day folded quietly into blackness. The harsh cry of a last crow leaving the scene as the pewter light soaked away, the trees stilled rigid in the cutting night air, and a full moon emerged like a silver penny.

A single owl watched from a high branch, searching for movements. Dried leaves were scattered over the ground, frozen in death into forms that resembled small rodents. One hapless mouse, scurrying through, tweaked the edge of one, causing it to shake. Without warning, the owl swooped. Her sharp talons seized it, then she gulped it down and, with a flick of her wings, vanished into the woods.

At the foot of the slope, the outline of the mansion's towers against the shifting clouds and the square-blocked solidity of the house held the space. The ground floor windows were blanked with wooden shutters; on the floors above some were vacant open eyes, while others were fringed by curtains - bedrooms still in use.

Lottie checked the flowering Christmas cactus placed on the chest of drawers and shifted it marginally to the left, rotating the base until it looked right. She walked over to the curtains and pulled on one, dragging it a little to the centre, ensuring that no light could break through. Earlier she had tried leaving the window open to the moonlight but found that her eyes were drawn constantly to its cool brightness, seeking the outlines of the bare trees edging the land, noting how they had succumbed to winter's impassiveness. For tonight's ritual to work, she needed to focus her energy on the mirror before her, so had decided to limit her view to the walls of the small room around her. She blew out the flames on the candelabra and had to feel her way across the room, sensing the darkness, soft like velvet against her skin. She found the single candle holder and worked her hand round it until she had clasped it firm. With a practised movement, she struck a spark with the other hand and took it to the candle, a solid round chubby form, that flared up and burned with a reliable flame.

She pulled the wooden straight-backed chair up to the dressing table and rested one leg on the small stool. A finely embroidered cushion in the small of her back would stop the rungs on the back of the chair from pressing uncomfortably into her. From her seat she checked the room, noting the pale striped wallpaper, the shadowed engraving of the Black Mountains, the blue flowerpot holding the plant whose hanging branches are covered in pink and red flowers, a symbol of faith and hope and her mother's favourite colours.

She had polished the furniture carefully earlier today, not permitting the servants to help, considering that this was necessary personal preparation for the evening, wiping away any dust that marred the surfaces. The mahogany glowed a deep warm brown, reflecting the quivering light of the candle. There was comfort in the known.

She moved the candle to its position between her and the mirror that rested before her. The ornate golden frame glowed and she traced the shapes carved into it with her finger, smiling at the feel, the roundness of bird forms, the sharper edges of petals, curves within the rectangular whole and then moved her fingers across to the skull, enjoying its smoothness, the apertures, the dips. She slid open the little drawer set in the middle of the front of the table and took out a brush and began to work on her hair, counting up to a hundred. As she observed her breathing, she kept her eyes on the mirror, letting the image blur, waiting for another face to look back at her. Wishing she could hear her mother's voice and feel her

arms wrapping around her shoulders. Anything would do, anything that made it feel like her mother was here with her.



My past is sitting at the table in front of me

Who is the wizard?
Who is the dragon?

Last time we sat opposed,
You drinking your coffee
I choking on my flapjack
And you wanted me to believe
It would all be good
And you wanted to believe
Your journey would take you from failures.

Who is the wizard?
Who is the dragon?

Lunch at the café in Llandovery

I am the chaffinch flying repeatedly
into the transparent glass
that seals you and her
in the room where she
pricks out the eyes of a doll,
while humming a pop melody,
snipping asunder
the ties that bind.

I fear it when you touch
the precarious heights
of optimism
while we rock together
counting scavenging crows,
singing one for sorrow
and seven for secrets
we can't bear to share.

Janet

No I don't feel alone,
Missing my sister
Playing the Steinway piano,
Defined by lime-washed walls,
Eyes grabbing purple mountains
On the edge of the sky.

The smell of lavender oil,
Sweeping the carpet,
Keeping the Steiner rules
With faceless dolls,

I never think of you
Healing me carefully
With small sugar buds
Of aconite and arnica,
Misshapen apples gathered
Barefoot from the orchard.

Sonatas on the clarinet
Moving under pastel shawls
Bending the lines
Rubbing polished wood lintels.

I don't hear the whispers
Travelling on the wind,
Folding linen napkins together,
Ecover suds in the china sink
Sinking soapily into the land.

Mother of the Physicians of Myddfai

We found our way via Llangadog
and Llanddeusant to the base
of the mountain track,
following satellite guidance
to Llyn y Fan Fach.
The greyness cleared
and sun lit our track.

She came down from the mountains' edge,
from her black glacial lake,
when there was ice in the rain,
to the unsuspecting lone farmer
who nested in the cwm.

In his loam-loaded boots
he draped garlands on the tree,
gathered mistletoe for the entrance,
hung a dark holly wreath on the door
and whispered sadly to his cattle.

She gave him her certainty,
a hot roast dinner -
apple tart and custard -
and a tankard of beer,
and he claimed a warm hearth.

In the story she makes sure
that he knows
there is only one condition -
If he hits her three times
(there can be no excuse)
she will return to her lake.

They had three boys.
She loved being a mother,
seeing them tumble around,
a bundle of puppies.
She taught them all she knew.

The farmer thought he knew
what he had and
how it worked
because it was smooth
like a knife through soft butter.

When it happened
she could not look again at him;
gulped in her sons
as if she were drowning
and turned to the door.

We survey the ridges and
slashed green velvet
of the mountains
and the dark clarity of the lake.
Knowing her now we return,
uncertain steps on uneven path.



Never for ever

She had been running away from her fame when she came to West Wales. She had hoped to hide in the fields, lost on the dusty, weed-cracked roads that run down into no more than tracks across wilderness mountains. She lived in obscurity with a remote farmer for as long as she could, flinching at the shadows caught at the corner of her eyes. Only at night did the restlessness surface, as, sleepless, she counted Evil Knievel motorbikes leaping across red-rock gorges.

Talley Abbey

I met a monk dressed in white here, beer-belly-rounded, but no happier for it. There was a nun in white too. Rhys ap Gruffydd founded it.

Premonstretansians. The mass to the Virgin Mary, acknowledging the female deity energy as much as the male.

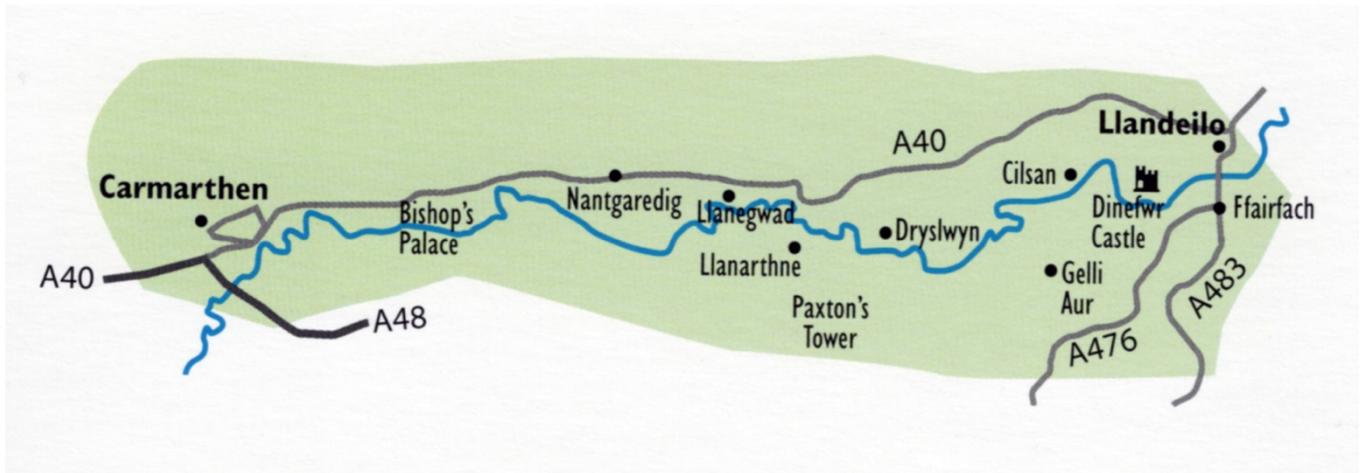
The people of tipi valley, sheltering in Cwm Du, the dark/black valley. The cushion of family wealth always in the background, they are playing at anarchy / rebellion. Festivals and camping and money to pay for 'healthy retreats', returning home to wash and sleep and eat, buy quilted sleeping bags, new puffed jackets when the rain gets too much. Mothers always the rescuers.

The village hall - birthday – women gathering, painted glass jars holders for candles, a circle of white flowers of wild garlic, glass jar vases with bluebells, a fruit cake covered with burning candles, dhal and nan bread, barefoot, long braided hair and a white cotton dress touching her toes, sweet scent of nag champa incense floods the air, guitars and hand drums and singing her celebration, an edge of cannabis smoke to the air, sitting cross-legged, tenderly stroking the back of her hands, ball games, love and peace and revolution in living differently, stepping away from the system and coming off grid. Talking about the men as adventurers.

Love in all its forms, mother, sister, partner. Knowledge through intuition, feeling the answers, being connected

Watching the waters, sewin breaking the surface with ripples, hunger satiated through breathing the place in through my pores

Llandeilo to Abergwili



Transposition

A shy white crocus
Whispers Imbolc's arrival
A new flame shivers

Llandeilo is at the head of a large, wide, fertile valley, through which the Towy winds to Carmarthen town. It is a beautiful sight on a misty morning. When the snows melt on the Brecon Beacons and the ground thaws, the water invades the land here, and cattle have to retreat to higher ground.



When I arrive here, I can feel the winter receding and a tension of innocent excitement that there could be other possibilities to discover, the playful energy of the swan maiden. This is the area of wealthy farmers, spiritual seekers and, more recently, media types. Llandeilo is a commercial centre and reeks of the affluence of centuries; from the road that comes from Swansea and the old mining town of Ammanford and over the classical arched bridge that spans the Towy, to the wide roads that start here and separate, one leading to Llandovery, the other to Carmarthen. And, too, there is a hippy commune at Tipi Valley, a Mandala Yoga ashram and a Padmasambhava Buddhist centre.

The mansion and park at Dinefwr is now owned and run by the National Trust. My journey changes and I stay here for a while, learning to know the place through repeated visits, which give me a familiarity with regular faces, beginning to know spaces that tell me more. I grow from the sense of temporary belonging.

The road runs past Aberglasney, a history that has signs of Roman connection, Medieval cobbles, Elizabethan cloister garden and a mansion that was recently restored. I am surrounded by the cultivated gardens and the culture of centuries of occupation.

Further along the road, at Nantgaredig, I become acquainted with a small, private swimming pool, which feels to me to offer a womb-like experience and often I have the water to myself, floating in a richness of quiet isolation. Sometimes there is something about it that speaks to me of Wales, not just because most of the swimmers speak Welsh. It is secluded, molded into the side of a hill, between fields and sheep and never busy. It seems shy but isn't. It is reserved and does not open itself to visitors, preferring to select those who can attend. From

inside, the swimmer looks out to the sky and trees and the sun dapples the undulating waters. I am protected here by the exclusion of all that connects me to anxiety.

Then on to Abergwili, the last village before Carmarthen.

From this stage of the river much more is possible than might be conceived of: the first signs of new growth arise, with a richness and variety of potential.

The sin eater

Three hundred years ago,
Beside the broad and confident river
Laced with sewin,
From the solid nobleman's town
A belief threads through the verdant fields,
A dirty corpse is being prepared.

Today, at the alternative therapy centre,
The owl-feathered shaman prepares
To offer talking space
Where she absorbs and absolves
The troubled mind for closure,
To reconnect the broken filaments.

Transgressions consumed
Through bread and wine and salt
and all recorded on the bark
of Brigid's silver birch.

After the loss of her child

A tree felled by the stormwind,
Roots wrenched from terrain into plain air,
Held at one edge to the land.
The underground system upright,
The sky-tickling bare twigs now lying
Like an upended woodlouse.

The height of a house along a length of mud,
Homeless millipedes, beetles exposed,
No longer attached to the murky, damp sludge
That cradles them in their burrowing,
But all cut by harsh breeze and daylight,
Connections with nourishment and
Balance torn away.

She stretches her trunk against solid earth,
Longing to feel still the stimulation of
Blackbirds resting among rustling branches,
Their counterpoint trills joyously vibrating.
No longer the guardian holding their lives,
Her place in the forest has become
A gap in the treeline, empty space.

Yet she
Is granted a moment:
Leaves growing greenness
On branches that lie sideways

Peace and Pleasure at Dinefwr

From the Deheubarth seat,
The woody valleys warm and low,
I view the distant summits
Windy, wild and high,
Purpled by the colours of the air.

From those far-off heights
How close and small the hedges lie,
The old castle rising from a hillside edge,
The Towy coursing far below,
Through woods and meads, in shade and sun.

My life's course has flowed along here,
Past pleasant seat, past ruined tower,
Over naked rock, through shady bower,
Past town and village, dome and farm,
Like pearls upon an Ethiop's arm.

Yet here in constant Dinefwr's folds
Are riches greater than any jewels.
The yellow beech, the sable yew,
The sturdy oak, with broad-spread boughs,
The site of the raven's bleak abode.

Now I recall ravening workday hours,
The pains of craven manipulations,
How the business driven beat the air,
While misers gather wealth and care,
And then release a soft, dismissing sigh.^{viii}

Raven

When I lived in
the little house
with gothic windows
and entered the underworld
through the yew
at the front door.

Like a cat the old man -
Will of Llanarthne -
brought me
the body of a raven
he had shot on his land
behind our cottages
on the hill with no road
but a hairpin track.

He told me
he could fashion
its bone for a whistle
as a gift for me
and I thought
I should call on the gods
for their forgiveness.

And I met Sarah
whose family carries
the lineage of
raven responsibility,
guardians of oaks
and sacred white cattle,
the power
behind the Tudor throne.

The thread
used not to bind,
not to entangle,
but to create
through jazz
and paintings
and light projections
giant-sized
onto mansion walls.

Rhys, called Rice
by English king Harry
led to an appointment
of Carmarthen's high sheriff who
dances in his velvet gaiters
to the tune of history
beneath the unblinking gaze
of supernatural knowledge.

The keeper of secrets
taught me about silence
and the importance
of lightness, skilful
play, airborne somersaults,
retrieval from deep dives,
the cleverness of artists.

The Stalker

A few months ago I made yet another visit to the Park – as always being drawn to it. On the one hand, in the park, it feels benevolent and revivifying. I'm not sure, I think I remember a guide saying that it was designed by Capability Brown, that guy who used all sorts of artificial effects to make a place look like a natural landscape. Artifice for aesthetics? An imitation that has the desired effect of soothing the soul or is it the innate energies in the land that generate that sort of feeling? Certainly, when I've been wandering along its paths, I've heard passers-by expressing similar emotions.

From the entrance at the gatehouse, I walk past the green uneven fields. I pass the Roman soldier still rambling lost around the fringes of his camp. He got drunk in Carmarthen and died of hypothermia as he stumbled back across country. I arrive at the house, through a long tunnel of trees, I'm unable to locate where the mountains are facing and where the town is. The experience is always the same. Disorientating. When I emerge from under the trees into the space around the house, I feel as if I have been pushed out into limbo, a safe hiatus, loving the wide skies and the solidity of the wood at the edge.

But the House is very different. The sensation of the existences of those who came here provoke reactions of distress and fear in the tourists. I am used to the sad butler, the child weeping on the stairs, the maid's frightened screams on the upper floor, the grey gentleman who walks through the wall by the converted canteen – and more. I am used to having unheard conversations.

I thought my visit this time would be for enjoyment; I came for the summer festival, to the music, the performers, to be part of the audience, letting my thoughts dance on the air and drift out to the distant purple mountains, soaking up the warmth of the sun, the buzz of conversations, gazing up at the blue sky and white clouds crossed by the occasional buzzard.

I went into the House to hear a recital. As I entered the room in one of the turrets, I smelled a whiff of hyacinths and felt a rush of energy up the back of my legs, traversing my back and coming to rest, prickling the back of my head. Ostensibly I ignored it and took my seat, but my heart was racing and I could feel an insistence like the threat of a thunderstorm pressing onto the light summer's day.

The violinist started to play Bach's Partita number 3. The thin pure notes vibrated through the small room, climbing over one another, skating into short, separate melodies. I could feel them slide through the glass, stretching across the space until they touched the tips of the leaves of nearby trees, gliding along branches, nestling into the comfort of solid trunks. I felt exposed to their beauty, recalling my grandmother who played this music when I was small, when it resonated through the strands of hair on the crown of my head, in my chest, tingling down through the soles of my feet. As always, I longed to feel again the security of her presence.

That day, though, as I reached out, I was caught firmly by a strong intent that would not let go. I was in that room in a different time. I slipped into her time and I could just make out a young woman with light-coloured hair in ringlets and lace trim flowing over her arms from the sleeves of an ankle-length full dress of rich material and then I saw that there was a shadow at her side on the dress which was growing darker and darker and that she was screaming in a high, hopeless way.

It begins as I am watching her running up the stairs, crying, "He's coming. He's coming. Shut the door. Why don't you shut the door?" Then the sound of heavy male feet following up the stairs behind her and she's trying to run faster, knowing that she can't. She runs into the little room, tries to shut the door, but it's no use against his strength. He pushes in. She knows she's cornered and trying desperately to find a way to stop him. She stands her ground at first. Consciously placing her feet apart in a man's stance, she tries to hold the wobble from her voice, "Just stop." This makes his face contract in greater fury and he looms intimidatingly over her. She cowers in silence, which enrages him more. Nothing now will halt his ferocious attack and no one follows them. She glances desperately towards the door, but hears nothing.

Then she cries out as the first blow is launched. He has pulled his sword and begins with small strokes, cutting away at the folds of her dress and then the cuts gain in fury and she is screaming as he rams the sword through her, each stab cutting through her heavy embroidered bodice, through the whalebone, through her, the sound of the metal slicing her flesh, the heat of his anger, her blood pouring from her side and the unbearable pain mixed with fear. She sinks to the floor, her hand unable to staunch the flow, slipping into the void.

I am she, Lady Cavendish.

I had met him at a ball, had granted him a dance, just as I would any acquaintance, then thought no more about him. There was nothing about him that stirred me. I was not looking for a suitor just then, being certain that the man I would marry was in London.

It surprised me when I kept encountering him, even when I was out taking a stroll. I did wonder at so many coincidences. Then it began to unnerve me that when he greeted me, he would perform a very ornate bow and take my hand and kiss it. I felt uncomfortable that he was coming so close to me. I didn't like the way he gazed so intently into my eyes and I would always try to glance down before he could do so, suppressing a shiver.

One day I was in the drawing room at home, playing on our new pianoforte, when I happened to glance over my shoulder outside and saw him beside the shrubbery staring keenly into the room. My sister was sitting with her embroidery beside the fireplace; I tried to draw her attention without making a scene, but he had gone before she looked up.

I told my sister and my cousins, but they said I was being absurd and that I should be amused to have his interest. They laughed when I told them he was following me, that I couldn't go anywhere without him turning up, that he found any excuse to take my hand or to sidle up beside me. When I tried to ignore him once, he spoke to me in a half whisper, saying that my rudeness was unwarranted and I should think twice before making him angry. But no one else heard him and no one believed me.

One day he came to my house when my parents had gone out in the carriage with my sister to visit a possible suitor for her. They had left me, always their secondary consideration. I was in the drawing room, reading. I looked up and he was standing in the doorway. I am sure the colour must have drained from my face, my hand rushed to my breast and I could feel my heart thumping with the shock. He smiled and walked towards me, no explanation. I knew somehow that I had to play this carefully. He told me that he had come to take this opportune moment to talk about a possible future for me with him and that he would be visiting my father soon. I couldn't think quickly enough. I nodded, hoping that it would satisfy him. He took it as compliance on my part, saying that he was glad we were so like-minded; he turned on his heel and left the room.

I called the maid, grabbed a shawl and, realising that I would have to walk, set off for the Dinefwr. Walk? I couldn't. I ran. When I arrived there, I told my cousin Hywel what had just happened and he laughed. I asked him to give me shelter until my parents and sister returned. He could hardly refuse, so I sat with him in the Library and he called for tea. He offered me brandy for my nerves, I was shaking from head to toe. Just as I took the first sip, the doorbell was rung and I knew, just knew that he had followed me here. I looked to Hywel and said "it's him" and he looked incredulously at me. "How could it be?" I heard the butler walking to the door and, as he opened it, I could hear that voice, asking for me. "Is Lady Cavendish here? Somehow, she missed me. We should have come here together to share some good news." He hadn't believed me. He was here to assert himself over me.

I tried to slip out and run up the stairs, but he saw me and forced his way in. I ran and he followed me and Hywel did nothing. Hywel did not rescue me.

The music has finished. The others have left. I am alone in the room. There is nothing to do but leave.

But she hasn't gone, and as I walk to my car I can't shift her.

She drives down the driveway beside me, within me. I manoeuvre to avoid dogs walking with their owners and it's as if I am watching a scene on TV. I dig my fingernail into the palm of my hand and find that the pain is a distant thing, hardly noticeable.

I turn out onto the small town road, the tarmac hissing under my wheels and settle into what is usually an automatic process. I push myself back into my seat and extend my arms straight as I hold the wheel firmly; I am driving and saying to myself, "You are Caroline. Your favourite colour is blue. Your favourite book is..." and I can't remember what my favourite book is. The houses we pass look like flats in a film and I don't believe that anyone lives in them. I follow the signs to the M4.

In the brightness of the motorway services toilets, I look into the mirror and I have no idea who the person is that I'm looking at. I see a young, slim woman, shoulder-length blond hair, sweetheart-shaped face, her smooth skin the colour of a pale orchid and vacant eyes that tell me nothing.

Other women enter as I finish washing my hands, I smile blankly towards them as I exit, drying my hands on my skirt. You can't use the wall dryers, the air they blow out is full of filth, drawing up the air that they heat from the floor below. I have worked this out for

myself, but heard it confirmed by some scientist on Radio 4 during one of my journeys round the country.

Today has been no different from the usual that has become my usual. I don't think anyone has noticed, because I manage my act well, always seeming slightly high on imagination, mixed with a bubbly manner. I like living precariously, having a sensitivity that shows me things that others miss.

I think, though, that this last time I might have taken myself to an edge that I'm tipping over and I wonder if I should be grateful that my internal switch has turned off all sensation. This time it was too much. I know that once my favourite food was spaghetti and tomato sauce with a little parmesan, but now I don't care what I eat or if I eat, it all tastes of dust.

Walking back to my car, I realise I have no idea where I will go to once I'm back on the motorway. I should turn in the direction of home and the comforts of my town beside the wide river, yet I am drawn to the city, the noise and the normality of that adrenalin-driven commerce. I don't know now where I should go. Logic tells me that nowhere is safe. I'm driving and I'm not sure who is looking in the rearview mirror.

The Maid's Story

Wishing I couldn't see what I just saw.

Wishing I couldn't hear her soft terrified pleas, wishing I couldn't hear her screams as he attacked her, pummelling her sweet face until she makes no more sound, slashing into her like a butcher without compassion. As he slices into her, parts fall away, a red river covering her pretty little satin slippers, pulsing across the floor towards me. I wish I couldn't still see his exhilarated, orgasmic face.

I wish he didn't remember me, I wish that I had run quieter, I wish I had climbed sooner to the next floor and not seen her murder.

I'm looking for somewhere to hide, I'm running from doorway to doorway. I hear my feet pattering, my skirts rustling and I know he can hear them.

I pause, listening for his sounds, holding my breath, thinking what I can say so he won't attack me too.

I will go to the children's room. Everyone looks after children, loving their softness, their innocence. I can hide in their toy box. I climb in and pull the lid down. I remember my mam singing a soft song to me, cuddling me in her warm arms, all snug and safe.

Then I hear his feet thumping loud, fast and furious up the stairs and his gasping for breath as he runs. His steps along the corridor, his sweaty breathing, bubbles rattling in his throat. I feel his heat through the door. He flings it back, crack on the wall, rippling through the room. I hear his steps across the floor, feel his fingers whisper across the lid, standing over me, thinking. I blank my mind. I hold my breath. He won't know that I am here. I could have climbed the stairs to the roof. I could be hiding in the chest under the stairs.

Then he goes out; sounds of the door closing, the latch clattering into the frame and he descends the stairs.

Am I safe?

I wait a little while, wondering if he has gone to get anyone else, if the lord has grabbed him and shoved him out. But I hear nothing, just a silence.

I climb out cautiously and tiptoe across the floor, I must be safe to emerge from the room. But he's locked the door? It's too high to climb out of the window. I'm trapped. There's nothing I can do.

I think how the lord and his family must be driving him away, how they will come up and break open the door and embrace me, glad to have their maid safe. How I will be able to go home and sit in front of the fire with my mam and eat her cawl that has been bubbling on the fire, waiting for me.

Relief that the scenes in my mind will go away.

I hear sounds on the landing, strange bangs and muffled discussion, but nobody comes to let me out.

I sit patiently against the wall, waiting for someone to come and release me. Shaking with fear from time to time, watching the skeletons of tree branches fluttering in the wind, hearing the land breathing in soft waves. The grey light in the pale sky darkens and the blackness of night creeps in, monstrous shadows alternate with the velvet comfort of the dark stroking me gently.

Then careful steps on the stairs coming up and I don't know why it has taken so long. The door pushes open and in the candlelight I see their faces and I don't like how they look. They don't speak, they don't look into my eyes, they take my hands and I know now that they have betrayed me.

I twist and struggle, trying to break free from them. I want to run away as far and as fast as I can, but I can't shake them off me.

There's a rope hanging from the centre of the ceiling down between the stairs.
How could they? What did I do wrong? I did nothing wrong. Why would they do this? Why won't they stop?

But they don't.

No.

A shadow is cast across the landing, whispers along the corridor, seeping into the children's room.

Ghosts

Walter told me this morning over his kippers that we have a visitor arriving this afternoon. A gentleman from the Americas no less. Apparently he has traced his lineage back to Wales, a great grandfather. There is also some business connection and potential for Walter. I bite back a remark about lack of advance warning or consultation. Of course he only sees things from his point of view, which works very well for him, I suppose.

It will be good to have some new energy about the place. I hope he is tall and wide and rumbustious and fills this place with happy noise, because we need it. It will be nice if there is the liveliness of conversation and maybe the chance for some games and music.

As I rest my cup on my saucer, the clink of the china echoes in the room and I notice how very silent the house is. Walter has left the table, called the dogs and gone straight out to estate business. The servants are away at their chores and I am alone with the dust dancing in a faint ray of sun.

It has always been like this since we were married. I knew from the start that this would be our lifestyle. We live a full, busy life in London for much of the year, but the Park is always in the back of Walter's mind. It is like some kind of magnet. Even from that distance he is always checking with his estate manager, asking after the locals, making assurances that he always keeps. We come back for the summer, for Christmas and for spring at Easter time and our arrival here is always an event, seemingly a cause for celebrations. Our social lives are continually interrupted, although it is good to get away from chatter and London politics sometimes. I didn't mind it so much in the early years, but now that the children are grown, there isn't so much to be gained from the country pile.

I shall wear my favourite dress this afternoon, the mint green silk with white polka dots, the top is buttoned and short-sleeved and the skirt falls from the waist to just below my knees in pleats. It swings as I walk and also folds softly round me when I am seated. I can't imagine that I would ever tire of wearing it. Walter always says that it suits my figure. Boyish he says. And I am delighted that this is still so. I shall wear it with my brown heeled bar button shoes. Such a good pair for dancing. I wish that my hair would rest straight in a bob, but the curls are rebellious and won't be restrained. He has told me that I am lucky still to have such a lovely warm colour to my hair and that it glows with a deep red hue. I suspect that he flatters me but am grateful for that.

I check the drawing room; the fire is laid ready, the Welsh tapestry throws add plates of colour over the backs of the settle and chairs, the bone china tea service is set and waits just for the cakes on their stand and a plate of sandwiches. I will order Welsh cakes, bara brith and smoked sewin for the sandwiches. I am sure that the American will appreciate some of the local food.

There is plenty of time for me to take a short walk up to the ice house and to watch the buzzards wheeling above. Walter says it's good for my nerves, but what does he know. Returning, I soak in the warmth of the sun, taking slow, measured steps. The air hangs heavy with heat and our gorgeous roses are ponderous in full bloom.

Back in the house and to its constant coolness, I find the piano, firstly to play a Schubert sonata and then try out some new tunes. Ones that I heard while we were in London. Swing

is all the rage now. First it's My Melancholy Baby and then I cheer myself up with Love is the Sweetest Thing, which we heard Henry Hall and His Orchestra play. What a night that was. The last verse and I'm singing softly,

Love is the greatest thing
The oldest yet, the latest thing
I only hope that fate may bring
Love's story to you.

It doesn't feel long before the butler opens the door and admits our visitor. I am delighted that he is all I had hoped for. He is about our age, Walter said, yet he looks younger. He seems to enjoy the tea, but I doubt that it has satisfied his hunger. He's so keen to hear the history of this place, voracious even. Walter positively glows and tells him about the Deheubarth Princes, the ravens on our crest, the connections with King Arthur, the sacred pedigree of our white cattle. Our visitor is soon asking for a tour of the land and both men are gone in a whiff of conversation.

The day's warmth breaks and rain is pouring across the windows, hissing in the evening's fire. But we are not downhearted. I feel that the weather closing in has just made the house cosier. Later, after dinner, he brings down a small pile of gramophone records and I am delighted that he wants to share the music with us – jazz, ragtime and big band. We wind it up and soon jolly sounds of laughter and music and chatter fill the room. I wish it would last for months, not just an evening.

The next morning Walter has already left to visit his tenants when Jack comes down. We talk about the music and move to the piano; I share some of the swing songs that I know from London and he joins in singing them and then adds some of his own. My Melancholy Baby is the loveliest sound in his voice, almost as good as the recording that we have of Ella Fitzgerald:

Come to me, my melancholy baby
Cuddle up and don't be blue
All your fears are foolish fancy, maybe
You know, dear, that I'm in love with you.

Jack's family has a history of musicians and he likes Bach as much as the new sounds, he says. I cannot contain my glee that I have someone here who shares my love of music. The morning passes with speed and I wonder if Walter is slightly resentful at the obvious fun we have been having when he returns for lunch. He reminds me of the need to write to our son. I don't react, it's not helpful.

In the afternoon we two play snakes and ladders and that new game that's all the rage, Lexiko. Jack begins to tell me about his family history and his Welsh ancestry. He comes from a poor family that lived in Trelech. His great grandfather was a blacksmith, who left to find a new life for his family. I am excited to hear that Jack lives in New York now, where pavements are called sidewalks, there's the Statue of Liberty and skyscrapers. It sounds so busy, so full of life. Jack says that I should come and try it out some time. He came over on the Cunard's newest ocean liner, the Queen Mary and had dinner with the captain and dancing every evening. I want to try this so much that I am tingling and feeling stretched with longing.

Over dinner Walter leads the conversation. He drones on about the worries of maintaining the land in what he calls the new political climate. Then he starts talking about the trees here. He tells him about the oaks that are seven hundred years old and how his ancestor refused to let Henry the Eighth have any to build his ships. He tells him that his family has become the guardians of the oaks and that it is an ancient duty we have to preserve. I am surprised how much he is revealing about his lineage and this seat of power that they have occupied for centuries. Eventually, he takes him to the billiard room, from where I can hear the easy flow of male conversation, Jack's deep laughter and the clicking of balls as they knock. He makes an easy companion.

The third and last morning of his visit, Jack comes in for breakfast as comfortably as if he had always lived here. I look down at the teapot as I pour his tea, taking ridiculous care over the action. He talks about his plans for his return to London. I'm not sure I hear him right, when he says "You should come down to London and I'll take you for tea at the Savoy. I hear they have tea dances there. You'd fit in real well."

Instead, I suggest a walk to the ice house. I want to share the neatness of this place with him and he seems to understand why it pleases me so. He stands under the trees at the edge of the woods and scans the sky. I watch him watching the ravens. The ravens of our coat of arms

I want to say, "Jack please don't leave me. I feel so alive with you. Stay and sing songs, dance the rest of your life away here with me." Instead I'm humming, words playing in my head:

Love is the sweetest thing
What else on earth could ever bring
Such happiness to ev'rything
As Love's old story.

I weep as Jack leaves after lunch. I turn to Walter who is accompanying him on the first leg of his journey to Cardiff and hug him as tight as I possibly can. "My wonderful husband, come home quickly. I will wait up for you."

The next few days pass in a haze, as I continue my wifely duties, yet wishing that we could have news of Jack. We receive a letter thanking us both for the warmth of our hospitality and Walter has a telegram or two about the business developments, which I know he will pick up on more when we return to London. Jack sends me a gramophone record that he thinks I will like. It's by Ira Gershwin, I Can't Get Started, a rather sad little ditty, sung by the wonderful Ella Fitzgerald. I smile at the first verse:

I've flown around the world in a plane
I've settled revolutions in Spain
The North Pole I have charted, but I can't get
started with you.

But at the last verse, the tears flow:

You're so supreme, lyrics I write of you
Scheme, just for a sight of you

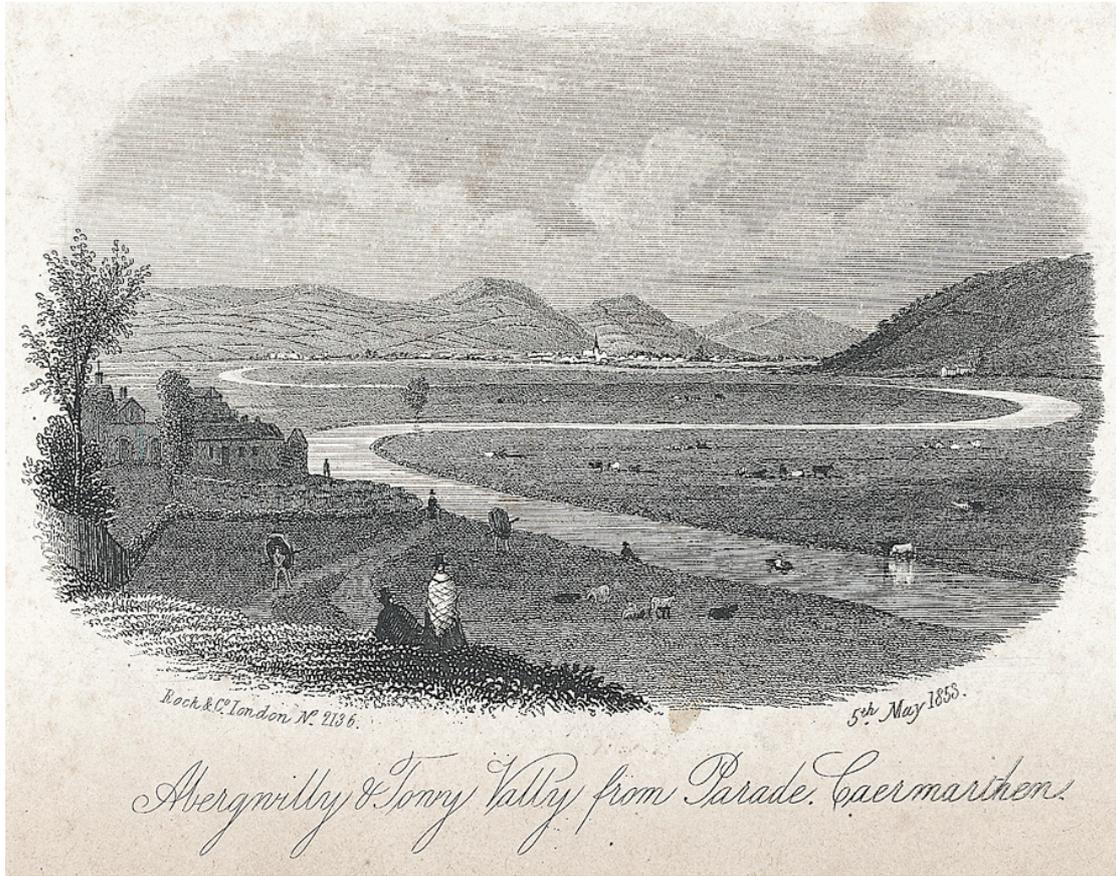
Dream, both day and night of you
And what good does it do?

One afternoon, another summer, I am surprised to hear the piano. Sounds echoing along the empty corridor. I know there is only me here? It's notes from My Melancholy Baby, it's the refrain:

Every cloud must have a silver lining
Wait until the sun shines through.

I wish I could hear Jack's voice again.

Later that day I'm sure I hear the clink of billiard balls and a deep laugh. Some things are here for always.



Rock & Co. London. N. 2136. 5th May 1850.
Abernilly & Tonny Valley from Parade. Caermarthen.

Travelling

At a point of power
in the vale of agri-kings
beef cattle munch grass,
presidents and film stars
fish for sewin and salmon,
thigh-deep in the fresh
fast-flowing Towy waters
that edge the village of Nantgaredig,
while the tributary of the Cothi
rises below Pontargothi and
crosses the valley floor
to join the royal river.

Merlin's hill oversees this meeting
and touches the bishop of Saint David
at Abergwili
in the geometry of a 1960's building
which lives alongside the old palace
where ghosts of friars tend
the walled garden
next to the mouldering walls,
now a museum hosting pottery
and an old telephone exchange.

Whispers of old Welsh ways susurrate
along the landing and down
the grand staircase,
reminding of the renaissance
and the heat of the passion
of church men and alumni of Oxford
that led to the salvation of Welsh words
in Bible and prayers,
and pride in the cultural heritage
that values life differently.

At Easter in the Village Hall

At Abergwili by the churchyard,
chilly air climbs
slowly up to the knees,
while radiant wall heaters
throw cascades of heat
at our heads and shoulders.
Stacked plates hold their position
in a tense uncertain stance
and trestle tables carry
a cold collation
for forgiveness
and a pavlova to dance.

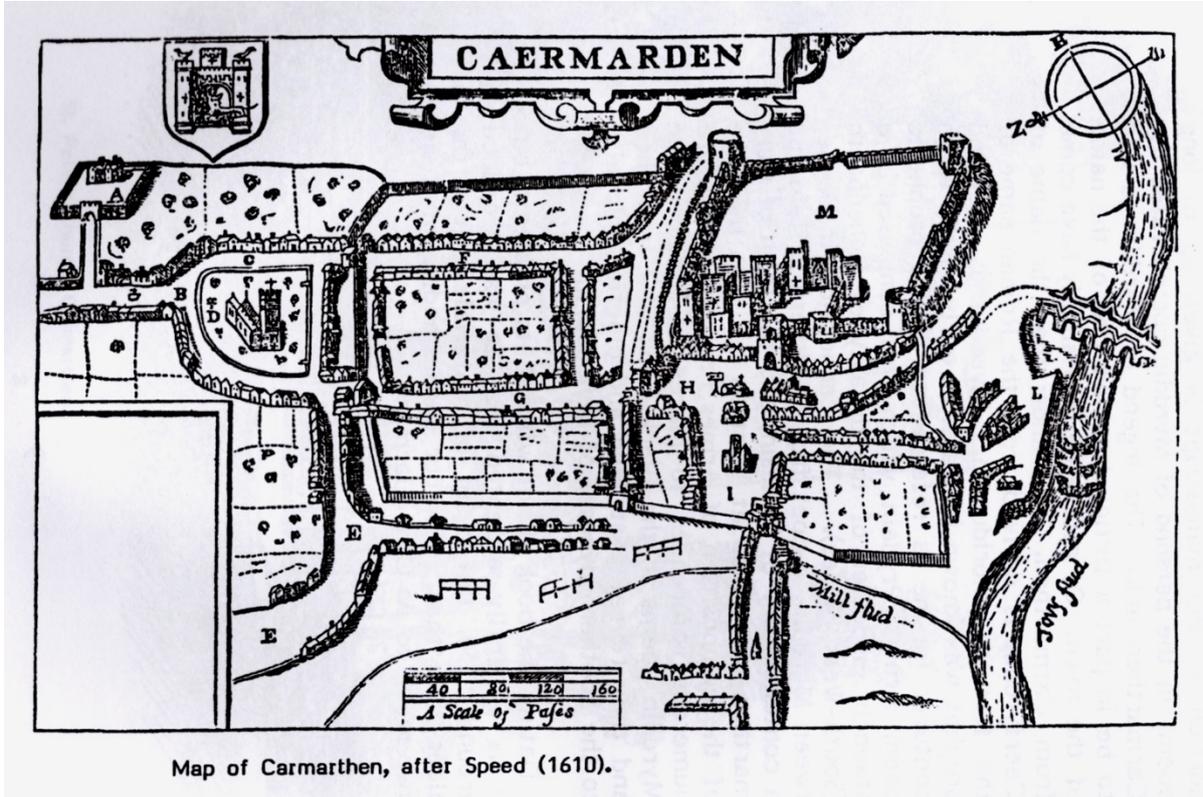
The four generation family gathers,
Viking blond and blue-eyed
with the confidence of
more than a century of
status and achievement
and customs of Loegria;
dressed in the certain tones
of this people's code.

The creative and clever women
of generations of steel intent
strengthen
the males' determination
to succeed and survive.
To avoid Ophelia's rue
knowledge handed on
in wildflowers:
scarlet pimpernel, dog rose,
cowslip, honeysuckle.

Chocolate eggs are scattered
for the competition
amongst gravestones of
another culture
where success is judged
in the address
carved into headstones.
Baskets of lavender to cleanse and heal -
today and yesterday.

Open to the wide sky
- and I begin to think I might dance again.

Carmarthen



Syncopation

Heart-healing hawthorn's
Pink-blossomed summer attempt
In chill-edged breezes

I have returned to the town where I first made the decision to travel to the Towy's source, and in so doing to seek a more joyful clarity. I am mid-point in the journey and am not yet convinced that change has really set within me. I find my way to the river and watch it flowing in fullness towards the sea, knowing that if I stand here long enough I will see the tide turn and ripples of brine travelling back towards the mountains as the sea flows in. Above me a flock of Rhiannon's white birds is gathered in disorganised flight, seagulls interweave, exercising their will over the town.

Here I am staying as I renegotiate my situation, so I make repeated visits along the path by the river. I come to know the wasteland at the edge of the town and keep watch on two scrubby fields, one used by a cattle farmer and the other by someone who keeps horses and ponies.

I become aware of an older man, often sitting on a bench beneath the footbridge, who watches the water intently, sometimes standing as he leans on the wall that runs alongside the town part of the river. I can see he is tall and white-haired and when he walks that he is flat-footed. He has a presence here, as if he belongs, and he is surveying his territory. Sometimes he converses with a less upright man and from a distance I can hear the unusual timbre of his voice, with a Welsh lilt. One evening as I am passing him on the bench, he calls me over, tells me that he has noticed me walking here regularly and that he wants to show me something because he knows he can trust me. He motions for me to sit beside him and tells me to wait, it won't be long. Suddenly he grabs my arm and points to the middle of the river. "Look there. What can you see? Can you see its head? It's the seal." And I see its head briefly as it surfaces, until it sinks again below the surface, and he tells me to watch the movement of the water, showing the trail behind it as it continues to swim upstream. He says to come again tomorrow and he will show it to me again. He knows the times to expect it and when to watch it travelling in either direction. He is a descendant of the water keepers of this part of the river and points out the house that overlooks the river where his ancestors lived. They were overseers of the coracle fishermen, too. His sharp Viking blue eyes look keenly into mine to check my responses. I feel as if I have been tested by Merlin and now honoured and inducted into the ways of an ancient folk. He will direct me to the otters and the kingfishers that live along here and tell me the times to come. Secrets not to be shared with the irresponsible and unappreciative.

I see the changes in the river, as it swells and sinks according to the phase of the moon, the turn of the tide and the extent of the rainfall. I get to know the wildlife, watch otters play on the bank five feet below me, the seal as it coasts upstream with the tide, watch the splashes of fish on the surface and swallows skimming above them catching flies, catch sight of the bright turquoise and orange of a kingfisher, connect with a heron that stands on the opposite bank, count up to 13 cormorants visiting the river - and meet one. The blackberries grow profusely, the Japanese knotweed swamps the banks and sometimes the coracle fishermen are out in the dusk. Frequently on the fields the other side of the river, sheep are grazing, wandering slowly in their undisturbed space, except for the times when the river rises suddenly and unpredictably and turns their land briefly into a lake.

**‘But the fire that struck here, came from Hell even,
Kindled little heavens in his words’^{ix}**

The king’s high sheriff in his black velvet breeches,
the ornate gold chain round his neck
weighs like a millstone and
betrays his fancy black buckle shoes.
A sly handshake shifts train tracks,
derailing plans, and truth is transitory.
Drunk Demetae wage war against the Romans
Still fighting after closing time,
Drunk like Dylan Thomas on Lammas Street.
The bland smiles of impassive citizens
take heat out of their thoughts and
Bleach their communication.
Resistance is a subterranean passage
To connect with Owain Glyndwr’s army.
Treachery in the boardroom
Sets alight the integrity of my words.

Kingdoms

Behind the solid front door
around the vase
of wildflowers – red campion,
white cow parsley, sunny buttercups –
which we picked for
the little girl at school
but who decided
to break up with you.
I know how to comfort
the smallness of you
and rebuild
your lego stack
that teeters in the
winds of her rejection,
with fish fingers and chips for tea.

I am overwhelmed by the certainties
of the men at the office, used to
asserting their will
through the size and sound
of their voice.

I am more used to a lace-
light edge-of-the room voice
that would not dent the surface
of their self-assurance.

Will my words fit
the patterns of your
expectations?
Is there space for
them to find a place
at your table?

Witness

I heard a seagull scream
And turned towards the bridge.

I saw her shape,
Black on a bleeding sky,
Walking the wrong way.

Her long hair
Frayed by the wind,
A ruffling of her skirt.

I heard the lanyards
Clattering on the metallic
Yacht masts.

I watched her
Pause
When she reached the edge.

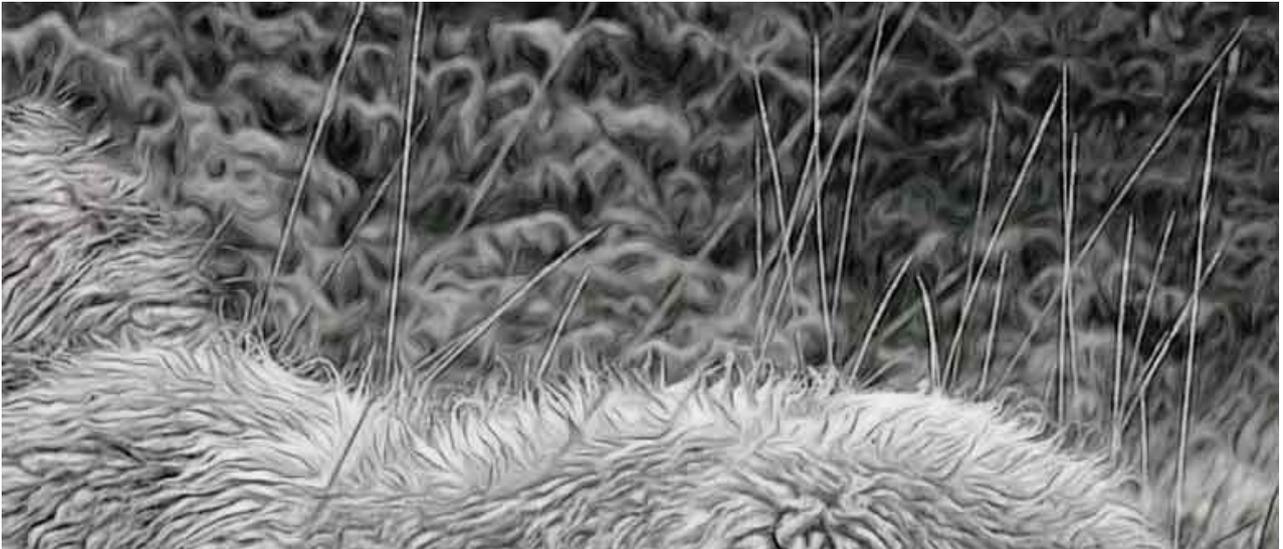
She leaned forward
Into the space.
I felt a gust of wind.

Soundless she fell,
Arms contorted,
A bird with broken wings.

I imagined the splash
As she hit the water.

Sheep

Slow-chomping grazers
Plod through rain-soaked turf shrunken
By a sea of sky



The end of times

I step outside, head submissive
To the anger of falling water,
Taking with me
The dog with blackcurrant eyes,
Along the street of blown
Sun and sheaves of corn.
Down the blue hill,
Bent shoulders beaten by wind,
I step over Styrofoam take-away boxes
Split open like broken oyster shells.

The swollen river looms
At the foot of the hill,
Racing to overwhelm sad fields.
In York the sewers have burst.
The skies are silent,
Crows blown off course.

We take the path of uncertainty
Alongside the rushing river,
Waters rising up the banks
Edging over the land,
Swirling eddies swallowing my confidence.
The iron of midwinter
Now a history.
From the waters I can hear the pearls singing
Mermaid songs of enticement.

And the music plays on

Cormorant luftpause
Close encounter on concrete
Dives to deep currents



This town is the point on its journey where the river brings the sea to the land and is at its fullest. Once Carmarthen was the effective capital of Wales, being a centre for commerce – exporting wood, wool, gold, and large ships brought trade to its quay – the river was wider and deeper then. Now it is a place that others describe as marginalised. It is on the periphery of things, the edge of the map. This is a place of peaks and troughs. A suspension footbridge to connect the one-horse station with the town and cycling coastal path are gifts from Europe.

A mixture of twisty lanes host small boutique-style shops, (some of which have Welsh names– Pethau Bychain, Pethau Da, Calon). A pedestrian precinct that is as bland as any other. A supermarket built on the site of a grand friary, with no trace of its existence now. A distribution of signs in Welsh as well as English.



It is a town where they look over their shoulders at the past, always in the rear view mirror rather than forward and it is hard to envisage a flourishing future. News of disasters and accidents and crises are easily the subject of conversation and depression may come like a companion, until the tide turns.

King Street

Strolling the length of the slippery
Wet-grey walk darkened by
building overhangs,
Too-early ropes of Christmas lights,
Pulling together the opposition of
Georgian apartments,
One after another
All the way down.

"Have you heard from Richard?"
"Yes. Very interested in this literary mob."
"Yes. I wanted to get hold of him."

A slow uncurling awareness
Of self-imposed limitations,
A tent-pegged mind
For the sake of brown-limbed
Cantering children and
Fragrant cake-baking.

The squawks and whimpers of travellers
Buying a newspaper at Spar,
Pausing to consider crafts of Dyfed,
Squabbling, supporting, simpering,
To end notes from the delicatessen.

Harveys Furniture Shop

Finding the furnishings
That fit this brave world.

No life left to linger,
No malingering even,
Sick with fear of failure.

In its place now
Rigid with tension,
Steeled with courage
To make our nest anew,
Square-angled arrangements
Placed strictly and evenly.

Unless you change your mind
And include unruly children,
A magic carpet,
And call on the It.

St Catherine's Walk

Screams of a child
Pierce the slow summer noon,
Fears of abandonment.
That massive white space and
You shrunk to the size
Of a hazelnut,
Small, alone and utterly lost.

Towy River at Carmarthen

Last night the sea tide drove in,
coursing roughly against
the mountain-sourced current,
its purposeful waves bristling
in the conflict of intent.

The sacrifice of a young life
in propitiation for our apathy.
the demands of an angry god
that cares nothing for
the heartache of our loss.

A heron rises into javelin flight,
a blackbird chatters defensively,
a seagull careens in troubled flight.

An eleven-year-old boy was lost yesterday in the stretch of the Towy that I walk alongside every day. I saw the emergency vehicles stretched along the side of the road that borders the edge of the river. I can't bear to imagine the pain of his parents and how they must be struggling to adjust to this news.

The stuck bit is the boy dancing on the edge of the walkway and then suddenly he's gone in a whoosh, soul scattered into atoms throughout the world, in the seas, the rivers, the rain, the mist, laughter pattering in spots on my umbrella hood.



“madness carves its own reality”^x

The vicious, unseen undercurrent
Grabbing the boy,
Taking him far away from his mother.
Daily she feels
The fast-flowing waters drowning
Her thoughts and her hopes.
The thumb in the dyke and
Water breaking through another hole,
Crinoline walks over moors in soaked shoes,
Suffering thwarted dreams,
The blackened stalks of a burnt field,
Cold grey rain drenching the sated land,
Running off into brown puddles
That rise unnoticed around my ankles.

the fallow field

An oak tree stands
on the border of the field in a corner.
I lean against its trunk to receive,
not to give, not to generate,

That calm of being motionless,
no concern with others' movement
Watching the past replayed.

I am here -
And from this peace
I am free to travel mentally

lost in
the blank black velvet of oblivion. I can only feel

Suddenly
in that separation
shines
the bright gold thread
of a question mark.

I clasp the golden sickle
to lop the mistletoe
antidote.

Reflection

I am other -
not my choice.
No matter how I arrived here,
I cannot return,
for the bridges burned to ash,
unseen behind my back.
The buzzard is losing
its grip on air space
to the red kite –
returned to claim its own.

The cormorant brings
news from afar
and dives into our
star-speckled night,
for we are in the underworld
where the fey kingdom
holds us enchanted,
superheroes find their powers,

and I converse
with the high priestess,
watching the seal
travel with the tide -
thoughts not of the mind,
sight without eyes.

Maybe

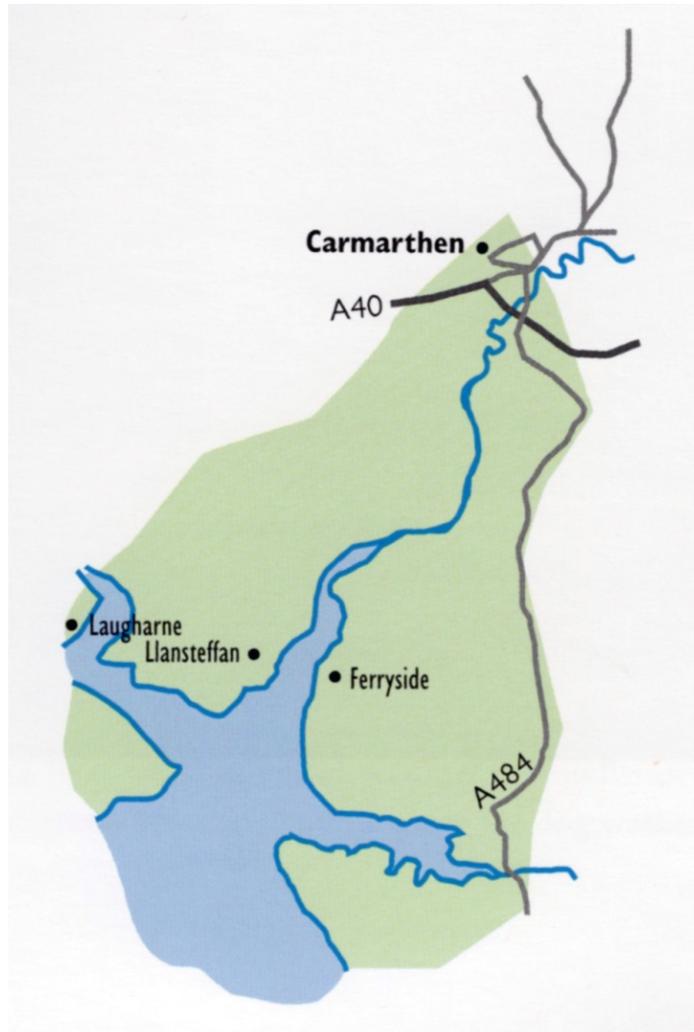
The black and red woodpecker
flies into the obscurity of
a fresh lime-green leafed sapling
at the edge of leisure centre fields.

Rowan blossoms sweeten the air,
and warm sunshine
dries the grief that
pours down the wall.

On the bend of the river
the swan seeks out its mate,
fixing its eye on a surrender to
romance and the gift of love.

The otters dive and twist
through the sparkling waters
with a suggestion of happiness
that is as fleeting as their appearance,
no guarantees except
for the solace of possibility.

after Carmarthen to Ferryside, and Llansteffan



Rallentando

Berries redolent
Sun-baked shining luscious black
Juice-stained evidence

As I leave the town, I am aware that I am stepping away from a very obviously peopled history. I am returning to a simplicity, where my place in the world is defined by the natural landscape and a separation from anger that was charged with such heat. The summer is beginning to cool and the fruits of nature's labours are evident in the hedgerows. Aine has shown me how to love, the ways of water, and given healing, even as she births the first sheaf of wheat. The initial drive is to find a place of height to look down over the river and see my way clear again before following its twists and turns.

The estuary is the focus of the next stage in the journey and it seems that there are two choices of destination.

Ferryside has a long sandy beach, 'kiss me quick' hats, a fish and chip shop, caravan sites for holidaymakers, and is by the railway 'station', being on the line that connects this area to the south of England. It runs right beside the seashore, which is accessed over the level crossing. I hear that an adviser to a recent Prime Minister lives in the village and finds it possible to commute to London as required. I call at the small ancient Parish Church of St Ishmael as it holds the edge of the land and blesses those that fish in the seas before it and those who farm the fields beside it. There is no sense for me of being at home, so I must move to try the other side of the bay.

Llansteffan has a sophistication woven with the complexity of delicate layers. I am told that it is home to artists; Dylan Thomas stayed with his aunt at a farm on the edge of the village, Fernhill. I read Byron Rogers^{xi} who tells the tale of an executioner who lived here once too and decorated the house with nooses. He used to swim across to Ferryside to go for a drink and would smoke as he swam. At night, you would see the glow at the tip of his cigarette protruding from his mouth above the water.

The village is accessed only via one road from Carmarthen as the river turns into an estuary, past the yacht club, then with sight of the beach through the hedges, while on the opposite side of the road woodlands overhang the road. Then to the row of houses and turn off to the beach with sight of the silhouetted ruins of the castle on the hill top, always overlooking the sea and any invasions. Woods are the skirts of the castle and run down to fringe the beach, where the Towy river and other streams flow on clear-cut routes across the strand into the waves.

I enter the car park where I am surrounded by mobile homes; this must be the resting place of the traveller. Time to let go of the past and prepare for the process of rebirth, feeling the trace of ivy as it weaves the whole together.

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Carmarthen hills are green and low,
And therealong the small sheep go
Whose voices to the valley come
At eve, when all things else are dumb.

Carmarthen hills hold in their arms
A host of quiet, white-walled farms :
The cattle feed by Tywi banks,
Silken, sleek, with dappled flanks.

And Tywi river, men have said,
Is the loveliest river God has made :
From Twm Siôn Cati's cave its way
Runs silver to Carmarthen Bay.

The roads between the villages
Are shy and shadowy with trees :
And every turn to left or right
Brings a new picture of delight.

And hazel boughs are everywhere,
And autumn-tide, if you go there,
On any roadside hedge you'll find
The brown nuts nodding to the wind.

DUDLEY G. DAVIES
(Written in India).

xii

Still the low call of the sheep
in the evening's stillness
across the wide silver river
now replaces
the missing strand
in the DNA helix. Shy roads
now opened
up to the noisy invasion.
The wisdom of hazel has
now become
rare in hedgeland that
draws lines on
established Carmarthen farms.

“O Rosalind! These trees shall be my books. And in their barks my thoughts I’ll character.”

In the cathedral woodland
I plait the strands of
me, the land, its mythologies.
I see your ribbon
and wind it round my thoughts.

The cows have emptied the pasture,
opened up a space as the tide runs in.
The breeze is tinged with salt
that tastes on the edge of my mind.
The day is sinking into death,
fading amongst the ancestors.

My journey is fringed by beech.
I write my words on her bark
as her serpent roots communicate
ancient knowledge with the others
and show me over the threshold,
to find routes to confidence.



Ferryside

I built a sandcastle, one meant to stay,
Thinking my world would always be the same,
But the tide came in and washed it away.

We came to the beach for freedom to play,
Me, my brother and sister Penny Jane.
I built a sandcastle, one meant to stay.

He the favoured, she the light, I the fey,
Hoping we'd create harmonious games,
But the tide came in and washed them away.

The friction built, kind words did not allay,
So seeing we three wouldn't fit in one frame
I built a sandcastle, one meant to stay.

Hoping this house would distract from the fray,
I festooned it with flags, seaweed like flames,
But the tide came in and washed it away.

We stayed 'til sunset, parting with the day,
He in peace, she singing, I feeling pain.
I built a sandcastle, one meant to stay,
But the tide came in and washed it away

‘German scientists believe that as water travels it picks up and stores information from all of the places that it has travelled through, which can thereby connect people to a lot of different places and sources of information when they drink this water, depending on the journey that it has been on.’^{xiii}

Sometimes I can't bear to think because all that is held at bay comes tumbling through.
I take a sip of Brecon Carreg mineral water and can feel the lives that experienced it before:
The thawing ice of a glacier soaking into terracotta clay,
A pantydraco, herbivore, pant y ffynnon dragon by the tranquil brackish black pond,
A red stag bending gracefully to lap from a stream,
Rain splashing the surface of a lake where lovers have met and parted,
Somersaults of a strong otter through the flow of a river,
Sails of a ship that has come upriver to trade fancy goods for wood, gold and wool,
The course of the salmon against the tide towards the source,
Two coracles rowing together in the evening light, a net strung between them, today,
this year, last century, two thousand years ago.
My mother painting a watercolour picture of her grandchildren at Llansteffan – Castle &
Coast – freshwater and brine,
My daughters each choosing this same beach as their favourite to bring their boys,
Saying “yes” when I should have said “no”,
Saying “no” when I should have said “yes”,
I have all these flowing within me.

Llansteffan Walk

At the time of full moon and the height of the season of candlelight, in brief dark days, the girl with artist's fingers and fractured eyes comes to the beach where the river dissolves into the sea and curlews cede to gulls.

She feels the mother's raging anger. Drawing on the grandmother's energy, she holds it all together with her patterns of yarn, thinking: loop the wool round the needle, cast on, knit one, purl one, row upon row; moss stitch holding the world together.

The sand, whipped by a scathing wind into a knee-high storm of dust that bites into her skin, stretches before her. She watches a lone horsewoman bearing an invisible pennant, cantering across time. She feels the Knights Templar emerge from the fringe of trees to her side, their eyes following their leader.

Armageddon energy bristles and she shivers. Drawing on the grandmother's energy, she holds it all together with her patterns of yarn: loop the wool round the needle, cast on, knit one, purl one, row upon row; moss holding the world together.

A little child near her is buffeted by a cold gust, his feet lift like a kite from the safety of the land. She looks for a father to intervene, *his* solid weight securing him from the wind's attacks. There is no father. The small boy stumbles, crying out.

She is terrified by the wind's power and the imminent possibilities of destruction. Drawing on the grandmother's energy, she holds it all together with her patterns of yarn: loop the wool round the needle, cast on, knit one, purl one, row upon row; moss holding the world together.

Light fades, gloaming creeps in, the tide eats up the land, she is observed by a plump seagull with vulture intent. She loops the wool round the needle, loops the wool round the needle.

She remembers the third needle, cable stitch: knit two, purl four, knit two, repeat, turn, purl two, knit four, purl two, repeat, turn, knit two, purl four onto the cable needle, knit two, repeat, turn. Twisted stiches forming twisted rope - strength to secure, strength to pull on.

November 2nd, All Souls Eve

Chrysanthemums rest
Against smoothed granite headstone
The veil lifts briefly

A Carmarthenshire Man

After all those years,
It was not the ending
He was anticipating.
He had hoped for
A falling asleep,
A gentle drifting of the boat
Across moonlit ripples,
A soft goodbye
As he floated from the shore.

His last years spent
Mentally galloping along
His life's country lanes,
Scraping white-laced hedges,
Frothing with sparrows, wrens, finches,
Past fields in midday sun,
Forking hay, tossing it
Onto a cart.

The last quieter years
Of mind's eye snapshots,
The times of desire's electric surge.
His hawk wheeled, focused,
Plummeted and plucked the target,
His girl, to be his wife,
Mother of his children,
Rings of romance forming
Circles of commitment
Held tight in the structures
And strictures of chapel
Simple prayers of a steadfast soul.

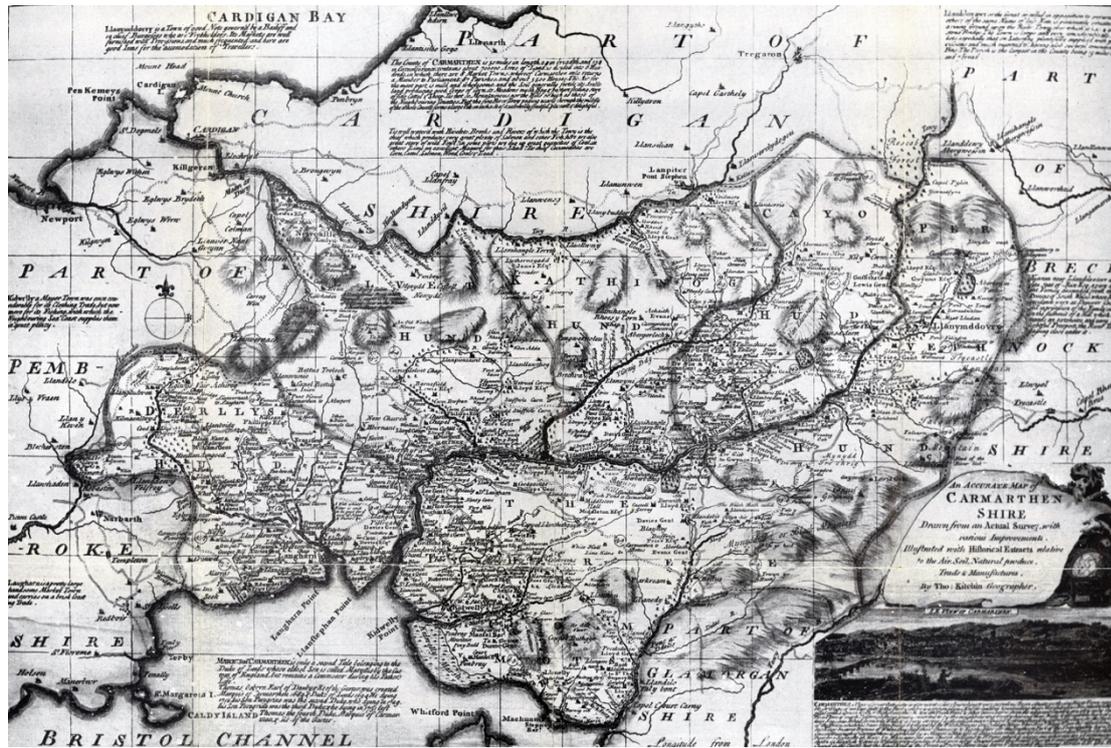
As he grew into himself,
Checking times on his fobwatch,
Dipping his pen into the inkwell,
He reassured himself of his status
With strong cursive strokes
Making his mark,
Feeling the balance of the heron,
His beak scooping the golden fish
To feed his family,
Gaia spinning the thread of his bloodline.

In the deep warm depths of the homely house,
All cosy in the candlelit glow,
Country comfort of rustic values,
Certainties of seasonal circles,
The birth of life growing into
Full-bloom, fertile explosions into
Seedpods like sails of small boats,
Lanterns hanging on the curved shepherd crook.

The day before the black
Dog of death
Came to his door,
His mind was busy
Cantering on time's horse
Across the wide sweep of
Cool-watered beach,
Feeling again the wind in his hair,
The tugs of optimism,
Confidence in his capability,
Honest hard work
To create all he desired,
Robin and blackbird guarding
The agrarian territory he had chosen.

Then death grabbed his throat,
Shook the life from him.
His soul slipped out
As that last gasp,
Disengaged from the torrent,
Sailed out on the surf,
Caught the wing of a cormorant
As it surfaced the waves
And flew out to sea.

Thomas Kitchin's Map of Carmarthenshire c.1763

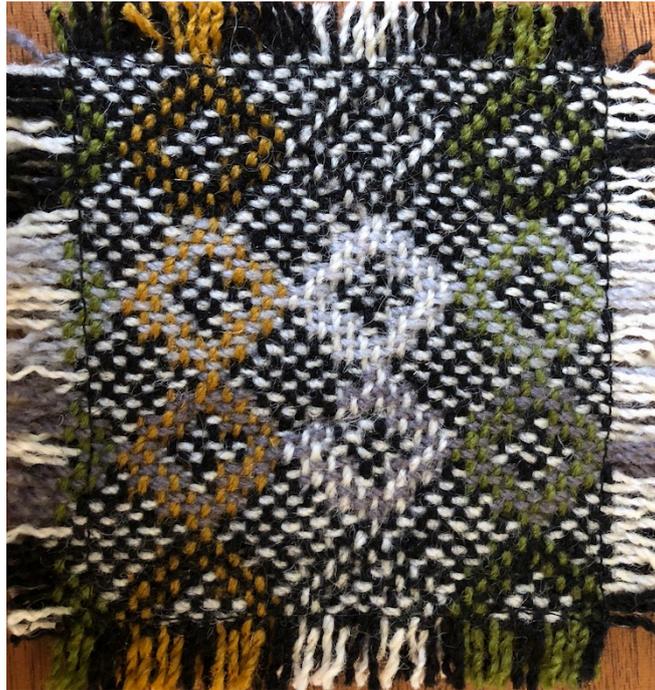


A day in the life

From below I watch
the pink dollhouse
which is stamped on the hill
where Ceridwen sits
on a red and blue mat
on the wooden plank floor
in a yoga posture,
waiting for Hunca Munca
and Tom Thumb to offer
reparation for what they stole.
She is overseeing the beach
where the broken, plump priest
looks to the horizon
listening out for the ocean's
warning roar of invasion,
wishing the demon
had not turned him
to possess a young boy,
fearing now the prison
behind his own eyes.

Under the vast forgiving sky
the poet enjoys heaven's
redemption through the gracious
arrival of a daughter,
opening the net to set free
wayward possibilities
in his alchemy of words,
while the consultant,
whose kindness has polished
her soul and given a maternal
comfort to the sick and desperate,
trades her skills for enjoyment
of artistic endeavours;
and the girl with a mind
full of bees hears the songs
of their humming as she steps
from the bus,
as the September sun sinks
at the end of the road,
the end of the river,
to release the night,
where a broken door creaks
comfortably
in the cloudless
star-bright darkness.

Women are spinners and weavers; we are the ones who spin the threads and weave them into meaning and pattern. Like silkworms, we create those threads out of our own substance, pulling the strong, fine fibres out of our own hearts and wombs. It's time to make some new threads; time to strengthen the frayed wild edges of our own being and then weave ourselves back into the fabric of our culture. Once we knew the patterns for weaving the world; we can piece them together again. Women can heal the Wasteland. We can remake the world. This is what women do. This is our work.^{xiv}



Cri Madonna

Un eich amynedd yn ddi-feth,
Un yn eich croes a'ch cri,
Mair, mam Iesu o Nasareth
A'Mari o Llanybri.

Dyfnallt

On the land above Llansteffan

Memory widens our senses, folds them open,
and I am
harbouring heartbreak that is
a grail cup cracked wide.
The night sky is braille in a rock of frost,
and I weep, spilling splints to
steelgraze the sky. My heart
hatched shrived nerves each day in valley clove.

The cry of the Madonna:

The same your patience unfailing,
The same your cross and your cry,
Mary, mother of Nazareth
And Mary of Llanybri.

Then you came and showed me
love is an outlaw that cannot be held
within the small confines and laws of man,
where pawns can eliminate a queen
and I can move with the pride of a spirited horse.
I have learnt the song from within Rhiannon's wood
and you produced the birth of sound within me.

From these hills, the fields, farm and hedges
lie below me like a Welsh quilt
hanging swallowsoft on the washing line,
through rivets of light marine butterflies
flood out the whole estuary.^{xv}

Acceptance - definition

This is now,
the point of calm,
The pearl in the oyster,
Abrasion's product,
The balance between
Good and evil,
The past and the future.

Not wanting nor wishing
Things had been different,
No longer desperate
To unravel the knit
To find the end of the thread
And begin again.

No longer driven
By the energy of
Rage and pain,
Urging on change,
Irritated by the itches
Of life's scratchy jumper.

I know there is
Absolution,
Am in a state of
Continence,
Holding my scales
Balanced.

Journey's end

In a bold blue sky,
Browning leaves crispen,
A gentle cold-edged wind is
Companion to those
Who lived before me,
And two dogs race
Along the quiet strand,
Carefree.

A breaker
Taps waves
To topple along the beach
Sideways.

The sea is returning
To swallow the river.
A small egret holds this
Moment.

Across the water
Blinking scarlet lights
A distant warning,
The two-toned train horn
Rounding the bend over there,
Carrying them all
Away.

Now I am finding
My own way
Home.

End Notes

ⁱ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/16/newsid_2960000/2960180.stm>, [accessed 30 July 2018].

ⁱⁱ Peter J. Goodall, *The Black Flag over Carmarthen*, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, Llanrwst, Wales, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ A.G. Prys-Jones, *The Story of Carmarthenshire, Volume One*, Christopher Davies, Llandybie, Carmarthenshire, 1959, p.46.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p.45.

^v Found poetry, combining lines from Robert Graves, Dylan Thomas, David Whyte, Walt Whitman, Jack Kerouac, Emily Dickinson (various sources).

^{vi} Laurence Main, *The Spirit Paths of Wales*, Cicerone Press, Cumbria, 2000, p.71.

^{vii} Olwyn Pritchard, archaeoastronomer, who wrote about the significance of this site in her MA thesis: *Archaeoastronomy and the Sacred Landscape of Strata Florida*, UWTSU, 2014.

^{viii} Lines from *Grongar Hill* by John Dyer, 1699 – 1757, who owned the mansion at Aberglasney.

^{ix} Ted Hughes, ‘The Martyrdom of Bishop Ferrar’, in *A Carmarthenshire Anthology*, (ed. Lynn Hughes), Dinefwr Publishers, Carmarthenshire, 2002, p. 51.

^x Kay Redfield Jamison, an excerpt from *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, Picador, London, 2015, quoted in The Hartford Courant, February 28, 2014, ‘An Unquiet Mind’ by Kay Redfield Jamison, <http://articles.courant.com/2014-02-28/news/hc-op-jamison-excerpt-an-unquiet-mind-0302-20140228_1_an-unquiet-mind-kay-redfield-jamison-feelings>, [accessed 30 July 2018].

^{xi} Byron Rogers, *Three Journeys*, Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion, 2011, p.31.

^{xii} Dudley G. Davies, ‘Carmarthenshire’ in A.G. Prys-Jones, *The Story of Carmarthenshire, Volume One*, Christopher Davies, Llandybie, Carmarthenshire, 1959, no p. no.

^{xiii} <<https://truththeory.com/2017/01/14/german-scientists-discover-water-memory/>>, [accessed July 30 2018].

^{xiv} Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted*, September Publishing, Tewkesbury, 2016, p.361.

^{xv} Found lines from poems by Lynette Roberts in Lynette Roberts *Collected Poems*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2005.

Maps on pages: 23 (the source to Llandovery), 41 (Llandovery to Llandeilo), 60 (Llandeilo to Carmarthen), 101 (Carmarthen to the sea) have been copied from Ken Day’s *Beloved Tywi*, published by Gomer Press, 2006. The 1610 map of Carmarthen on page 82 has been copied from *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, published by Llanerch Enterprises, 1989. The pull-out copy of Thomas Kitchin’s map of Carmarthenshire (c.1763) on page 112 was taken from A.G. Prys-Jones’ *The Story of Carmarthenshire, Volume One*, published by Christopher Davies, 1959.

Painting used to illustrate ‘Crossing the Veil at Winter Solstice’ on page 52 is *The Penitent Magdalen* by Georges de la Tour, 1640.

Contextual and Reflective Work

Explanation

The first part of this section, (entitled: Autoethnographic Practice), is concerned with the research that underpinned and governed my creative practices and the formal and historical contexts and the themes that became a part of the undertaking, i.e. psychogeography its historical context and its descendants, the importance of urban and rural locations in writing, the river and as a liminal experience, walking and the transcendental (pilgrimage), being a woman, the relativity of time, identity and otherness, aspects of Welsh culture and stories, visual images and textiles. It is offered using a spiral approach, working from the outside in, reflecting the multi-layered nature of the creative work itself, gradually going deeper and revealing more information about psychogeography and its relationship to the other ideas that form the structure of the background to the creative work.

The second part of this section, (entitled: 'Writing'), is in a journal-type format, reflecting the concept of a journey. It provides a chronological, linear description of the development of the creative writing project and of the impact upon it of my research into other writers who had relevance to the content, styles and forms in my creative writing as it arose from my encounters with the designated sites. It provides an account of comparisons with others' work as well as the progression of the project towards the final collection of fragmentary pieces with the River Towy as meta-structure.

Autoethnographic Practice

Introduction

It started very simply: I would apply the usually urban practice of psychogeography to a rural environment in West Wales. The first stage in the project involved identification of suitable locations to focus upon and an exploration of the implications of the term ‘psychogeography’, in order to have a fuller comprehension of what it entailed for my practice and what it *really* means. I used my familiarity with areas or places that I had located or visited to decide where might be appropriate, which included a knowledge of where might be described as having a determinable sense of power or experience. The selection of the Towy River and sites along its length seemed to be a natural choice as a consequence. I was aware that walking was a significant component, along with a different use of cartography and writing from the encounters in the landscape. The history and stories of a place, the myths, were inherent in any place, which meant that cultural and societal contexts were too. The evolution of psychogeography into differently described activities matched my own practice; I found that I connected with ‘mythogeography’ or even ‘deep topography’¹ and that intuition was a preferred faculty. As Papadimitriou suggests: ‘the world that confronts us through our immediate surroundings is alive and intrinsically valuable in ways not amenable to instrumental reason or economic reductionism’.² There are also some practitioners of psychogeography who work esoterically, which fits with my personal inclinations, and I felt comfortable that I was making a spiritual journey.

I maintained a commitment to the origins of the project in psychogeographical practice, through my prose descriptions of my journey and the geographical areas at the start of each section, with use of maps as visual chapter headings as a way of giving direction to the reader; that is, a visitor to the writing or to the physical geography of the Towy, travelling

¹‘Not Psychogeography’ defines the activity of mythogeography, < <http://www.mythogeography.com/not-psychogeography.html>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

Carla Mackinnon explains deep topography: ‘So you wanna be a deep topographer? 6 Tips from Nick Papadimitriou’, August 24 2012, <<https://pickingrich.wordpress.com/2012/08/24/so-you-wanna-be-a-deep-topographer-6-tips-from-nick-papadimitriou/>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

² Nick Papadimitriou articulated the term ‘deep topography’ to describe his activity which is the subject of his own book *Scarp*, Nick Papadimitriou, *Scarp* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), Introduction pp. 1 – 14, p.11.

from the source to the estuary. The evolution of a multi-layered text facilitated a different approach to time and space, variety of form and style of writing, a diversity of themes. I became aware of many dimensions to the background of the creative writing that I was producing. As I work visually, I was inspired by images that I captured; found materials from each site from other writers and other artists were woven into the text and the involvement of fabric surfaced effortlessly.

The natural landscape was a main character, involving the seasons, animals and plant life that I encountered on my visits, although the people there were a vital factor, too. Importantly, I was making a connection with specific places. Sharon Blackie moved to Donegal, Ireland four years ago and she has written about her connection, her relationship with the wild environment of her new home:

Connection begins with knowing a place – its ecology, geology, how it presents itself in all weathers, its physical characteristics. Connection continues with knowing its social and cultural history: the history of humans in that place, and the relationships we've had with it over time. Connection is well underway when you understand the land's myths and stories.³

She describes the 'enchantment' that arises from such a relationship⁴:

We feel as if we belong, as if we are a part of a wild-hearted community in which animals always have something to teach us, trees and plants can save or cure us, wise old men and women are waiting in the dark woods to help us, and a well may be a doorway to another world. Myths and folk tales can weave us back into the seasons and cycles of the year and they can help us to accept the necessary, sometimes challenging, cycles of life.⁵

This was essentially the experience of my journey and encompasses the factors that were a part of it. In my search for belonging to Welsh culture, I was overlooking the belonging that I had through my relationship with the land.

³ Sharon Blackie, 'The Art of Enchantment' (transcript of audio file), <<https://theartofenchantment.net/2016/10/08/myth-and-story-as-an-act-of-placemaking-the-transcript/>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

⁴ 'enchantment by my definition has nothing to do with fantasy, or escapism, or magical thinking: it is founded on a vivid sense of belongingness to a rich and many-layered world; a profound and whole-hearted participation in the adventure of life. Enchantment is intuitive, embraces wonder, and fully engages the creative imagination – but it is also deeply embodied, ecological, grounded in place' (Ibid.).

⁵ Ibid.

Psychogeography itself is a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – and some might say twenty first century, so an understanding of its relationship with modernism and postmodernism was an intrinsic consideration of the work, although it was not important to encompass the wider discussion of these two movements. I also had to consider the transcendental dimension that is important to me and how it is explicated by other writers. The natural landscape is a part of this and I explored the work of nature poets and pastoral writing, finding a home with the Romantics, R.S. Thomas, Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry. As I wrote, my personal journey emerged.

I was aware of a sense of friction between my research activity and the ambiguity of a product that is a creative art. What I was doing fitted within autoethnographic practice, as defined by Ellis, Adams and Bochner. I was writing autobiographically and using this to understand cultural experience.⁶ At times, there was a tension in what I was writing, because I was aware that it was not explicit, so content might be considered obscure, which could make it less accessible to the reader. It was necessary to remind myself that the ‘product’ was creative writing, rather than a conventional description of research findings and that the emotional and personal processes were an intrinsic factor of the activity. I understand that autoethnography is a form of relational ethics, which is about how we should live together, i.e. human interaction. This is certainly a dimension of the project and the work; I could detect a need to resolve for myself an unease that I was experiencing between identity and community; and the expression of this was a desired outcome.

Gradually, I realised that I was undertaking a pilgrimage of sorts, a transformational journey, so the writing had to express this. This was not undertaken in the sense of the traditional travel, where the destination is the focus, the end-point. It might be described as a ‘postmodern pilgrimage’, as considered by Phil Smith, in that ‘changing oneself along the way’ is the ‘dominant theme’.⁷ It is not about the achievement of reaching the point of

⁶ ‘Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (ELLIS, 2004; HOLMAN JONES, 2005). This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others (SPRY, 2001) and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (ADAMS & HOLMAN JONES, 2008). A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product’, Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12.1, Art. 10 – January 2011, <<http://www.qualitativeresearch.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>>, [accessed 31 July 2018], (no p.nos.).

⁷ Phil Smith, *On Walking* (Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2014), p.65.

completion and where the transformation is identified, rather it is: ‘consciously and openly going as a ‘pilgrim’ partly to discover how the world, how people, how oneself (selves), how the landscapes, how the divine might respond to that.’⁸

I was beginning a process of self-examination, to confront how I felt about being an outsider, the Welsh / Celtic culture, my relationship with memories. The theme of womanhood was inevitable, while mental health became an underlying element to which I did not want to give too much emphasis. As I travelled, my writing developed according to the stages of the river, which is surely the epitome of psychogeographical practice.

Psychogeography has its origins in theories about the urban, with roots in modernism, where the *flâneur*⁹ wanders without intent around a manmade environment. The concept originated with Baudelaire in the nineteenth century and achieved greater definition with the Situationists (Guy Debord) in the 1950s; it entailed the act of walking around a city leading to an interpretive reading of it. The term for this is *dérive* or *drift*;¹⁰ it was a practice of the Dadaists, was influenced by Surrealism and ‘the spirit of playful creativity’¹¹, before being incorporated by Debord into the philosophy of the Situationists, where it became, according to Coverley, ‘a pure science’¹² and a political activity. The definition of ‘Situationist’, from the International Situationists’ first journal, cited by Coverley, is ‘having to do with the theory or practical activity of constructing situations. A member of Situationist International.’¹³ In addition to the *dérive* is the *détournement*, which is concerned with artistic and literary creations of the past and was defined by Stewart Home as ‘the theft of aesthetic artefacts from their own contexts and their diversion into contexts of one’s own device’.¹⁴ (There is always the question of the truth of originality in the absolute sense, as everything

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ‘the *flâneur*, or ‘one who wanders aimlessly’, was born in the first half of the nineteenth century, in the glass-and-steel-covered *passages* of Paris’ (Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p.3.

¹⁰ A form of wandering without purpose in order to experience the city differently: ‘the sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places’, *Psychogeographic Review*, *Psychogeography: Taking Back the City*, Bobby Seal, 2012, cited Guy Debord: *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* 1955, <psychogeographicreview.com/psychogeography-taking-back-the-city/>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

¹¹ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden, Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p.91.

¹² Ibid., p.90.

¹³ Ibid., p.93.

¹⁴ Stewart Home, *Mind Invaders* (London: Serpent’s Tail, London, 1997), p.136.

we create has some sort of precedent and emerges from a history of others' previous shared experiences and teachings.)

The ideologies of all three movements informed my practice, so playfulness, non-conformity, dissenting political action and intuition were integral. Maisie Ridgway's description of psychogeography adds to this: 'a seizure of power'.¹⁵ The interaction with the urban environment was also an essential element; using the 'city as a site of mystery and [seeking] to reveal the true nature that lies beneath the flux of the everyday'.¹⁶ The background to this activity consists of society, community and language, i.e. all derivatives of human existence. It is argued that the observations made during the process enable a deeper understanding of the energies at work below the surface, while taking a 'vertical descent through its past'¹⁷ into the histories that infuse contemporary experience. Sonia Overall explains the process more simply: 'Psychogeography is driven by curiosity and a desire to experience place more fully, on many levels.'¹⁸ Or, to take Will Self's approach, it is a "meditation on the vexed relationship between psyche and place".¹⁹

Necessarily, a writer is usually somewhat disconnected from engagement with the community, needing some space between her/himself and the environment that is being observed and interpreted, so the *dérive* suits some writers' work and philosophies.

The Pastoral

The role of the psychogeographic writer is similar to that of the urban poet as considered by Terry Gifford.²⁰ In his research into the difference between urban and pastoral poetry, Gifford argues that 'the urban poet, then, is an allegorist, who attempts to translate urban experience into language'.²¹ In a later essay, Gifford explains what is to be 'pastoralist'. He

¹⁵ Maisie Ridgway, 'An Introduction to Psychogeography', <<http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2014/12/an-introduction-to-psychogeography/>> [accessed 31 July 2018] p.1.

¹⁶ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* p.13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Sonia Overall, 'The walking dead, or why psychogeography matters' (2015), <<https://create.canterbury.ac.uk/13859/1/13859.pdf>> [accessed 31 July 2018], p.3.

¹⁹ Will Self, *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), dust jacket.

²⁰ Terry Gifford, *Green Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

identifies the ‘ancient pastoral impulse of retreat to a rural landscape and return to the city’²² and to the belief that one is changed by the experience, so as to live differently upon the return. The countryside is an ancient, idealised concept, ‘nostalgic, escapist, comfortingly timeless and stable – in a word, ‘Arcadian’, the writing genre originates from Virgil’s poetry’.²³ These were the roots for the practice of Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets who celebrated ‘the sublime landscapes of rural Britain’,²⁴ in contrast to the discomfort and alienation of the ‘expanses’ of towns and cities.

Henry David Thoreau’s work, *Walden*, describes the lifestyle choice that he made when he went to live alone in the woods: ‘because I wished to live deliberately to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived’.²⁵ He left the town where he had been living and went in search of a simpler life, not wishing to continue living ‘meanly like ants’;²⁶ and with the aim of showing that it was possible to live without the accoutrements of his contemporary society; e.g. bathing in the pond in front of his shack and drinking from the stream, in order to find the true meaning of life. Gifford’s definition of pastoral literature as a tool of Western culture is a description of such an approach, i.e. how we:

have mediated and negotiated our relationship with the land upon which we depend and the forces of nature at work out there in ‘outer nature’, as we have at the same time mediated and negotiated our relationships with each other and what we think of as our ‘inner nature’.²⁷

That Thoreau was a transcendentalist²⁸ fits the modus operandi of some psychogeographers, but not all. I could certainly relate to his choice to simplify his existence, to connect with nature and to explore the higher meaning of life.

²² Terry Gifford, ‘Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies’, [The final version of this essay is published in Scott Slovic (ed.), *Critical Insights: Nature and Environment* pp. 42-61, Ipswich: Salam Press, 2012], <<http://www.terrygifford.co.uk/Pastoral%20reading.pdf>> [accessed 31 July 2018], p.3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.5.

²⁴ Merlin Coverley, *The Art of Wandering* (Harpندن: Oldcastle Books, 2012), p.127.

²⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.

²⁷ Terry Gifford, ‘Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies’, p.7.

²⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* ‘Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars’, p.90.

There were, of course, some writers who did not subscribe to the portrayal of the countryside as a rural idyll, and ‘anti-pastoral’ poets wrote about the hardship of working on the land. Crabbe is identified as such a writer by Gifford: ‘Can poets soothe you, when you pine for bread / By winding myrtles round your ruin’d shed?’.²⁹ However, Gifford also informs us that some English academics no longer perceive any difference between the contemporary urban and the pastoral experience, ‘arguing that the separation of town and country is now defunct – even rural living is urbanised in so many ways’.³⁰ If this is the case, then wherever activity is undertaken, the environment does not differentiate it.

As recently as 1994, Paul Cloke wrote about the ‘urban-rural spectrum’;³¹ how there was a feeling that the ‘delimitations’ had become artificial; although *his* experience of Lampeter in West Wales had led him to perceive not one rural geography, but several. He describes the concept of the rural as a ‘social and cultural construct’, which is ‘subject to a constant flow of production, consumption, reproduction, representation, commod[if]ication, manipulation and so on’.³² For a more contemporary analysis, Alice Entwistle interviewed Zoë Skoulding in 2008.³³ A poet and academic who resides in North Wales, she describes the ‘rural *dérive*’ in her co-written chapter, as being difficult to differentiate from the urban:

Given the intensity of modern communication and its ability to locate the subject simultaneously in a range of contemporary experiences, it’s hard to say where the city ends and the countryside begins.³⁴

If any of these interpretations are correct, the countryside requires a different level of response beyond that of viewing it simply as rural idyll.

²⁹ George Crabbe, ‘The Village’, in *The Village and the Newspaper*, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5203/5203-h/5203-h.htm>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

³⁰ Terry Gifford, ‘Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies’, p.4.

³¹ Paul Cloke, ‘(En)culturing Political Economy: A Life in the Day of a ‘Rural Geographer’, in Paul Cloke, Marcus Doel, David Matless, Martin Phillips and Nigel Thrift, *Writing the rural: five cultural geographies* (London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 1994), pp. 149-190, p.160.

³² *Ibid.*, ‘Introduction: Refiguring the ‘Rural’’, pp. 1-6, p.3, & p.171.

³³ Skoulding’s definition of pastoral takes issue with the idea that modern technological development has redefined relationships between countryside and urban landscapes: “One way of looking at countryside is to see how it’s the ‘contra terra’ or converse of the city: pastoral is an urban dream of freedom. But the countryside is locked into the same networks of power as everywhere else and it always has been: the tops of these hills are marked with the remnants of settlements from a thousand years ago; the whole landscape would have been crossed by lines of defensive vision in the way that it’s now crossed by phone lines, power cables, traffic and the languages shimmering across it in communication networks” (Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 156).

³⁴ Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding, ‘Disobedience: collaborative writing and the walk poem’, in David Kennedy (ed.), *Necessary Steps: Poetry, Elegy, Walking, Spirit* (Exeter: Shearsman Press, 2007), p.29.

Psychogeography definitions

Developments in psychogeography have included a different intention in the way that the work is undertaken and can be seen, for example, in the work of Iain Sinclair in the Thatcherite 1980's. His *dérive* was infused with political and occult purpose when he walked the route of the M25 motorway. This approach is echoed in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*³⁵ in the description of Stillman's daily walks in New York (the ultimate metropolis) after leaving prison, which Quinn eventually realizes are tracing the letters of religiously significant words. The novel is a postmodern psychogeographic work, indeed is fundamentally situationist, 'constructing situations', with corresponding loss of ontological certainty. When Quinn follows Stillman, he lets go of control of his actions and has to work with the design of the streets, no longer in charge of his destination. The main character of the work is the city of New York itself. Stillman is a philosopher who makes first connection with Quinn, a writer of mystery novels, when the former phones and asks to speak to Paul Auster, a private detective whose identity Quinn then adopts. Fact and fiction are blended, identity is multi-levelled and everything is 'reduced to chance, a nightmare of numbers and probabilities',³⁶ from which the metaphysical work emerges.

The antithesis of this practice is seen in the work of Will Self, who references the Situationists and describes his motivation in the Youtube video 'Obsessed with Walking':

what my kind of practice of psychogeography is is decoupling physical from human geography, which I think goes back to the Situationists who were a tiny groupuscule of insufferably pretentious Marxists in 1950's Paris.³⁷

He feels that the graffiti words, 'work, consume, die', sum up what Debord was talking about in the definitive *société du spectacle*.³⁸ The modern city reflects that kind of ethos and "it reflects it to such a level that it's no longer a real place".³⁹ In order to find a new reality, it

³⁵ Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, Book 1 of *New York Trilogy* (London: Faber, 1987).

³⁶ Paul Auster, *City of Glass* p.91.

³⁷ Will Self, 'Obsessed with Walking', MenofLetters series, (26 October 2011), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGWF-VzIqPI>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

³⁸ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, publ. 1970, reprinted 2010).

³⁹ Will Self, 'Obsessed with Walking'.

is necessary to do things in such a way that it becomes anarchic practice and to find different activity for different reasons.

Self seems, also, to have a personal reason for undertaking psychogeography, i.e. that it is tied up with his activity to control his abstinence from drug-taking.⁴⁰ He also uses walking as a way of relating differently to the terrain that he travels through/across in order to undertake what is required of him as a writer and lecturer and to express his political and cultural convictions:

For most of us our social, political and economic orientation completely obscures where *we* are geographically. We live out our lives in cities that blot out natural features, while we resort to mechanical transport to annihilate distances and gradients.⁴¹

It may be easier to apply this explanation of contemporary lifestyle to urban dwellers than it is to those who inhabit and negotiate the rural environment.

A *traceur* who negotiates the urban setting as an exponent of the discipline of parkour is, arguably, an example of a postmodern eclectic response. Using an activity that is considered by some to be 'play', she/he opposes uniformity and seeks autonomy by rediscovering a place through renegotiating her/his relationship with the urban landscape and making her/his own traces in the form of new pathways over, across and through the location. That is to say, extending the 'rules' and structure of modernism to a freer application, creating a pastiche.⁴² Arguably, too, the assertion of the individual on the built environment in this practice, as with psychogeography, is a form of self-empowerment. Similarly, Sinclair is interested in the rewriting of community, protesting through psychogeographic activity against contemporary developments of enforced changes to community that are overwriting traditional forms, (c.f. *Ghost Milk*⁴³).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Will Self, 'Fujian Mind Warps', in *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp.108-12, p.109.

⁴² Tim Woods characterises postmodernism as a change to a positive, embracing approach, rather than a regretful establishment of new systems: 'Postmodernism does what modernism does, only in a celebratory rather than a repentant way. Thus, instead of lamenting the loss of the past, the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood, postmodernism embraces these characteristics as a new form of social existence and behaviour. The difference between modernism and postmodernism is therefore best seen as a difference in mood or attitude, rather than a chronological difference, or a different set of aesthetic practices.'

Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 8-9.

⁴³ Iain Sinclair, *Ghost Milk*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

Sinclair prefers to distance himself from the Situationists and understands the roots of psychogeography in Rimbaud and Blake - 'the godfather of all psychogeographers',⁴⁴ whose walking of London was associated with an understanding of its arcane qualities:

[His] awareness of London's symbolic existence through time allowed him to perceive the unchanging reality of the city beneath the flux of the everyday; a transcendent image of 'the spiritual Four-fold London eternal'.⁴⁵

Arthur Machen, gothic writer and esoteric practitioner, (and member of The Golden Dawn, - as was W. B. Yeats), was born in South Wales like Sinclair, and is another Welshman who moved to London and wandered its streets. He was able to find there a representation of metaphysical significance, 'a concrete image of the eternal things of space and time and thought'.⁴⁶

Peter Ackroyd is an exponent of what seems to me to be a purist understanding of psychogeography, where time is relative, the chronological order of events is not meaningful;⁴⁷ the city is the ultimate creation of man and the society of man, built on the energies that are present in the land wherein their foundations lie. Contemporary society has seen a powerful (re-)connection with the megalithic era, perhaps seeking a simpler time and greater connection with ancestors, natural forces and landscape, to the point that the historical timeline has lost its significance. Paul Davies considers this:

the processes of evolution, 'the past in present' and how, in the *here and now* when the idea of ancestry is fully embodied within our own spiritual practices, those distinctions/separations really do seem to lose their meaning (or perhaps it is truer to say that they are transformed).⁴⁸

R. J. Stewart, a Western Esoteric Practitioner, explains what he describes as a new understanding of time:

⁴⁴Merlin Coverley, *The Art of Wandering*, p.131.

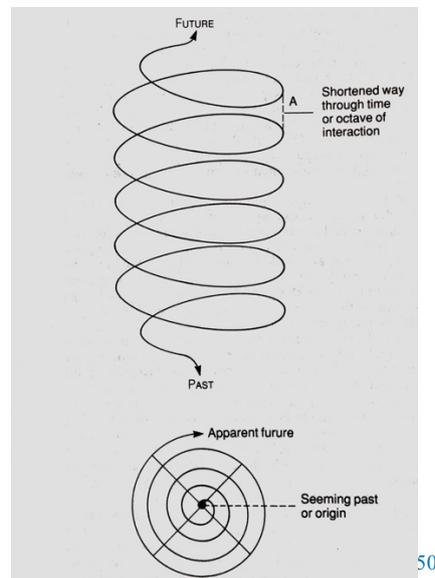
⁴⁵ Blake, 'Milton' in *The Complete Poems*, p.521, quoted Coverley, *The Art of Wandering*, p.130.

⁴⁶ Merlin Coverley, *The Art of Wandering* p.141.

⁴⁷ Ana Sentov, 'The Postmodern Perspective of Time in Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*', (2009), <<http://facta.junis.ni.ac.rs/lal/lal2009/lal2009-10.pdf>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

⁴⁸ Paul Davies, 'Introduction', in Paul Davies & Caitlin Matthews (eds.), *This Ancient Heart The Threefold Relationship Between Landscape, Ancestor and Self* (Winchester, UK: Moon Books, 2015), pp. 6-10, p.10.

The twenty-first century seems to have a resonance, a harmonic connection to the megalithic period, as if turning a spiral brings us into line with it although we are removed from it in a superficially linear time sense.⁴⁹



An application of this approach in my own work meant that I investigated and wrote about any and every era that has meaning to the particular site that I was visiting and that I could dive through time and write about different points of chronological time together (e.g. the Strata Florida poem ‘Palimpsest’ and also the Carmarthen poem: ‘But the fire that struck here, came from Hell even, / Kindled little heavens in his words’).

In writing about Venice, Ackroyd provides a paradigm for all other cities and readings of them:

In Venice there is no true chronological time; it has been taken over by other forces. There are occasions, indeed, when time seems to be suspended; if you enter a certain courtyard, in a shaft of sunlight, the past rises all around you.⁵¹

He describes the meanings that can be drawn from observations gained during wanderings around the city and the intimations to be deduced about the nature of the development of human communities. A passage about the exuberance of stone carvings to be found throughout Venice becomes a musing about the significance of stone and of cities and the

⁴⁹ R. J. Stewart, *Power Within the Land* (NC, USA: Mercury Publishing, 1998), p.21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁵¹ Peter Ackroyd, *Venice: pure city* (London: Vintage, 2010), p.72.

loss of our connection with divine energies, which are gained through our relationship with the natural environment.⁵²

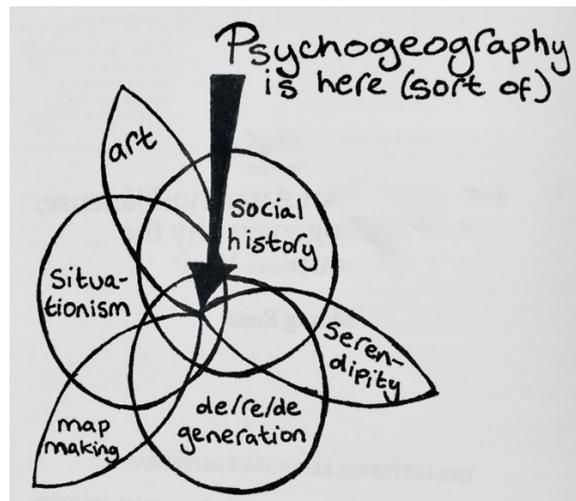
Psychogeography is concerned with questions of how the individual 'reads' her/his environment, applying practices that have resonance with the surrealist movement, allowing the subconscious to rise to the surface through separation from conscious intent, inspiring verbal descriptions and explanations that could be in a variety of artistic media. The process arguably acknowledges the presence of a collective consciousness (as first conceived by the psychiatrist Carl Jung) to which we all have connection and of which we are aware to a greater or lesser degree. The responses that emerge are not the consequence of accidental activity, however; arising from the initial intent, the artist/writer executes carefully made plans for interaction with a situation, a material or an environment that leads to spontaneous inspiration and understandings. This is a technique of the modernist movement, which saw the arrival of psychotherapy and psychology as a way of understanding and working with mental processes, innovative creative styles and movements.

This approach, too, can enable a different level of understanding of the urban experience, where identity is defined by social context and the spatial experience is the interaction with a man-made city (the metropolis), which is the epitome of modernism. Through response to the built matrix that is the landscape of New York/ London/Paris, the individual locates her/himself in the world. The landmarks of a city provide social coordinates, which are then incorporated into the interior terrain of individuals; and as we map the inner world, language is an intrinsic element of the process. As these different matrices create tensions to which individuals must find responses that create the inner narrative, the ontological explanation of the process enables stability for both the writer and the reader.

A visual representation in the form of a Venn diagram by Morag Rose encapsulates the areas which are involved in the process:⁵³

⁵² 'If Venice has turned the natural world into stone, its secret longing might be to reverse the miracle and once more to become fresh and yielding. Stone represents the longing to die, a tendency and a yearning to be found in every city. God created the natural world, as the Venetians were taught, but humankind made the city. After his murder of Abel, Cain became the founder of cities. Cities represent the primal curse, and the abandonment of natural ties. Venice is their avatar' (Ibid.).

⁵³ Morag Rose, VENN DIAGRAM OF PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY (2006), in Tina Richardson (ed.), *Walking Inside Out: Contemporary British Psychogeography* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015), p.148.



An example of psychogeographic practice may be seen in the walk of the length of the route of the M25 that was made by Iain Sinclair counter-clockwise and from which he wrote *London Orbital*, 2003. It was a political, subversive act against the Prime Minister of the time.⁵⁴ To walk along a course which is being dedicated to the passage of vehicles that traverse the land at speed and solely in order to convey the travellers within from point A to point B and for purposes that are pre-determined by capitalism reminds us of how walking was used as a form of protest. Some of the first marches of the common people against an oppressive system took place in France in the eighteenth century and were an act of revolution against the aristocracy, leading to their eventual overthrowing and the instillation of a democracy. Since then, Paris has seen other political marches, as have London, Berlin, and Prague and such acts of resistance are described by Solnit as ‘a psychogeography of insurrection in which life is lived in public and is about public issues’.⁵⁵ Sinclair’s intent in his walk of the route of the ‘London Orbital’ is very much in tune with this way of thinking. He was attempting to counteract the effects of the capitalist system through his actions. More generally, Self perceives that the execution of a *dérive* by a proponent of psychogeography, by walking through an urban environment with a certain frame of mind, is conveying a political statement:

⁵⁴ Iain Sinclair, ‘A Circular Story: The opening of the M25 in October 1986 (Margaret Thatcher’s dome moment) signalled the end of London and its liberties.’ <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/oct/25/featuresreviews.guardianreview27>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

⁵⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (London: Granta, 2014), p.230.

The contemporary *flâneur* is by nature and inclination a democratising force who seeks equality of access, freedom of movement and the dissolution of corporate and state control.⁵⁶

Somehow, as the practice of psychogeography has evolved, it seems that there are rules that have been devised that need to be followed in order to reach the state of mind that produces suitable insight / inspiration / creativity in response to the engagement with the pre-determined environment. Sinclair describes his journey as ‘[a] voyage into reverie, narcolepsy, murder (road-rage stabbing at Swanley interchange), drug deals, madness.’⁵⁷ For him there are dark forces operating along the M25 route and in the act of walking he is coming into contact with them, recognising what they are and relaying this in his writing. This may be considered prototypical psychogeographic practice.

If the original purpose of the *dérive* was related to interaction with the urban environment, an interplay with the modern community, being in the ‘public’ space, creating an individual response whilst being a part of the crowd, the effect of the psychogeographic approach in a rural area must, perhaps, be explored differently. If the former is about identity in a social, manmade context, the latter may be about disconnection/separation, finding self-identity through (human) relationships in rural communities and/or through the natural landscape and exploring the socio-, politico-, cultural environment of identified sites in these geographical areas. The sense of self gained through city life is likely to be quite different from that gained through rural life. If meaning is gained through interaction with the ‘other’, the question must be what is gained by the individual through an interface with the countryside and what the resultant self-construction and creative responses may be. Entwistle considers this through her interviews with women writers in Wales. Here, Christine Evans defines the paradoxical experience of feeling culturally alienated, whilst also feeling affection for her home:

the thing that Wales did more than anything else, apart from making me feel at home, was give me a sense of otherness. How do you define your sense of self unless you have something to measure it by?⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Will Self, ‘Walking is Political’, *Guardian online* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/30/will-self-walking-cities-foot>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

⁵⁷ Iain Sinclair, ‘A Circular Story’.

⁵⁸ Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.91.

Sinclair made the move from urban psychogeographic practice, executed many times in London, when he returned to southern Wales, his birthplace, to write a novel, *Landor's Tower*. For instance, he mentions Watkins, who 'haunted' the area; an 'apologist for ley lines'⁵⁹ who explained how 'streams of energy are activated'⁶⁰ when the connections are made.⁶¹ He describes a slice of the Welsh community, those who had moved there seeking an alternative lifestyle and lived in semi-derelict farmhouses. As Sinclair says: 'The utopian communities shrivelled, closed the ring, shifted west' and became 'the tepee folk of Llandeilo'.⁶² He explains the move west of two poets he knew: 'Settling, healing their wounds in these remote places, was a form of self-annihilation'.⁶³ His description of the Welsh in the Valleys is bleak: '[Women whose] faces were blank, registers of tranquillisers punted by GPs Men in groups stood on corners, staring at the passing traffic with steroidal hatred'.⁶⁴ His later work, *Black Apples of Gower* (named after a series of paintings by artist, Ceri Richards), drew him further into the past, retracing his boyhood steps in the Gower and referencing local writers, Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins, apparently trying to reconnect with his origins, although his 'inherited racial compass is completely wrecked'.⁶⁵ He begins to heal the rift by taking a swim in the bay and mentions the effect of his previous novel, the 'justified criticism ... for trying to re-establish a tentative connection with my homeland in a novel of the borders'.⁶⁶ His practice and the book's form are still psychogeographic (autobiographical writing, travelogue, historical facts, use of images and photos). He mentions the need to find a 'holloway path'⁶⁷ as a connection with his tribe or history and I am reminded of Robert MacFarlane's works, *The Old Ways*⁶⁸ and *Holloway*;⁶⁹ this latter makes a correlation between MacFarlane and his tribe, the men with whom he was

⁵⁹ Iain Sinclair, *Landor's Tower* (London: Granta, 2002), p.12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁶¹ Merlin Coverley in 'The Art of Wandering: Arthur Machen's London Science', identifies 'two clear strands of psychogeographic thought'... 'Situationist and Earth Mystery', the latter being 'the current of esoteric thought that originates with Alfred Watkins and his theory of ley lines, resurfaces in the work of John Michell and the earth mysteries school of the 1970s, and can be seen today with the accumulation of occult paranoia that surrounds the work of Iain Sinclair' (ed. Tina Richardson, 2015, pp. 103-114, p.104).

⁶² Iain Sinclair, *Landor's Tower* p.334.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.334.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁶⁵ Iain Sinclair, *Black Apples in the Gower* (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2015), p.11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁶⁸ Robert MacFarlane, *The Old Ways*, (London: Penguin, 2012).

⁶⁹ Robert MacFarlane, Stanley Donwood & Dan Richards, *Holloway*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).

travelling, and his English culture and history. This work, too, encompasses all the components of a psychogeographic book as described above.

A Psychogeographic Context

In an attempt to define terms and the relevant concepts which provide the background to my project, an explanation of the postmodern has significance, since it is, surely, relevant for the practice of contemporary psychogeography. In seeking to give it a temporal designation, I began with the understanding that it followed modernism and agreed with Charles Olson that the modernist movement was immersed in quantification; ‘logic and classification’ being an end rather than a means.⁷⁰ I was interested to find Butterick’s statement in his essay about Olson that ‘postmodern’ was ‘used to distinguish the new energies appearing in American culture following World War II’.⁷¹ Olson argues that modernism inevitably led to the projection of the postmodern from the former’s commencement in the fifteenth century with the ‘voyages of discovery which made “all the earth a known quantity” and the development of the machine in the nineteenth century’.⁷² Idiosyncratically perhaps, he believed that ‘postmodern’ practice would enable the resumption of ‘a proper relationship with the universe’⁷³ and he sought a return to this state that existed prior to 500 BC, i.e. before Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, with the restoration of ‘mythological participation in the laws of nature through a language which is “the act of the instant”’.⁷⁴ For him, the process requires ‘disordering or disorientation ... of syntax’⁷⁵ and new forms of poetry would arise from this.⁷⁶ And yet, as Sinclair assessed when he went to see Olson, this was not the destructive

⁷⁰ George F. Butterick, ‘Charles Olson and the Postmodern Advance’, *The Iowa Review* 11.4 (1980): 3-27. <<http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview/vol11/iss4/3>>, p.5, [accessed July 31 2018].

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷⁶ Butterick outlines some of the conventions of postmodern poetry in terms of a deliberate lack of precision in the use of language which undermines the medium itself: ‘Postmodern poetry categorically includes more—dream data, imparted messages, chance occurrences (and reoccurrences), fortuitous rhymes, misspellings, frustrations, the blanks Pound said should be left in for what we don’t know, stanzas, vulgarity, allusions, direct confessions, philosophical waxings, personal waning, aesthetic gossip. It demands more of the reader, proportionally. The syntax itself exhibits the postmodern “high tolerance for disorder.” Such poetry is not to be mistaken for gross randomness, pilings, that abuse our trust. It is even intended to test our faith in the representative power of language. One practices the *’istorin* of the sentence—to find out for oneself. The meter is the measure of the man not of the line.’ (*Ibid.*, p.22).

act of a rebellious anarchist.⁷⁷ Therefore, the subversion of structures and assumptions upon which we have relied that can be seen in psychogeographic writing are the products of an intelligent, deliberate development. For instance, postmodern concepts such as that of time as non-linear, can be seen in Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and is arguably 'designed to problematise scientific, social and cultural constructions of time, constructions that are associated with western concepts of reality',⁷⁸ which was certainly in my mind when I was writing, and might be considered to be more in evidence in my poetry than my stories.

As Gifford suggests, 'pastoral poetry in its idealized form was from the earliest the product of an urban culture'.⁷⁹ It grew from a juxtaposition of the manmade and the natural. The awareness of change and the transitory nature of cities was a contrast to the sense of imagined permanence and seasonal slow changes of the natural landscape. Garry Snyder seeks to take us back to a state which resonates with Olson's explanation of the postmodern and provides a different way of relating to the ecological environment:

As a poet, I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the late Paleolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth; the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe. I try to hold both history and wilderness in mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times.⁸⁰

He is linked with Olson and other American poets who are a part of the Black Mountain College USA movement and Beat poets whose work is, perhaps, a postmodern expression of the experimental (deconstructive) approach to language and cultural thinking, as well as being concerned with metaphysical and transcendental concepts and beliefs. Allen Ginsberg's pantheistic 'Wales Visitation' is an example, (an early influence on my project and relevant in its subject, i.e. his journey through Wales):

The
vision of the great One is myriad –

⁷⁷ Iain Sinclair argues that Olson's poetry was engaged with academia and not merely a popular or rebellious cultural product: 'We also knew that Charles Olson was much more than an outlaw enthusiasm, picked up in Ireland, supported by renegades in Bristol and communes along the Welsh borders; there was a deep engagement within the folds of Cambridge academia' (Iain Sinclair, *American Smoke* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), p.19).

⁷⁸ Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope* (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), p.175.

⁷⁹ Terry Gifford, *Green Voices* p.26.

⁸⁰ Gary Snyder's Essay in *A Controversy of Poet* cited 2009, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gary-snyder>

smoke curls upward from ashtray,
house fire burned low,
The night, still wet & moody black heaven
Starless
Upward in motion with wet wind.

The Transcendent / Spiritual Experience

Pathways across the countryside terrain have their origins in the journeys of ancient ancestors who used large stones as coordinates for others taking these routes and, later, they gained significance for early Christian pilgrims. Such trails are described by the Right Reverend David Huw Jones as being places ‘where a sense of hallowed peace is virtually tangible’,⁸¹ perhaps sensing that the use of a site for the same repeated, spiritual purpose causes a certain, similar type of experience to be available to any future visitor who seeks a relationship with that place. As he notes, these are ‘trails where prayers have been offered for centuries’.⁸² It is possible, therefore, to begin to associate significances of a transcendent nature with the natural landscape, and through assigning it meaning, draw the inhabitants of the urban to re-connect with a soul’s path or to reframe the inner terrain, which may have become confused by the social and cultural experience that is to be found in the city. As RS Thomas suggests:

In cities that
have outgrown their promise people
are becoming pilgrims
again, if not to this place,
then to the recreation of it
in their own spirits.⁸³

Thomas discovered that a true spirituality existed outside religion and in permanence within the natural landscape. Gifford describes Thomas’ later poetry as finding in the Welsh landscape ‘idealised sightings of eternity to be ‘recreated’ in the human spirit’.⁸⁴

There seems to be a current trend of renewed interest in the spiritual experience of the natural world alongside the awareness of the importance of conservation of the natural environment.

⁸¹ cited in Damian Walford Davies and Anne Eastham, *Saints and Stones* (Llandysul, Wales: Gomer, 2002), p.ix.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ R.S. Thomas, *The Moon in Lleyrn*, 1974, quoted in Gifford, *Green Voices* p.49.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

Nick Mayhew-Smith was interviewed about the recent (August 2013) BBC4 television series *Pagans and Pilgrims: Britain's Holiest Places*, having identified sites that seem to hold a certain sort of energy that is unchanging and that impacts people in a particular way, time after time. He stated:

So much is written across our beautiful landscape, so many stories and beliefs that embrace creation and the chaos of human existence in all their glory. No-one climbs a mountain or rows to an island to pray today, but we show some extraordinary places where our ancestors did just that. With a bit of imagination and a love of natural wonder you can still use all these amazing holy sites for an unforgettable spiritual experience.⁸⁵

He went on to write a similarly titled guide to 'sacred sites' in the UK.⁸⁶ Gifford cites Roger Sales' diagnosis of the 'elements' of pastoral poetry as containing 'refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem and reconstruction'⁸⁷. Thus, the countryside is described as providing an alternative to the urban, an escape from the metropolis to a place where higher, universal truths might be encountered and understood, where the individual's experience of life can be affected by the eternal nature of the environmental cycle.

Nature Poetry

Of course, much contemporary poetry about the rural landscape provides an experience other than the pastoral tradition of a descriptive interpretation that eulogises an unreal model. Gillian Clarke describes new nature poems as 'scientific rather than lyrical, concerned but not romantic. ... They relish the patterning of things, the connections between the worlds of nature and ideas'.⁸⁸ They involve exploration into the tension of our relationship with the natural environment. Simon Armitage, for instance, writes about the wild terrain of the Pennine Way, the people of this area and the possible catastrophic future of this environment caused by manmade pollutants.⁸⁹ He walked the route, starting from the point that is usually the end, a form of wandering with intent. He was continuing a tradition of writers walking as an integral part of the creative process, initiating work that may be about that process or, indeed, about completely different imaginings. His walk fits, too, with the nineteenth century

⁸⁵ 'Britain's Holiest Places', <<http://www.holybritain.co.uk>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

⁸⁶ Nick Mayhew Smith, *Britain's Holiest Places* (Bristol: Lifestyle Press, 2011).

⁸⁷ Gifford, *Green Voices*, p.18.

⁸⁸ Gillian Clarke, *At the Source* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p.14.

⁸⁹ Simon Armitage, *Walking Home* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013).

shift in societal perception of walking, when walking became a ‘deliberately selected mode of travel’⁹⁰ with political connotations for some; and for others ‘*a return to the garden [of Eden], an escape from the history and problems of fallen man*’.⁹¹ One might wonder whether this type of activity is a replacement for the ancient form of pilgrimage. Although the spiritual encounter is not identified through religious description, the content of the journey is of metaphysical / all-encompassing contemplation, leading to insights that are shared with the wider world. In this sense, I see my creative project as a kind of pilgrimage.

The ‘new Nature poets’ offer, too, the opportunity to ‘read’ places differently, in terms, as described by Peter Redgrove: ‘our animal awareness of the invisible natural forms of, for example, electricity and magnetism extra-sensuous perception’.⁹² As Hilary Llewellyn-Williams states, they write about ‘our struggle to come to terms with the fact that we’re part of the world out there and not simply observers and manipulators’.⁹³ Snyder suggests that we have had to move away from the evolutionary thinking of the previous two centuries to the ‘ecological model’, i.e. ‘reciprocal and interactive rather than competitive’.⁹⁴ He suggests, taken to its furthest interpretation, we might consider ourselves to *be* the natural world:

Mind in the mountains, mind of tumbling water, mind running rivers,
Mind of sifting
flowers in the gravels
At the end of the ice age
we are the bears, we are the ravens,
We are the salmon in the gravel
At the end of the ice age.⁹⁵

Our relationship with the natural world has significance of equal measure to the urban environment for psychogeographic writing. Perhaps it has gained greater importance, with the relatively recent destruction of the balance of forces in the planet and possible disintegration of the commercial markets, which have been intrinsic to the modern world. And poets are needed to open minds to different realities. As Clarke states, R.S. Thomas ‘consistently used science and the new nature to warn us of the calamity the earth faced, long

⁹⁰ Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.10.

⁹¹ John Elder, *Imagining the Earth* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p.94.

⁹² Terry Gifford, *Green Voices* p.10.

⁹³ *Poetry Wales* 1985, cited Gifford, *Ibid.*, 1995, p.3.

⁹⁴ John Elder, *Imagining the Earth* p.191.

⁹⁵ Gary Snyder, ‘Raven’s Beak River at the End’, in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009), p.123.

before it was fashionable to do so'.⁹⁶ There is a greater awareness of the need to develop a stronger sense of connection and better understanding of our place in the natural environment and even perhaps try to save the planet from what may become inevitable destruction. It might even be surmised that we are alienated from the physical world by digital technology, immersing ourselves in virtual reality. A psychogeographic practice in a rural environment, therefore, sits comfortably with the current development of a fuller exploration of our relationship with the natural landscape, including vertical shafts through historic eras. And of course, there is a clear readership for work of this kind.

The increase in this post-millennial era in the search for understanding of our self-identity is exemplified by the greater concentration of focus on mental health and an upsurge in writing about this. The use of the natural landscape has always provided a means to achieve health. The difference that walking can make may be beneficial and the connotations in Wales are complex. Entwistle considers the aspects of the socio-cultural and political in walking as a psychogeographic activity. She notes, citing Skoulding:

It is an embodied process of re-ordering the connections that shape everyday life; it draws on environmental and subconscious factors obscured by capitalism as a re-ordering of space from a revolutionary utopian perspective.⁹⁷

Ursula Martin exemplifies the use of walking for health in her solo 3,700 mile journey around Wales, crossing inhospitable terrain, finding places that are lesser known, experiencing the stories of those she meets on the way, learning local myths, processing her feelings about her cancer operation, life and death, her brother's near-fatal accident.⁹⁸

Cultural and Societal Contexts

When I first moved to West Wales in 1992, I was drawn on some level by the traditional perception of a 'rural idyll', 'rooted in pastoral images of agricultural life, and augmented by the supposed sins of urbanism. It can represent arcadia, utopia, or a refuge from

⁹⁶ Gillian Clarke, *At the Source* p. 14.

⁹⁷ Zoë Skoulding, 'Geographies of the Self, Ph.D. thesis, Bangor University, 2005, cited by Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender*, p.154.

⁹⁸ Ursula Martin, *One Woman Walks Wales* (Powys, Wales: Honno Press, 2018).

modernity'.⁹⁹ I was soon to find that I was immersed in multiple narratives, involved in the trade of 'a currency of ideas about 'belonging', 'marginalisation', 'theft', 'modernisation', 'naturalness' and so on'.¹⁰⁰ There was an uncertainty about where I fitted in relation to the traditional Welsh communities, although those of us who had chosen to come to the Ceredigion area for alternative lifestyles were able to find a sense of sisterhood through lifestyle choices, shared beliefs, ideals and attitude towards the natural environment. I was seeking to find that state as a creative practitioner when we resume our harmony with nature and connection with the divine.¹⁰¹

When I moved to Carmarthenshire seven years later, the clarity diminished because the 'tangle of influences, politics, morality, training, faith and situation'¹⁰² felt less inclusive for those of us who were immigrants. It was also influenced by the move to a town for practical reasons, which led to urban connotations in the lifestyle. The influence of the postmodern ideology as explained by Terry Eagleton, is also seen in the revival in the area of language, 'when reviled and humiliated groups are beginning to recover something of their history and self-hood' and I was one of those who had 'traditionally been their enem[y]'.¹⁰³ My ensuing sense of cultural alienation was exacerbated by the strong presence of the Welsh language and its use as a weapon by some; for, unwittingly, I had chosen to live in 'the 'Welshest' part of Welsh-speaking Wales', as described by Menna Elfyn in her interview with Entwistle.¹⁰⁴ The sense of being other is a strong consideration for those who live in Wales, according to Entwistle; and Elfyn chooses to keep English outside her personal identity, in order for her to stay within her sense of her otherness.¹⁰⁵ Evans, too, dwells within the sensation of being an outsider: 'Some things an outsider can see more clearly .. I am still an outsider'.¹⁰⁶ Entwistle states her conviction that the saving grace is poetry, which mediates the 'split cultural

⁹⁹ Paul Cloke, (En)culturing Political Economy: A Life in the Day of a 'Rural Geographer', (Paul Cloke, Marcus Doel, David Matless, Martin Phillips, Nigel Thrift, 1994), (Short, 1991, cited Cloke), pp. 149-190, p.177.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.163.

¹⁰¹ Snyder reflects on this relationship in his introduction to the collection *Turtle Island*: "The voice that speaks to me as a poet, what Westerners have called the Muse, is the voice of nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess, the Magna Mater." (Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), introductory note).

¹⁰² Ibid., p.149.

¹⁰³ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.121.

¹⁰⁴ Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender* p.40.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.46.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.83.

experience’, and takes us ‘beyond identitarian boundaries’.¹⁰⁷ I might add that this became one of my aims in my writing.

My quest began to establish a new perception of self-identity by exploring my personal connection with the natural landscape of West Wales and seeking to use psychogeographic practice to take a meta-approach, to find my own ‘ways of seeing’,¹⁰⁸ believing that this was a step away from interaction with the socio-cultural dimensions of the area.

I soon found, however, that I could evade neither cultural nor societal influence, because my response to the natural landscape was inevitably interwoven with my personal history and interactions with others who encountered the identified spaces. I could relate to Snyder’s developed Buddhist philosophy, that the mountains and rivers are us and we are their expression, and our poetry is the voice of the earth: ‘This living flowing land / is all there is, forever / *We are it / it sings through us*’¹⁰⁹ It became clear that my responses were complex; any interaction became a narrative that involved the story of what had been before. In my selection of the starting point of the source of the river in the wilderness of the Cambrian mountains, I had made the choice, unintentionally, to go back to the point of origin of our cultural experience, where there are menhirs, stone circles and cairns; and I was making a connection with some of the prehistoric mythologies from which much has developed. Snyder suggested to Wendell Berry:

the place where we do our best work is in the unconscious, or myth-consciousness of the culture... reviving the value system and integrity and authenticity that belongs to the Neolithic.¹¹⁰

This is a view I share.

Contemporary developments in psychogeography related to my experiences. For practical reasons I would be neither walking nor swimming the length of the Towy, so I had selected sites that had an association with the river and in my judgement contained an essence of its varied stages. My ‘walking’ involved the use of mechanical transport to get me to certain sites and then limited perambulation around a site. As ‘the Crab Man’ states in a similar

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.21.

¹⁰⁹ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* p.41.

¹¹⁰ Loren Wilkinson, Critical Review of Chad Wriglesworth, ed. *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder*, *Journal of Ecosophy* 32.1 (2016), p.82.

situation in *Mythogeography*, this could ‘charitably’ be considered a ‘catapult’; ‘a Lettriste device, an artificial stimulant a walker can use to disrupt themselves’.¹¹¹ It meant in practice that my walked experience of the site was of greater significance and intensity than the act of walking from or to it might have been.

Psychogeography’s Developments

Phil Smith, a member of Wrights & Sites, terms a layered approach to interaction with place ‘mythogeography’, which ‘places the fictional, fanciful, mistaken and personal on equal terms with factual, municipal history’.¹¹² In his explanation of the expression he writes about ‘the key principles of multiplicity and trajectory’¹¹³ and shows that it encompasses all types of walking and can include travelling by car to get to the site. Smith makes further efforts to differentiate between his approach and psychogeography, outlining his less regimented approach:

‘This is walking as art, hyper-strolling, taking the ramble on a ramble, revolutionary walking, pilgrimage, extreme walking and walking for a change. The ideas and tactics here are ones that anyone can use; whether for a stroll around the corner or a pilgrimage to a shrine that has yet to be built. Take the friend in your head, the people you love and the strangers you encounter on the journeys of their lives’.¹¹⁴

Permission is given to undertake the activity in any way that appeals. Overall, in her analysis of mythogeography describes it as a ‘combination of pedestrian resistance and magical thinking’,¹¹⁵ designed ‘to give story and history equal footing’.¹¹⁶ She finds its counter-factual approach appealing, lending greater emphasis to the intuitive.¹¹⁷ I could relate

¹¹¹ ‘The Crab Man’ aka Phil Smith, *Mythogeography* (Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2010), p.44.

¹¹² S. Hodge, S. Persighetti, P. Smith and C. Turner, (2004). ‘Mis-guiding the City Walker’, Wrights & Sights presentation at *Cities for People: The Fifth International Conference on Walking in the 21st Century* Copenhagen. <<http://mis-guide.com>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

¹¹³ Smith outlines his approach to mythogeography: ‘Applied to walking that means resisting routines and boundaries and treasuring the many selves you may pass through or encounter on your journey. I would always try to protect the freedom of walkers to use guises and camouflage in acts of transformation.’ Phil Smith, *On Walking* p.16.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., no p.no.

¹¹⁵ Sonia Overall, ‘The walking dead: or why psychogeography matters’, paper presented at Re-enchanting the Academy, Canterbury Christ Church University, 25 September 2015, p.7.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.6.

¹¹⁷ Overall argues that the fantasy and the factual have equal weight in mythogeography: ‘Mythogeography’s counter-touristic approach is also hugely refreshing. “Move along”, say the signs and the roped-off areas; “look over here, walk this way, keep out. These are the dates and facts.” But equally compelling are the possibilities, the overlooked or forgotten stories, the ghosts, folktales and urban legends that tell us so much about a place, its visitors and inhabitants’, (Ibid., p. 7).

comfortably to this approach in the project as I visited the identified sites. I was also drawn to the concept of layers that Smith describes from the work of Tim Ingold, who:

advocates an image of the earth (not unlike certain esoteric world pictures) a series of layers and unfolding crannies, which must be explored more and more closely, not by the distancing of the observer, but by immersion and involvement.¹¹⁸

This might also be thought of as ‘deep topography’, as described by Ian Marchant. In writing about his walk with his dog in Presteigne, he decided to lift ‘one element from the early Debordist psychotravellers: I will alter my consciousness for the walk’.¹¹⁹ The similarities of area and geography and practice led in my own work to writing that exhibited this, c.f. some of the poems written in the town of Carmarthen. Papadimitriou coined the term and Overall describes it, suggesting that it is a progression from mythogeography. Her description of the practice drew me to conclude that this was also the type of activity that I was undertaking for the project:

Deep Topography enables Papadimitriou to constantly reassess his relationship with marginal and liminal spaces. ... It’s a re-mystification of the habitual and man-made: an embracing of what is, has been and could be: a constant defamiliarising. In this sense, Deep Topography draws on the ‘mytho’ of Mythogeography, accepting the individual experience, the imagined and fictitious along with the cherished historic and contemporary overlooked.¹²⁰

For instance, I experienced this particularly during the repeated daily walks with a dog along a path beside the river and scrubby wasteland at the edge of Carmarthen town. Meaning arose from a variety of experiences with what often is regarded as having little status or significance and no value was given to a judgement of the material; fiction and fact were synonymous.

¹¹⁸ ‘The Crab Man’ aka Phil Smith, *Mythogeography* p.216.

¹¹⁹ Ian Marchant, *Walking the Dog: (For Those Who Don’t Know How to Do It)*, (ed. Tina Richardson, 2015), pp. 47 – 58, p.50.

¹²⁰ Sonia Overall, *The walking dead: or why psychogeography matters* p.8.

Walking is an activity that is intrinsic to human existence, and a regular form of travel that has provided access to other places on a basis of want or need. Unless there is a difficulty with the use of two feet, one after the other in repetitive movements, this is the first pattern of travel for most human beings. The rhythm and speed can be varied, but effectively it is a fundamental necessity for living. The actions arise from a conscious decision to undertake a physical activity and resonate with the automatic procedures of the lungs and the heart; Solnit suggests that it is aligned with our innate, instinctive selves.¹²¹ Indeed, for many, once the skill has been acquired, the walker becomes ‘largely oblivious to its operation’,¹²² which lends itself to the development of other cerebral activity. For Frédéric Gros the act of walking creates the opportunity to be different, think differently, to experience a freedom: ‘By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and history.’¹²³ It can help us to step outside the limitations of who we are in the context of contemporary community or society.

An essential factor of the discipline of psychogeography involves interrogation of a route or urban area whilst strolling along or through it, in the manner of the *flâneur*. Some practitioners walk the length of a river, such as the Thames, from source to mouth, stopping at significant sites, and then write about the discoveries from the experience, as in *Thames: Sacred River* by Peter Ackroyd, 2007. He writes: ‘To be baptised in the river is also to be reborn, to have crossed the threshold into a new life’.¹²⁴ The idea that the river holds the power of a liminal experience was inspiring to me as I was considering the Towy river as the project’s focus. I rarely entered the water, however, remaining as an observer on the banks for most of the way, watching those who engaged with its currents – anglers, the coracle fishermen, the seal, otters, cormorants, herons.

The Towy River

It seemed, therefore, easy to make the decision for psychogeographic activity to be undertaken along the length of the Towy, the longest river that flows only in Wales. There

¹²¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.5.

¹²² Merlin Coverley, *The Art of Wandering* p.11.

¹²³ Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* (London: Verso, 2015), p.6.

¹²⁴ Peter Ackroyd, *Thames – Sacred River* (London: Vintage Books, London, 2008), p.82.

was already a sense of personal relationship with its entirety, having lived near to the source and at other places between there and its mouth, and a personal history had already developed alongside it. It seemed, too, that it held meaning of an equivalent sort to the Thames in England. My previous encounters with it had suggested, as Ackroyd speculates, 'there are some parts of the river that create or harbour distinct properties that are not susceptible to rational analysis'.¹²⁵ As I walked beside its waters, I felt that I had identified the differences that it generated through differing 'states of mind', and the places of human habitation seemed to depict these differences. The poems and stories that I wrote seem to echo this; for instance, there was a sense of wildness in the Cambrian mountains, a freedom from societal behaviour requirements and even a sense of mischief, which is why I wrote the *Twm Sion Cati* triptych and set the story about the man having an affair at Strata Florida. I was motivated to write from the points of view of each of these individuals having read Simon Armitage's 'Hitcher', a monologue in which a murderer describes a murder he has committed.¹²⁶

Penny Billington describes a druidic explanation for the importance of our connection with the 'ancestral heart' of the natural world,¹²⁷ and describes the practices of our ancestors who made 'votive offerings . . . to the realm of the Gods through the portal of deep water', offering their precious goods to 'lakes, fast-flowing rivers and marshland'.¹²⁸ Thus, the selection of the river, from its source to mouth has a spiritual resonance with ancient roots.

The river travels 75 miles through an area of Wales that has a strong Welsh identity and a resistance to Anglicisation. The effects of the Welsh Renaissance that were generated by William Salesbury and compatriots at Abergwili from the Bishop's Palace have reverberated throughout the centuries. It is said that it was he who saved the Welsh language through his translations, his book of Welsh proverbs and Welsh/English dictionary.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.47.

¹²⁶ Simon Armitage, *Paper Aeroplane* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), p.62.

¹²⁷ Penny Billington, 'The Heart of the Land: The Druidic Connection' in Paul Davies & Caitlín Matthews (eds.), *This Ancient Heart The Threefold Relationship Between Landscape, Ancestor and Self* pp.160-179, p.163.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.171.

¹²⁹ William Mathias, SALESBURY, WILLIAM (1520 - 1584), <<http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-SALE-WIL-1520.html>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

The challenges of making a relationship with the area as an immigrant from the country that is regarded as the oppressor of the nation created its own issues as I had attempted to integrate, realising often that the Welsh community has incontrovertible limits to acceptance and inclusion. I had been naïve to think I would ever be fully accepted, despite my attempts to adopt cultural practices and language and to distance myself from perceptions of colonialism. Over time, I came to realise that I would always be on the edge of the community of those of Welsh heritage, no matter whether I spoke the language or not. This disaffection led me to a separation from that society, which enabled me to connect unhindered with the natural landscape and to operate as an observer, one who experienced unreciprocated emotions. This viewpoint allowed me to hear the stories of others with empathy and not getting lost in their experiences, sitting beside them in their situation, not in it with them. As Lauren Elkin suggests, the state of being ‘un-rooted’, so that we are no longer ‘protected by place’, is what leads us to find our true identity and gives us the freedom to write, to be: ‘Beware roots. Beware purity. Beware fixity. Beware the creeping feeling that you belong. Embrace flow, impurity, fusion.’¹³⁰ In the choice of working with the flow of a river in my sense of ‘unbelonging’, this was surely the way to find myself and deal with inner wounds that were holding me back.

Walking – how to

As mentioned above, there is discussion amongst psychogeographers about the type of walking that is required; for example, whether it should be done without intent or with a previously specified objective. Tina Richardson is very clear that it is an urban practice that is undertaken in cities, as is Maisie Ridgway: ‘Put simply, psychogeography is the exploration of the psychological effects of an urban environment’.¹³¹ Is it a ‘sensory walk’ as suggested by Victoria Henshaw, where ‘the physical environments through which a walk passes can provide many layers of meaning influenced by social and cultural norms, memories, experiences, expectations and power relationships’?¹³² If this is the case, then its execution is equally acceptable in the rural environment, given that this, too, has been affected by socio-cultural and politico-historical factors.

¹³⁰ Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* p.279.

¹³¹ Maisie Ridgway, *An Introduction to Psychogeography* p.2.

¹³² Victoria Henshaw, ‘Route Planning a Sensory Walk’, (ed. Tina Richardson, 2015), pp. 195 – 210, p.196.

The intent of the walker is a noteworthy consideration: for some it is finding the connection with the histories of the identified site; for some it is an expression of political dissent, for some it is a mystical exposition; and for others it is an exploration of an undetermined journey and may involve ‘urban drift’. Gros describes the type of movement as a ‘form of strolling’ with three pre-requisites: ‘city, crowd and capitalism.’¹³³ He proposes that the man-made, built environment has become a landscape of its own, which can be traversed using the same perceptive sensitivities as if it were a natural geography.¹³⁴ The relationship with the ‘crowd’ is necessarily one of separation, ‘anonymity’,¹³⁵ and thereby an aloneness; while ‘capitalism’ is the dominant ideology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and provides a structure to interact with and against. This is equally applicable to rural practice if the nature of the activity is about separation or aloneness, for we are doing just that because we are stepping away from the crowd and, as we ponder and process while we walk, we have to deal with capitalist thought, because we are inevitably products of this system. And of course, the ‘natural’ landscape has evidence of man’s interventions/occupations, so we are reminded of the effects of human occupation since earliest times. Solnit addresses the difference of this quality in the two environments:

Solitude in the city is about the lack of other people or rather their distance beyond a door or wall, but in remote places it isn’t an absence but the presence of something else, a kind of humming silence in which solitude seems as natural to your species as any other, words strange rocks you may turn over.¹³⁶

I could relate to this particularly when I was in the Cambrian mountains, where there were no signs of current human occupation to be seen.

Cartography

The execution of a psychogeographic event may entail the use of maps, although the usage may be anarchic, for instance using a map of Brussels whilst walking in the Preselis (as Zoë Skoulding did). This achieved a ‘(dis)located, (dis)locating view of the invariably undecideable relationship between self and place, looker and looked-at landscape, here and

¹³³Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* p. 175.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.177.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2006), p.131.

there'.¹³⁷ The use of deictic markers in this list suggests how hard it is to identify where we stand, how we are situated in our relationship with places. Coverley quotes Machen: 'and as to maps, for example, if known they must be forgotten... For the essence of this [the London Art] is that it must be an adventure into the unknown'.¹³⁸ The reactive stance of a psychogeographer is conveyed in the way that they apply cartography, finding a way to reassert a sense of self over the control that is innate in a printed map.¹³⁹ Skoulding suggests that walking is 'about everyday life' and 'in everyday experience locations are pulled into unexpected conjunctions and dislocations that the rational overhead view of the map can never reveal'.¹⁴⁰ This reminds me of Olson's definition of modernism being overwhelmingly about quantification, which is surely what cartography is concerned with, containing and defining landscape through human activity, although it also attests to our curiosity and vision. As Stephen S. Hall explains:

maps ultimately testify to our belief in the value of exploration, whether the compass is pointed inward or out. To do so is to appreciate the value of the mind as a dynamic vessel of exploration; it does not travel according to the limits of the compass rose, but moves by association. And when the mind comes to rest, when it ceases its orientating leaps and shunts and associations, we find ourselves back where we started, where Here intersects Now.¹⁴¹

I made the choice not to use a map in my practice; for instance, when I was searching for the source of the Towy in the Cambrian mountains, knowing that I would use an instinctual approach to the paths that I would be negotiating, that specific points would be difficult to recognise because it is a bog, I hoped that I would be better able to connect with ancient ways in the process. I was aware that, as a practitioner experimenting with mythogeography, I would be: 'guided less by maps and more by the intuiting of atmospheres and ambiances'.¹⁴² This heightened my sense of vulnerability and led to a freshness in my reactions, with a more delicate response to the land. In the instances of sites being well known, a different style of

¹³⁷ Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender* p.151.

¹³⁸ Merlin Coverley, 'The Art of Wandering: Arthur Machen's London Science', (ed. Tina Richardson, 2015), pp. 103-114, p.110.

¹³⁹ 'Architectural theorist Robert Harbison says that: "To put a city in a book, to put the world on one sheet of paper — maps are the most condensed humanized spaces of all... They make the landscape fit indoors, make us masters of sights we can't see and spaces we can't cover." So, creating or manipulating maps in order to navigate space is a form of empowerment that allows autonomy over our environment and praises discovery over dictation.' (Maisie Ridgeway, *An Introduction to Psychogeography*).

¹⁴⁰ Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender* p.152.

¹⁴¹ Katharine Harmon, *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).

¹⁴² Phil Smith, *On Walking* (Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2014), p.15.

activity needs to be devised, and in these cases the ‘drift’ is applicable, i.e. lifting the mental process to a level that does not calculate and relies more on the intuitive senses. I was well acquainted with most of the sites that I visited and had to be careful to avoid assumptive responses. With those that I had not been to before, I found that the experience was rather different, and I was more aware of ‘looking’ at my surroundings and more ‘exposed’ to all aspects of the experience. Solnit describes Walter Benjamin’s definition of the desired state in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*: ‘to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography.’¹⁴³ The (iterated) visits to known places were always undertaken with a frame of mind designed to open me to encounters with others – people and/or wildlife – and with an awareness that what I was doing was ‘equivalent to the philosophical and spiritual search of the alchemists’.¹⁴⁴

Common Ground by Rob Cowen begins with an analysis of maps: ‘Maps transform us. They make birds of us all. They reveal the patterns of our existence and unlock our cages.’¹⁴⁵ I think that this is a good explanation for why I wanted to use maps, firstly of the whole river and then of sections of the river as chapter headings in the eventual format of the book. The first message from this is that the river is a superstructure for the book. Using maps in combination with a haiku set the scene for each particular section of writing. I liked the thought of being a bird and taking a view from above over the sites that I was interrogating and the sense of freedom that comes with this. At the same time, I was aware of my preference to step away from maps in an unlimited frame of mind and the greater freedom that gave to my use of my intuitive faculties in my deeper interaction with sites. I felt, however, that they helped to direct the reader’s attention to the differing nature of each area.

Artwork

As much as writing is a creative response to place, visual art too can be a product of psychogeography and this is one of the reasons why I included visual images as part of the project and in the final version. The environment may be the subject of the activity and also

¹⁴³ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* p.6.

¹⁴⁴ Phil Smith, *On Walking* p.15.

¹⁴⁵ Rob Cowen, *Common Ground* (London: Hutchinson, 2015), p.1.

the walking. David Evans' 'field guide' to art and walking suggests that there are two ways this latter might be present, i.e. as the subject or as 'an integral element of the artwork'.¹⁴⁶ Coverley describes how the artists' responses to environment began with the Dadaists:

upgrading the role of flâneur from disinterested observer to participant in an aesthetic experiment ... [which] transfer[s] artistic value away from the realm of objects towards space and performance.¹⁴⁷

From these first developments of this sort of art came the work of Richard Long, landscape artist, who 'explores relationships between time, distance geography and measurement'¹⁴⁸, as he makes 'conceptual drawings on the Earth' through his walking of predetermined routes. Solnit describes his work as a form of travel writing, which is ambiguous and leaves a great deal to the viewer's imagination.¹⁴⁹ This reminds me of Olson's explanation of postmodernism and 'field composition', a 'poetics of improvisation and spontaneity',¹⁵⁰ which leads eventually to a different use of language, stripping it back to the breath. There is an openness in both these men to an inventive conception of the work, both written and visual, which leads to a freedom in whatever form and expression is chosen. Solnit feels that Long has taken the creative response to a level beyond that of the more conservative literary world.¹⁵¹ This approach inspired me when I began the project.

Woman

A further consideration in the activity was the effect of my gender, for I identify as female. I was very aware that there is a preponderance of male practitioners in the field. Lauren Elkin describes the *flâneur* as a 'figure of masculine privilege and leisure, with time and money and no immediate responsibilities to claim his attention.'¹⁵² George Sand had to cross-dress in

¹⁴⁶ David Evans, 'Introduction', David Evans (ed.), *The Art of Walking* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), pp.13-18, p.17.

¹⁴⁷ Merlin Coverley, *The Art of Wandering* p.184.

¹⁴⁸ Katharine Harmon *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* p.88. Harmon describes his work: '[he] investigates the interaction between a single man and a solitary landscape'.

¹⁴⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.270.

¹⁵⁰ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p.69.

¹⁵¹ Solnit suggests that in Long's work we can perceive a shift from the purely linguistic: 'But while the literary art of the rural walk bogged down in convention, sentimentality, and autobiographical chatter, Long's art is austere, almost silent, and entirely new in its emphasis on the walk itself as having a shape, and this is less a cultural legacy than a creative reassessment' (Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.272).

¹⁵² Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* p.3.

order to have the freedom to wander around the city alone when she wished. Women often have been restricted too in the past by the responsibilities of keeping their families, the ways that their work consisted in keeping a home. It was harder for them to write about personal experience historically. More immediately, Entwistle explains the effect of the ‘gender-constraining constructions’¹⁵³ of Welsh culture, due to the ‘patriarchal character of the bard’s powerful cultural influence’, which was challenged by Menna Elfyn, who began to write ‘in ways which made space, figuratively and literally, for the meshing languages of her own physicality’.¹⁵⁴ Increasingly, I became aware that my writing unavoidably reflected my experience as a woman. It is said that the field of psychogeography is male-dominated and my own experience suggested that this is so. For instance, at the Black Mountain College USA celebration in Crickhowell, May 2018, there was a lack of women presenters and a ‘patrician flavour’ to the event; it was ‘individualist, heroic, epic and transgressive’, as described by Dee Heddon and Cathy Turner in their essay,¹⁵⁵ and who ‘mobilise the political potential of walking to create new social relationships rather than produce extreme versions of the same old ambulating’¹⁵⁶.

Solnit describes the effect of historical convention on the practice of walking:

I was advised to stay indoors at night, to wear baggy clothes, to cover or cut my hair, to try to look like a man, to move someplace more expensive, to take taxis, to buy a car, to move in groups, to get a man to escort me – all modern versions of Greek walls and Assyrian veils.¹⁵⁷

She deduced that “many women had been so successfully socialised to know their place that they had chosen more conservative, gregarious lives without realising why. The very desire to walk alone had been extinguished in them”.¹⁵⁸ The field of psychogeography seems a distinctly male province and this may be because of the conventions that held women back, as described above; but since it includes political acts and cultural insurrection in its ethos, the participation of a woman in this type of activity can challenge assumptions, for ‘space is a feminist issue’,¹⁵⁹ also in the rural environment. As Smith maintains, there are plenty of

¹⁵³ Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender* p.30.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Dee Heddon and Cathy Turner, ‘Walking Women: Shifting the Tales and Scales of Mobility’, cited by Phil Smith in *On Walking* p.163.

¹⁵⁶ Phil Smith, *On Walking* p.163.

¹⁵⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.241.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* p.287.

women walking, although they may be absent from the narrative; and he perceives there are ‘increasing numbers of women making aesthetic and activist walking in public space’,¹⁶⁰ despite the need for more work to be done to make these places safer for women and for historic prejudices and traditions to be wiped away. Because of the interrelation between them, the rectification of both can come from heightened and promoted interaction. Grace Nichols believes that: ‘crimes against nature are crimes against women’, so if we heal the land, the lives of women should improve and vice versa.¹⁶¹ During the project I began to understand the significance of my being a woman in my interaction with, and understanding of, the sites in the natural landscape as I interpreted the energies and related these to human experience.

The Spiritual Dimension

There are signs of pilgrimages in north Pembrokeshire with the presence of stone markers first placed centuries ago and, alongside or on top of these, sixth century churches used by early Christians that indicate safe routes for pilgrims and that communicate the sites’ spiritual significance to those seekers. Many of these trails lead to Saint Davids, a location where ‘people come every year from all over the world to experience the beauty and spirituality of this sanctuary of clear air suspended between the boisterous seas and the solidity of the ancient land’.¹⁶² In the Cambrian mountains, there are Bronze Age cairns at places which are considered to be sacred sites for the tribes who lived there then. It is thought that they were built to honour the energies of the waters that arose there as the sources of the Teifi and Tywi rivers.

Through the act of walking there may be a sense of connecting with the spiritual aspect of one’s existence, and perhaps that generates alterations in the traversed land as well as in personal realities. As Solnit states: ‘pilgrimage unites belief with action, thinking with doing, and it makes sense that this harmony is achieved when the sacred has a material presence and location’¹⁶³. Interestingly, in a similar strand of thought, Coverley also references John

¹⁶⁰ Phil Smith, *On Walking* p.163.

¹⁶¹ Terry Gifford, ‘Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies’, p.27.

¹⁶² Damian Walford Davies and Anne Eastham, *Saints and Stones* p.118.

¹⁶³ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.50.

Bunyan.¹⁶⁴ Solnit describes Snyder's discovery of the effect of walking with a specific intent and focus.¹⁶⁵ How we construe a journey can be synonymous with how we live and the way that we travel may be transformative, while the arrival at a destination is of equal importance. The challenging pilgrimage performed annually by the Huichol involves the harvesting of peyote and 'to *keep the world going*'.¹⁶⁶ Thus, the act is performed for two purposes, 'personal and cosmic'.¹⁶⁷ This was certainly a component of the project, walking at sites from the source to the mouth of the river where its waters merge with those of the sea and conceiving of a transcendental event, healing not just of the self but of the past, the present and the future.¹⁶⁸ The changes would include finding ways to acceptance and accommodation of 'otherness' as a positive rather than an injury.

Site energies

As part of my journey, I wanted to encounter some of these sites, to experience what has made them enduringly special. I wonder whether there are innate energies within the land and whether events / thoughts / experiences of those who have been at that place in the past have been affected by them and also somehow invigorated those energies. The choice of sites may originally have been made through an intuitive 'reading' by those with suitable awareness of their power – e.g. Stonehenge, Gors Fawr in the Preselis, churches and cathedrals that have been built on prehistoric sacred sites. Thereafter, it is arguable that the effect of constant prayer and supplication has increased or maintained the level of that power as has been the case in centres of power as diverse as Mecca and Westminster Cathedral.

R. J. Stewart maintains that 'there is an individual power within each land, a power which varies from zone to zone, place to place, but which leads and attunes us to the potent

¹⁶⁴ Coverley describes these journeys as 'arduous', that need to be completed 'in the correct manner, as any deviation from the true path will end not in salvation but in damnation' (Merlin Coverley, *The Art of Wandering* p.49).

¹⁶⁵ 'how walking the landscape can become both ritual and meditation', (Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.146).

¹⁶⁶ Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* p.126.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.127.

¹⁶⁸ Solnit describes her feelings about the endings of a river's journey into the sea, which reflect mine in their relation to a personal metaphysical experience at a life's end: 'The river we had been following flowed into the sea, becoming broad and tranquil at its mouth, and the afternoon light lit to silver, the same silver as the sea. I looked and two things that had been stories seemed fact at that moment: the belief of many coastal tribes that the souls of the dead go west over the sea, and the description of death as the point at which the river enters the sea.' (Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* p.61).

awareness of the planet as a whole being.’¹⁶⁹ This resonated with me, because of my personal observation of places that I had visited. They each had a different ‘sensation’ and had provoked in me an awareness of human responses that were dependent on the energies inherent in each site. For instance, I discovered different individuals who spontaneously and independently disclosed that they had experienced the same sensation of bliss/peacefulness and timelessness at Strata Florida, even though there was little to indicate how the site had been used, nor that it had been considered special in any way – an archway, a field, a few flagstones next to a small church and graveyard. It might be said that cultural predetermination would cause such a similar reaction, but then why this particular space and not another one that resembled it?

I learnt, too, that in Carmarthen local wisdom states that the Demetae tribe were early settlers of the area and had been so named for their worship of the god of war and drunkenness - Demetos, which pretty much describes the behaviour of Carmarthenites after dark. This also underlies the account from an elderly neighbour that Carmarthen has always had this type of behaviour and is known for it. He told me how the town used to be described as the Wild West and how ballots could not be taken in elections a hundred or so years ago because of the fear that the government officials would not be safe. The alternative explanation of the Demetae is that they were worshippers of the Irish god, Dagda, ‘the god of protection, warriors, knowledge, the arts, magic, music, initiation, prophecy, weather, reincarnation, death, fire, the sun, healing, regeneration, prosperity and plenty’.¹⁷⁰ The practice of seeing that there is a duality or plurality in all gods and goddesses lends itself to the interpretation of different potential outcomes from interaction with energies at a site. The goddess Maeve whose name means intoxication, and who is a warrior goddess, also represents magic and mysticism. If there is a type of energy that resides in the area of Carmarthen, it might be suggested that it could lead to drunkenness and war-making and yet also to spiritual and creative activity, which would explain the presence of the site of a large, powerful friary at one end of the town and the priory at the other, where kings have been buried. It would also explain how it could once have been the capital of Wales and the base of Rhys ab Gruffydd who was responsible for putting the Tudor lineage on the British throne.

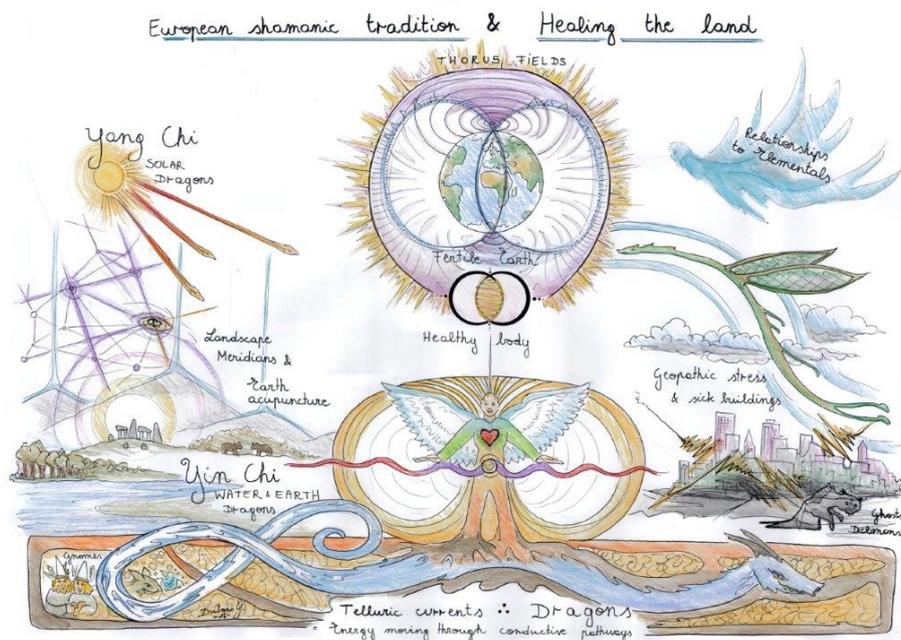
¹⁶⁹ R.J. Stewart, *Power Within the Land* p.2.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Celtic Kingdoms of the British Isles’, <<http://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsBritain/BritainDemetae.htm>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

The presence of site energies is not a new concept, having been called ‘genius loci’ in the past and acknowledged as a reality by the Romantic poets, who also raised the value of emotion and intuition to an equal level with reason. (I could easily identify with their philosophies.) Patrick MacManaway a geomancer and dowser, explains the historical understanding of this:

For our ancestors and still many around the world today, the reality of the Spirit of Place or Genius Loci, [its] *sic* subtle defining personality and [its] *sic* profound influence on all things that live and occur there, was and is taken for granted – a core assumption in a perceptive and integrated cultural paradigm.¹⁷¹

He states that he is able to ‘read’ sites and the impact of the thoughts and feelings of those who have been at those sites, ‘footprints in the sand, awareness and memory of mining and excavations, of battles and land disputes, of the many overlapping uses and demands of the place from history into the present’.¹⁷²



Art by: [Yannick Dubois](#), Inspired by Patrick’s talk at Shamanic Lands Conference 2016¹⁷³

According to Solnit, ‘the landscapes, urban and rural, gestate the stories’.¹⁷⁴ I felt that if I could interact with previously identified places through walking, I would be able to make

¹⁷¹ Patrick Macmanaway, ‘Dialogue with the Spirit of Place’, <<http://patrickmacmanaway.com/important-conversation-agriculture/>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.4.

better connection with some of the historic stories and happenings that have become interlaced in the land itself and also begin to find some of the fundamental essence of each individual site, expecting a differentiated set of experiences. From this I could create poetic responses. *The Songlines*¹⁷⁵ by Bruce Chatwin combines fiction and non-fiction and could be construed as an application of psychogeography in the rural environment, especially in relation to socio-history, culture and identity. He travelled through the Outback in Australia, journeying with members of the indigenous Australian community. He learnt about the process of song and walking in that society, through which there is an establishment of songlines (like a sort of map made from powerlines), and the Aboriginal mythological Dreamtime. 'The song and the land are one.'¹⁷⁶ Steven Hitchins' *Canalchemy* project has a similar sense of connection with the land through the recitation of words and a healing of old wounds by walking the now defunct canal in Glamorgan.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, the concept of lines of energy (ley lines) has been described by Sinclair and has been explored by Laurence Main who has renamed them 'spirit paths', finding them in Wales,¹⁷⁸ comparing them to 'dragon paths of China and the fairy paths of Ireland'.¹⁷⁹ He identifies some sacred sites and gives details about how these places might be investigated. His way of working relies on use of the intuitive faculty and acceptance of his advice depends on the reader's willingness to suspend a need for hard evidence. Strata Florida and the Cambrian mountains are on his itinerary and he describes the latter as 'the sacred heart of Wales'.¹⁸⁰ I used a quotation from this section to begin the piece about my visit to the source of the Towy and was aware that intuition (the same as the Aborigines' Dreamtime?) was an important factor in my responses here and throughout the project.

Psychogeography in a rural environment

But how to expedite psychogeographic practice in a rural environment? Solnit writes about Walter Benjamin who lived in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century¹⁸¹, and who

¹⁷⁵ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Vintage, 1998).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.28.

¹⁷⁷ Steven Hitchins, 'Canalchemy', <<https://stevenhitchins.wixsite.com/canalchemy>>, [accessed August 7th 2018].

¹⁷⁸ Laurence Main, *The Spirit Paths of Wales* (Cumbria: Cicerone Press, 2000).

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.71.

¹⁸¹ 'One of the great scholars of cities and the art of walking them', (Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* p.197).

analysed and described the activity of the *flâneur*, who ‘goes botanizing on the asphalt’, suggesting that it equates with rambling in the countryside, appreciating the flora that is to be found. This suggests that the urban practice is not so very alien to the rural landscape. In *Common Ground*, Cowen writes about the growth of his relationship with a piece of wasteland on the edge of the housing estate in Harrogate, to where he moved from London. The descriptive and evocative writing describes the wildlife that he encountered during this time, his imagined transference into being those animals, and the history of this site as it arises. At the same time, he is going through a personal transformation alongside the foetal development of his son, up to his baby’s eventual birth. I had begun to realise that my journey along the length of the Towy was not all that I was writing about and that as I depicted places, I was also describing my internal experiences.

The main character in *Common Ground* is the place and the story is about how Cowen grows to understand it:

With evening falling the light appears to slip down the gradient of the field and puddle at my feet. But there is also a strangeness here, a keen sense of what lies beneath. A thinness in the fabric. This is a margin a within a margin. ... It’s moments like these that make you think places have a memory of their own.¹⁸²

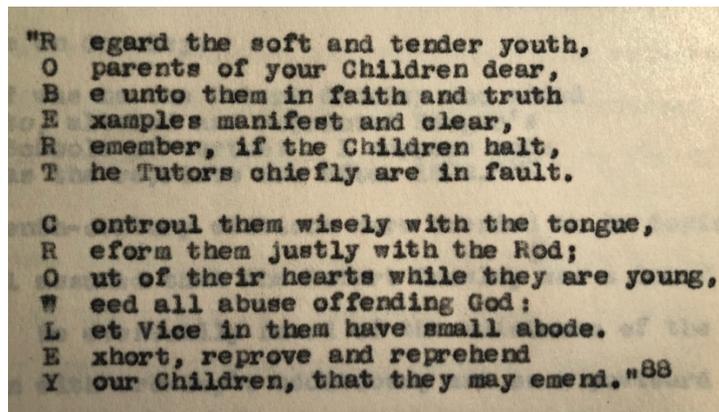
My frequent walks in Carmarthen with a dog along the path that took me along the side of the Towy river, on land which is wasteland, are comparable. Each visit was different, affected by the level of the river, the wildlife that I saw, the season, the weather, how I was feeling, my learning about previous events in the area. The repetition led to a deepening in my sense of relationship with the place, with its stories and its histories.

The initial intent of my project had been to develop the ideas that arose from research following on from my mother’s MA thesis¹⁸³ and to find out more about the renaissance that had occurred at the Bishop’s Palace in Abergwili, led by William Salesbury with Richard Davies, then Bishop of Saint Davids, when the New Testament was translated by them into Welsh and published by Robert Crowley in 1567. It seemed to me that this site would hold energies that could possibly generate creative expression. The village of Abergwili sits in the

¹⁸² Rob Cowen, *Common Ground* p.270.

¹⁸³ Illston, Olga E., *A Literary and Bibliographical Study of the Work of Robert Crowley, (1517 – 1588) Printer, Puritan and Poet.*, King’s College, University of London, (1953).

Towy valley and I have long been aware of a certain quality of joy that I feel when I travel through this part of the landscape and at the sites that I have visited in this part of the Towy. I had initially been drawn to the idea of a story about the friendship that had been formed at Oxford University between Salesbury and Crowley, the connection kept between them as they experienced the political upheavals of those times and the effect of their Protestant religious beliefs.



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Further research led me to identify the power and influence that had been held in Carmarthenshire in Tudor times. Rhys ap Thomas, the landowner who lived at Dinefwr Castle, was the man who killed Richard III in the battle of Bosworth and, subsequently, enabled Henry Tudor to become king of England, the first of the influential royal lineage. He went on to be the most powerful man in Wales – the governor - and was made a privy councillor and a Knight of the Garter. The fact that Carmarthen is the oldest town in Wales and that popular local belief holds it was the seat of Merlin (Caer Fyrddin), gave added potential intrigue.

I was versed already in the mythologies of the area, such as the Mabinogion, and could not help but include them in my thinking and writing, (e.g. Ceridwen, Olwen, Rhiannon). The influence of the Celtic deities is a part of the work of some of the specialists I researched; for instance, Laurence Main dedicated his book about spirit paths in Wales to Rhiannon. I could see the potential connections that could be made as Carol Lovekin had made in *Ghostbird*,¹⁸⁵ which is clearly influenced by the legend of Blodeuwydd, whilst also being a tale about

¹⁸⁴ Transcript from verse of title page of 1667 edition, British Museum copy 11623. Aa.37.1. Olga E. Illston, *Literary and Bibliographical Study of the Work of Robert Crowley, (1517 – 1588) Printer Puritan and Poet*, p.155.

¹⁸⁵ Carol Lovekin, *Ghostbird* (Wales: Honno, 2016).

contemporary characters who are living in the Lampeter area and in a magical reality. I was aware of the local Robin-Hood-style hero, Twm Sion Cati, whilst in actuality he was probably a bit of a rebel who became a solid married citizen (Mayor of Tregaron even) as he aged.¹⁸⁶ There is, too, the legend about the Lady of the Lake at Llyn y Fan Fach, which has a resonance for women of any era who are abused. The account of sin-eaters in the area between Llandeilo and Ammanford is said by some to be superstition, however there is evidence that they were a historical fact.¹⁸⁷ The ghost stories that emanated from Newton House at Dinefwr Park are retold by National Trust staff and have led to a television programme about the hauntings on the ‘Britain’s Most Haunted’ series. This was a topographical history that was essential to the ways in which I wrote the project and might be described as the practice of ‘deep topography’ or – akin to the explorations of ‘mythogeography’. I was very aware that I should hesitate to use the latter term to explain my work, since Phil Smith made it clear in his explanation of mythogeography as a hybrid and experimental response to places that resists completion and categorisation: ‘it can only ever be practised in the future. There can be no mythogeographers or Mythogeography Departments.’¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Llewelyn Pritchard, T J, *The Adventures & Vagaries of Twm Shôn Catti* (Aberystwyth: the author, 1828)

¹⁸⁷ This summary of a sin-eater gives a clear idea of what was believed at the time: ‘Upon the death of an inhabitant of a locality, the sin-eater would be summoned and would place a plateful of salt covered with a slice of bread upon the breast of the deceased. After the recitation of appropriate charms over the body, the sin-eater would then proceed to eat both bread and salt, and wash them down with a tankard of beer. It was generally believed that the sins of the deceased were transferred to the unfortunate wretch through his consumption of the salt and bread’ (Dr. Huw Walters, Sin-eating in the Amman Valley, *Carmarthen Historian*, 15 (1978), 70–76).

¹⁸⁸ Phil Smith, *On Walking*, p.60.

Writing – my journey

The starting point

As the starting point of the project was a development from my mother's MA investigation into the life of Robert Crowley, 'printer, puritan and poet', I anticipated working from the period of Tudor history. Deborah Harkness¹⁸⁹ describes the 'scientific revolution' that took place in Elizabethan London and how the word *science* was first used then to describe what we understand now as scientific activity, and how it was applicable to alchemical practices, as this type of activity. These developments seemed to me to combine with the ideas related to the resurgence of the Welsh language and culture which led to the Welsh Renaissance in Abergwili (described in the previous chapter).

I wanted to explore this era and perhaps create a gothic novel set in the Towy valley and, having enjoyed Harkness's multi-genre *All Souls* trilogy,¹⁹⁰ (themes of which might be described as: contemporary fantasy / romance novel / alchemy), considered there was potential in researching this geographical area that has such a rich history and could lead to a multi-layered creative response. Eventually, I realised that I could not limit myself to one time period, because I had to take into consideration a greater range of times and occurrences, in order to stay true to the psychogeographic practice of depicting the psyche of sites and any recurrences that convey how the energies affect those who come there.

Styles of writing

Ian Sansom's *The Norfolk Mystery*¹⁹¹, provided me with an example of a possible approach. Set in the 1930's, it is a murder mystery, for which the Norfolk countryside is as essential to the story as the era and the events. The influence of this work may be seen in the short story, 'Ghosts', written during my two years as a writer in residence at Dinefwr Park, the National Trust property, where I had time to explore the history of a particular site and become acquainted with accounts and stories of the employees, the residents, the generations of the

¹⁸⁹ Deborah E Harkness, *the jewel house* (New Haven & London Yale University Press, 2007), p. xv.

¹⁹⁰ Deborah E. Harkness, *Discovery of Witches* (UK: Headline, 2011), *Shadow of Night* (UK: Headline, 2012), *The Book of Life* (UK: Headline, 2015).

¹⁹¹ Ian Sansom, *The Norfolk Mystery* (London: Collins, Fourth Estate, Harper, 2014).

family that lived there and their servants. It is not a mystery, but the essential components of the story include: that it is set in the thirties, there is significant influence of the environment and its history and the characters are affected by these factors. The target reader was envisaged as an educated reader who enjoys a broadsheet newspaper and the sort of person I imagine to be typical member of the National Trust.

I considered writing a novel like Barney Norris' *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, telling the stories of five local people in the Salisbury area, whose very different lives are already interconnected. They come together at the point of a car crash. Norris, like Sansom, is equally concerned with the nature of the local culture – Wiltshire in this case. He uses the rivers in Salisbury Plain to provide a numinous quality to the text and as a metaphor for the lives of five ordinary people and references cartography, as per psychogeography:

while five rivers flow into this city and this story, only one sings out of it, and all the other voices are lost in the chorus, all their stories never end, but disappear back into the greater body of water they came from and make their way out to the sea. There is never a clean chord where these five rivers are all singing in the same moment, and yet they are the rhythm and pulse of this landscape; if you map out the passages of these rivers and their songs, you will have mapped out the whole of the city.

I thought to myself, what if the same might be true of the lives brought together that evening on the corner of Brown Street? What if there is a map of the world waiting to be excavated beneath the surface of that movement? ¹⁹²

There are similarities in the short stories, flash fiction and poems throughout my text, describing the lives of people who live in this area. They describe the variety of characteristics of the energies along the length of the Towy, such as 'Holy Grail', 'Never for ever', 'Talley Abbey' and 'A Carmarthenshire Man'. In this latter poem, I was aware of the historical link with Elizabethan lyricists, such as Edmund Spenser, who narrated stories about people, whilst also steering a course through metaphysical seas, referring to symbolisms, significances and astrological connotations.

When writing, I made the connection between the psyche of an area and its communities, attracting certain types who were drawn by the energies and chose certain lifestyles. For instance, my poem about Janet places her very firmly in the area that runs at the edge of the Brecons and her values, as described in the poem, are representative of those of a sizable

¹⁹² Barney Norris, *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain* (London: Transworld, 2016), pp.260-61.

group of people who have moved here during the past 50 years: 'Playing the Steinway piano,
/ Defined by lime-washed walls, / Eyes grabbing purple mountains / On the edge of the sky.
... The smell of lavender oil, / Sweeping the carpet, / Keeping the Steiner rules / With
faceless dolls.'

The situations of the stories are married with the qualities of the identified places that are influenced by the presence of the river and its form at that stage of its journey. The decision about the form of the work (i.e. not to write lengthy text, to respond to contemporary developments in literature and the need for immediacy in textual experience) provided the reasons not to mirror, for example, the structure of Norris' novel. I was also aware that a gothic thread continued in my writing, as in the superstition about sin-eaters, because of the nature of the geography along the route of the river:

as Dyfnallt, one who knew the district well, said: "It was a lonely area, cut off from the outside world, and such areas are the strongholds of legend, superstition, ancient practices and long-held customs. The imagination is nourished by old superstitions, and old customs die hard in areas where the ancient fabric of society remains undisturbed."¹⁹³

I could see, too, that the gothic genre has a relevance for younger readers. Indeed, as Jeni Williams states in her review of *Welsh Gothic* by Jane Aaron:

In today's paranoid world scapegoats and victims become objects of fear and loathing and, as Aaron points out, in film, graphic novel and rock band, this is exactly what has happen[ed] to this figure [the sin eater].¹⁹⁴

As I wrote, I wove together contemporary issues and understanding with legends and/or histories (and found another contemporary relevance in my poem 'The sin eater').

Since psychogeographic convention was a given in terms of my practice, I felt that it was acceptable to consider a multi-genre approach, because that is inherent in much of the writing. I had as an initial example, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, in which time is not linear,

¹⁹³ Rhamant a Rhyddid, J. Dyfnallt Owen, Aberystwyth, 1952, pp. 10-11 (quoted in Dr. Huw Walters, 'Sin-eating in the Amman Valley').

¹⁹⁴ Jeni Williams, 'Welsh Gothic', Review of *Welsh Gothic* by Jane Aaron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), <<https://www.swan.ac.uk/crew/crewreviews/welshgothic>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

events of the eighteenth and twentieth century are interlinked and Nietzsche's (to me, intriguing) idea of eternal recurrence is a premise.¹⁹⁵

'The Butler' (see Appendix 1) was a short story in which I attempted to work marginally with layers of time, using ghosts, some from the Second World War and the main character of the butler from the nineteenth century, while they are observed by a 'psychic' tourist who interacts with the butler:

One individual, however, is sitting on the solitary settee, looking out of the window, watching the visitors with cameras slung around their necks in the paved garden, the deer in the distance, and pink roses tapping the windows. She feels him cold, resting just behind her left shoulder, but doesn't turn to acknowledge his presence, preferring to read him as she views the busy summer afternoon outside.

The American Officers in the 1940's, queuing in the corridor, observed his journey while they waited to be treated for war wounds in the converted Book Room. They watched him carefully carrying a tray as he traversed the passageway and entered the room; then following behind him, they found no one there.

It was written originally to tell the tale of a haunted corridor in the mansion in Dinefwr Park and was designed for the market of people who are attracted to visit Newton House because of its reputation in this regard. The nature of the language and the content, however, was too populist for the final version of the project and did not include juxtaposition of differing styles/content.

After I had written 'The Butler', I discovered Kate Mosse's *The Mistletoe Bride and other Haunting Tales* and felt that I was very much in tune with this author's style and approach in these sixteen short stories: 'inspired by a particular time and place'¹⁹⁶ and the interaction that occurs across the ages:

characters [are] separated by more than a hundred years, but connected through living in the same place; the notion that stories come out of landscape ... ; the hope that emotion will speak across boundaries of time and context.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ 'Truly Time is a vast Denful of Horror, round about which a Serpent winds and in the winding bites itself by the Tail. ... a beginning continuing, always ending' (Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* p.75).

¹⁹⁶ Kate Mosse, *The Mistletoe Bride and other Haunting Tales* (London, Orion, 2014) p. xiv.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.233.

In 'The Butler' I was concerned equally with a resolution to the grief of the dead character; to find a way to help him to release the emotions that are trapping him in the place. I was able to use the psychic visitor to give him an equivalent to absolution of sins, with the understanding that being gay is no longer a sin. Somehow in the writing of the story, I had the feeling that I was writing the healing of a circumstance.

The content of *The Mistletoe Bride* also has similarities to my 'The Maid's Story': a tale about a woman who locks herself in a trunk, with fatal consequences; although the manner of the death is not the same. I wonder if perhaps this is a meaningful theme in women's mythologies, the idea of being trapped and in danger in a place that should be where something is kept safe and sound? I find this idea particularly frightening. The sense of being helpless in the face of brutal menace is certainly a theme for women who have been abused and is a thread for both *The Stalker* and *The Maid's Story*.

In deciding what to do, I was aware that a mixture of forms (short story, poetry, flash fiction, poetry prose, non-fiction prose) could replicate some psychogeography texts and had seen the effect of the use of varying forms, with the use of found material for centos, illustrations and images. Sinclair's *Black Apples of Gower*, which conveys a scrapbook effect in some respects, seemed to me a potential model in this regard. However, I was not writing an overt autobiographical account such as this. Sinclair's practice is usually a psychogeographic standard, i.e. a combination of prose that resembles a travelogue with other sorts of writing that include personal history, relevant historical events, philosophical and metaphysical discussion related to the visited sites and visual content. In contrast, I worked with poetic and fictional responses to the encounters with sites, whilst invoking the local mythologies and working with a spiritual focus. I felt that poetry enabled me better to express more depth and multiplicity of meaning.

I noted, too, that often psychogeographic writings, such as *Holloway*, include factual information, journalled, poetic accounts of the writer's journey, and embedded quotation, in this case Edward Thomas - with use of pencil illustrations for each of the stages along the way. This use of 'found poetry' to create a cento also synchronised with my research into poetry that had been written at/in response to the identified sites along the length of the Towy. I began, therefore, by writing a poem using lines from Dyer's *Grongar Hill* for the Llandeilo chapter. This was followed by Cambrian mountain and Llansteffan pieces.

Town

My first practical psychogeographic outing was in Carmarthen town, as I wanted to begin with a *dérive* in a town. I strolled randomly around with a mindset that was open to receipt of impressions and produced three poems as a result of the experience, ‘King Street’, ‘St Catherine’s Walk’, ‘Harvey’s’, which began to give the form to the work that I would eventually settle upon. As the work began to flow, it felt important to write after engagement with a site and not to be proscriptive about the type of writing. I was following the process Olivia Laing describes of Virginia Woolf: ‘she wrote dreamily of *chattering* her books on the crest of the Downs, the words pouring from her as she strode, half-delirious, in the noonday sun.’¹⁹⁸

River

In order to hold the work together with a structure, I initially intended to use the length of the river to provide a narrative poem, somewhat like Alice Oswald’s *Dart*¹⁹⁹ or Hedd Wyn’s nineteenth-century poem *Ystrad Flur*. This poem about the Towy’s journey through landscape and history would form the equivalent of a backbone throughout the book. There was an awareness of how it would work metaphorically. Ackroyd analysed the importance of the Thames and the meanings that could be drawn from it, perceiving:

its affiliations with human purpose and with human realities. So the personality of the river changes in the course of its journey from the purity of its origins to the broad reaches of the commercial world.²⁰⁰

Whilst I had traced a similar development in the river, it became clear early on that an overarching poem would not serve the nature of the work that I was producing, because I realised that I wanted to create a scrapbook effect, where items were disconnected and each piece would present itself to the reader in a looser association with the other pieces.

¹⁹⁸ Olivia Laing, *To the River* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011), p.91.

¹⁹⁹ Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber, 2002).

²⁰⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Thames – Sacred River* p.7.

However, my journey along the river from source to mouth continued to provoke my thoughts and provide me with inspiration for the writing, so that meant that it continued as a superstructure to the work.

As Ackroyd described the Thames as a ‘metaphor for the country through which it runs’,²⁰¹ I chose the Towy because of its significance to Wales and the strong identity of the Welsh culture in the localities through which it flows, whilst also being aware that I am at best naturalised Welsh and have little sense of belonging. Unlike Sinclair, I cannot refer to ‘the inherited racial compass’²⁰² which he describes as having lost in *Black Apples in the Gower*. He has to find a way to reconnect with his Welsh roots when he returns to the Gower, where he used to come as a boy, so uses swimming in the sea at Horton in order to do so.²⁰³ I also noticed how he had ancestral links that connect him with the river, the area, the culture, the paranormal dimensions that I was investigating:

The whole tribe were chapelgoers coming east from Carmarthen and Cardigan. ... I grew up drifting in and out of their bilingual kitchen stories. Corpse candles. Deaths foretold. Ghost paths. Mari Llwyd. Walks over the hills to Neath Fair. And an old aunt, swathed in layers of bombazine black, who swam every day from Llanstephan to Ferryside, across the mouth of the Towy.²⁰⁴

I was interested in his mention of ‘corpse candles’, which reminded me of the ‘sin-eaters’ of the Amman Valley.

I was already writing in a similar, gothic way about Dinefwr Park when I discovered Cowen’s and MacFarlane’s books, described earlier. I elaborated my work with descriptions of encounters with the natural environment as my relationship with the site developed. ‘The badger watch’ (Appendix 2) was one piece which I intended to use when I thought this was the kind of work that I wanted to produce. Gradually, it became clear that the style of writing I had been using did not fit with the rest, because it was too lightweight and directed at a ‘tourist’ readership. The prose passages that introduced each section of the final book were kept, however, because they told the story of my journey and contained some more metaphysical considerations.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p.8.

²⁰² Iain Sinclair, *Black Apples of Gower* (Dorset: Little Toller, 2015) p.11.

²⁰³ Ibid., p.21.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p.104.

Olivia Laing's story of her journey along the Ouse from the source to the sea uses the themes and subject matter that I was bringing together in my response to the Towy. I felt the connection in our work even more greatly because she was writing about the area that had been my home before I had sought refuge in Carmarthenshire more than twenty years ago. I could identify comfortably with her account of her personal experience; the culture, the landscape, the geography and the history that she evokes, feeling less like a stranger in my experience of her book than I do in West Wales. My knowledge of the people she talks about, - Derek Jarman, Virginia and Leonard Woolf - and the places where they lived was a part of me, acquired as part of my history. I was aware that I have been working to absorb all aspects of the place where I now live in a similar way. This emphasised the sensations that had drawn me to choose the Towy and the West Welsh landscape, partly choosing the natural environment with which I have already acquired a strong relationship in the past twenty years, and also to find a connection with and understanding of the cultural history of this locality that could lead me to gain a deeper understanding of the place where I would always be 'other'. The sense of social and cultural belonging here would always be elusive, and my journey was a way towards acceptance of this.

The reader travels with Laing as she makes the physical journey and encounters others, whilst also delving into varying historical events, reminiscing about personal experience and speculating about the nature of the Woolfs' lives. I could find many similarities with the way that I was developing my research and the content of some of the writing that I was producing. I was surprised that the final paragraph that she writes at the point where the river meets the sea bore similarities to the poem 'Journey's end' that I had written at the end of my journey. I found her sentence evocative: 'But that's how we go is it not, between nothing and nothing, along this strip of life, where the ragworts nod in the repeating breeze';²⁰⁵ and, 'It was over. I was going home'²⁰⁶ compared with my last verse: Now I am finding / My own way / Home.

²⁰⁵ Olivia Laing, *To The River* p.268.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

The image

As my project progressed, I was increasingly responding poetically to my encounters with the land and diving into deeper personal emotional waters. I realised that this was what was working for me as I made the journey along the river. My poetic writing has a similarity with Ezra Pound's Imagism, as in 'In a Station of the Metro':

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

I was moving away from narrative verse, towards the image, as Pound described: 'a radiant node or cluster, it is what I can, and must perforce call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which ideas are constantly rushing.'²⁰⁷ I began to write haiku as descriptions of my encounters with the natural landscape, encapsulating a movement of time in an image, a moment of experience, whilst, at the same time, expressing a deeper meaning, which may be ambiguous, following the adage 'show don't tell'. I worked to the strict tradition of formal Japanese haiku, as explained by David Cobb: they must consist of 'brevity and compassion', being only of 'essential words' and around seventeen syllables, placing them in a specific season of the year, finally a 'cutting word', *kireji*, is necessary and must feature 'at the end of any of the three lines'.²⁰⁸ My haiku 'Sheep' fits within these strictures, for example:

Slow-chomping grazers
Plod through rain-soaked turf shrunken
By a sea of sky

I referred to the haibun 'Stallions Crag'²⁰⁹ as a possible model:

Sometimes a starless night of damp stillness hangs over the mountain, amplifying
whatever sounds there are.
Somewhere in the mist
a sheep's hacking cough

²⁰⁷ Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism', *The Fortnightly Review*, September 1, 1914, 461-71, <http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism/>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

²⁰⁸ David Cobb, 'Introduction, David Cobb (ed.), *The British Museum Haiku* (London: The British Museum Press, 2005), pp. 1-7, p.5.lbid.

²⁰⁹ Ken Jones, *Stallion's Crag* (Northumberland: Iron Press, 2003).

the night wears on.

The dawn landscape is narrowed to the reeds, which fringe the front of the cave, each delicately beaded with drops of water.²¹⁰

I was aware that Basho invented and wrote haiku and haibun as poetic forms to be employed when making a journey²¹¹, which made sense to me for their usage in my activity, with both the internal and external mental images that arise on the journey. If I had only written about the journey by the river, its waters and the land beside it, it would have been a good form for me to use. However, other threads were emerging in my project that involve the histories, stories about the people who have a significant connection with the land and specific sites, trauma and mental health, my memoir of a personal internal journey, which accompanied the geographical experience and possibly evolved as a consequence of the experience but did not arise from it.

The final version of the project makes use of haiku as descriptors of the year-long seasonal cycle, which gives a structure to the book, commencing at Halloween/autumn and rolling through to the return to autumn/Halloween at the end. A haiku begins each chapter and gives the flavour of the season as well as being tied in with the emotional states that the autobiographical poems describe. Each of these is followed by a poetic prose piece that describes my journey to the identified sites, making association with Celtic myths and deities that had relevance to my interior travel, as well as the seasons with which each section was identified. Others contribute to the evocation of the impressions of each stage of the journey. The nature of haiku is such that they are individual complete pieces. Thus, each chapter was a section of the river, which had its own identity described by stories and histories, was characterised by a season and described a stage in my own inner journey.

The Form

The decision to adopt a scrapbook form evolved because I took on board the zeitgeist preference for shorter texts and the trend for immediacy, responding to the shortened attention spans of readers; all of which some say is due to the influence of the World Wide

²¹⁰ Ibid., p.38.

²¹¹ 'Basho 1644 – 1694', <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/basho#poet>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

Web²¹². My judgement was corroborated by Self at his address to the Irish Royal Academy in 2017. He argues that the novel has lost its relevance and that it is no longer an intrinsic necessity of cultural expression. He considers its historical meaning: ‘we had this idea that the novel represented the DNA of our culture’,²¹³ but argues that this artform is paper-based and does not have the same relevance in the era of digital technology, for ‘you need an analogue of the novel in order to make your thinking coherent’. The process has become unnatural and non-intuitive, ‘people have to kind of train themselves to stay in the text’. The final form of my text does not fit Self’s explanation of the novel, ‘the novel is designed to be internally self-explanatory’ and ‘the novel is designed as a piece of knowledge technology to contextualise itself’.²¹⁴ I explore ideas verbally and visually about the land, culture, history, memory, spirituality, creating a portrayal of specific cultural expression, using a fragmentary construction.

Self also describes his experience as a PhD supervisor and the difference in the research that is undertaken by these students in comparison to historical practice. He spoke to PhD students about the all-consuming insinuation of the internet into academic study and how investigation is taking a different form. He argues that ‘your words are the reportage of the images that you are seeing on the world wide web’,²¹⁵ and I was struck by the degree to which I had felt that the presence of visual images in my text was essential. We are, indeed, moving into an era in which communication is via the image, and written text has lost its primacy. I was reassured by his speech in relation to my decisions about the form and presentation of the work.

Whatever the reasons for this shift in our cultural expression, the security of assumption about the effect of written text is no longer a given. I have been aware of the communication that I wish to have with a reader. I want to grasp immediate attention, and flash fiction is one way of doing this, e.g. ‘Never for ever’, (which was just one of the ways that I used the

²¹² Timothy Egan, *The Eight-Second Attention Span*, 22 January 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/opinion/the-eight-second-attention-span.html>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

²¹³ Will Self, ‘The Last Trump: Fiction in the Age of Uncertainty’, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9Zoj7r2wnA>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

scrapbook approach). There were also incomplete, fragmented texts that were stories, as well as haikus and poems, both formal and free verse.

The suitability of my choices was further borne out by the winner of the Man Booker Prize 2017, George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*.²¹⁶ This is a very disjointed work and includes short stories about characters' deaths and their afterlife existence. These are woven into the text that deals with the death and afterlife of Lincoln's son, his parents' responses to his illness and death, and writings and non-fictional quotes (commentaries) about this time in the Lincolns' lives.

Welsh aspects

In Ackroyd's review of *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*, he describes Sinclair's style as 'vertiginous and polychromatic ... a master of the literary collage'.²¹⁷ It would seem, therefore, that the decision to present text in a fractured, condensed and disjointed manner would not be a step too far away from the conventions of psychogeography. As the project developed and I found that I was writing nature poetry, I looked for Welsh literary sources from Carmarthenshire and found that Gillian Clarke's work touched on some of my emerging ideas. As I read her work along with a wide-ranging selection of other poets from this area, such as Dylan Thomas, Lynette Roberts, Chris Ozzard, Menna Elfyn, I became aware of other refrains, other subjects that are a feature of Welsh poetry in English – the cadences of the language, the sonority of place names, the religion and customs of chapel, crafts – especially weaving and quilting, the myths, the sense of 'other'. 'The Carmarthenshire Man' contains some of the tropes of Dylan's writing, the wildlife and the homestead. Of being Welsh, Clarke writes:

Welsh writers in both languages are connected by several common experiences: the relative classlessness of Wales, and the sounds of two drums beating. ... We share history, ancestral

²¹⁶George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

²¹⁷ Ackroyd places Sinclair in a linear tradition of psychogeography dating back to the eighteenth century: 'His prose is vertiginous and polychromatic; it is a powerful firework display, owing something to Thomas de Quincey and something to William Burroughs. It is often excessive, but excess is the palace of wisdom... He is a master of the literary collage. How much is real, how much imagined, is not a question to ask of such a book. It may not stand up in a court of law, but it will pass in the higher tribunal of literary excellence' (Peter Ackroyd, *Hackney, That Rose Red Empire: A Confidential Report by Iain Sinclair*, *The Times Review*, 12 February 2009, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hackney-that-rose-red-empire-a-confidential-report-by-iain-sinclair-n93zpzkh07t>> [accessed 31 July 2018]).

connections with Nonconformism, farming heavy industry, and an enduring respect for and ambition for education. ... It is a small country, a place of coincidence and connection.²¹⁸

She highlights for me how my desire for a sense of belonging is always thwarted because of my lack of ancestral Welsh roots. As an immigrant, I feel that all that I am experiencing is in a way one step removed. I may comprehend the language, but I am not a Welsh-speaker who understands the nuances of Welsh as a mother tongue. I felt that I needed to weave some of the language into what I wrote, as the dual languages are side-by-side in daily life for the inhabitants here. Clarke's first poem in *At the Source* functions as a foreword and demonstrates the substance of this:

Sgwarnog

'Tell me the names for the hare!'
'*Sgwarnog* for its long ears.
Cochen for its red-brown fur.
Ceinach for its criss-cross course.
Cath y Mynydd, Cath Eithin,
Cat of the mountain, of the gorse.'²¹⁹

In recognition of the presence of this language that is 'other' to me, I have used it where it seemed to be intrinsic to the experience of sense of place and/or the characters, as in 'Strata Florida', 'Holy Grail'.

Animals and plant-life

I did not, of course, grow up being coached in the rules of the chapel, which leaves a part of my Welsh cultural empathy ever empty. I do, however, have a relationship with the natural environment of the Towy and its banks and this is significant when I write. I noticed that my observations of the wildlife during my repeated walks alongside the Carmarthen town edgeland allowed me to sink into a sense of participation in the landscape. The space of existence was being filled by nature and I began to conceive of an existential state that was described by it. As R.S. Thomas writes in 'Excursion':

Went to the sea; stared
at the birds. Did they

²¹⁸ Gillian Clarke, *At the Source* p.9.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, unnumbered page.

stare back? Nature looks
through us, beyond
us, into a territory
always denied us.²²⁰

As I wrote, I was aware of the meaning attributed to some animals and birds; thus, for example, the heron governs solitude and is priest – messenger from the gods; the cormorant gives a deeper understanding of the different dimensions of reality. The chaffinch was chosen in ‘Lunch at the café in Llandovery’ because of its symbolism for persistence and its colours represent three of the four elements, red for fire (energy/passion), blue for water (emotions) and white for air (thought), while the black and white show the balance of the dark and light. ‘Participles’ provides the qualities attributed by druidic lore to trees:

The wisdom of brave oak,
The protection of sacred ash,
The complication of hawthorn

I was using the wildlife and plants in my poems as tropes to clarify my interrogation of my visits and also as metaphors for some of the meaning I wished to convey. For instance, in the ‘Towy River at Carmarthen’, which is about the tragic fatality of a young boy who fell into the river, the last verse refers to the heron, which - as stated above –is the messenger of the gods, the blackbird which is representative of intuition, and the seagull that usually symbolizes carefree behaviour and freedom. Thus, I am suggesting that the wildlife is in trouble, too, and we need to read that the natural world has been disturbed by the event:

A heron rises into javelin flight,
a blackbird chatters defensively,
a seagull careens in troubled flight.

Self-examination

I began to realise, too, that my state of mind was affecting my responses and that my work was becoming confessional. When I considered the same poem, I could see from the choice of vocabulary how severely I had been upset by what had happened (as nature is upset so am

²²⁰ Tony Brown & Jason Walford Davies, (eds.), *R.S. Thomas Uncollected Poems* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books.1981), p.115.

I), and there seemed to be no source of comfort or reassurance. Note the similarity of the interchange of feeling between woman and landscape as in Gifford's description of Nichols' belief that 'a woman's ease or anger about her own treatment is echoed by that of the landscape in which she lives'.²²¹ It also suggests the dire state of mankind and the lack of comforting spiritual (Christian) belief:

Last night the sea tide drove in,
coursing roughly against
the mountain-sourced current,
its purposeful waves bristling
in the conflict of intent.

The sacrifice of a young life
in propitiation for our apathy,
the demands of an angry god
that cares nothing for
the heartache of our loss.

Similarly, in the poems and prose poetry in the Cambrian mountains and at Llandovery, I was clearly depressed. The first haiku about the bee conveys my feeling of exhaustion in relation to my situation:

A tired bee loads up
From nectar's source, sweet transport
To hexagon hives.

As I explain in the prose passage that introduces the start of the journey, I was stepping away from the nightmares and choosing to release what binds me in order to find the freedom that is in a true sense of self. As I sought the source of the Towy, I was seeking my own source, in order to renew my identity and the sense of the transcendence that I find in my connections with the natural landscape and through the Welsh culture, weaving a blanket, as in 'Participles':

On the grey-green mountain
Rain is the warp,
I am the weft,
A white thread
Shaping a pattern.

²²¹ Terry Gifford, 'Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies', p.27.

The importance of the natural environment in defining my state of mind and leading me to different personal and metaphysical understanding via a ‘pilgrimage’ became clearer as I progressed.

The urge to find a position of recuperation is echoed in ‘Snowfall’, seeking elements of life that will convey hope and optimism, the end to daily ‘warfare’. The extreme state of my mental health is exposed in the prose poetry of ‘Wintry storms’ conveying my traumatised state. The difficulties in an intimate relationship and my anxiety about someone close to me are also evident in this section: ‘My past is sitting at the table in front of me’ and ‘Lunch at the café in Llandovery’, i.e. describing my real distress that there is so much damaged history and worries about the future:

I fear it when you touch
The precarious heights
of optimism
While we rock together

Counting scavenging crows,
Singing one for sorrow
And seven for secrets
We can’t bear to share.

The time spent at the Llandeilo / Nantgaredig phase is almost like breathing space, a break in the process that I was undergoing, a relief. At Nantgaredig there was a reconnection with familial history and traditions alongside the historical renaissance of Welsh culture and language.

Even after I moved on to Carmarthen, I was aware of tensions and fears of possible natural disasters. Now the world has become hostile and apocalyptic. At the same time, the news about irreversible climate change is synthesised with the personal, as in ‘the end of times’:

I step outside, head submissive
To the anger of falling water,

The swollen river looms
At the foot of the hill,
Racing to overwhelm sad fields.
In York the sewers have burst.
The skies are silent,

Crows blown off course.

However, the opening line of the chapter's haiku is 'heart-healing hawthorn', which gives the message that the journey towards improvement has begun.

The final stage of the mental journey was where adjustments were made and a hope for positive outcomes became a possibility. 'Ferryside' shows the history of the emotional journey and, as such, provides the backdrop to other uncharted events, although their effects and consequences are traced from the beginning of the work. 'Acceptance – definition' is the first evidence of the healing that had come, the distance that had been travelled; and although I did not feel that the quality of the poem is great, it seemed necessary to include it here. 'Journey's end' and 'A day in the life' show that the cycle of seasons is complete and has returned to autumn, which is both 'gentle' and 'cold-edged'. The use of the name Ceridwen reminds us of how souls are returned to the cauldron to be mixed again by her. 'Journey's end' encompasses the tropes and themes of the book, referencing wildlife, although it is an egret (a white heron), which has greater strength in its symbolism than a heron; this time the sea is swallowing the river, which was swallowing the land and my confidence in 'the end of times'. Generally, it conveys the sense of balance that may be retrieved, whilst also reminding that the state of distress is not entirely vanquished, 'Blinking scarlet lights / A distant warning'. 'A day in the life' is suggestive, too, of Keats' 'negative capabilities', being able to live with doubts, without certainties,²²² in the final lines:

to release the night
where a broken door creaks
comfortably.

Mental health

Mental health writing, as recent media attention has indicated, is of increasing interest to readers²²³. However, this is not made an obvious theme for the reader of my book, because I

²²² Keats describes the term 'negative capabilities' thus: 'that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' (John Keats, letter to his brothers, 1817, quoted, Stephen Hebron, *John Keats and 'negative capability'*, 2014, <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>> [accessed 31 July 2018]).

²²³ 'How common are mental health problems?', (April 2017), <<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-p>>, [accessed 31 July 2018].

preferred to keep this a non-explicit undercurrent. Confessional poetic writing about mental health is not uncommon, as Joanne Limburg's *The Autistic Alice*²²⁴ demonstrates. She explores here her responses to the suicide of her brother and her autism - both the diagnosis and how it affects her. Two writers whose works of psychiatric fiction deal with the effects of mental illness are Deborah Kay Davies' the uncomfortable *Reasons She Goes to the Wood*,²²⁵ and Nathan Filer's *The Shock of the Fall*,²²⁶ with an unreliable narrator who is schizophrenic. The accident that seems to have provoked his illness is a tragedy, which has resonance with my anticipation of the state of mind of the mother after her son lost his life in the Towy, as described in my poem 'madness carves its own reality'.

Thus, my short stories and poetic prose fit this contemporary genre, although I was very clear that I did not wish to identify the project in this way, because it would limit it and be a distraction from the other themes that I felt were what the project should be concerned with. Mental health was to be included as an unexceptional dimension. 'Llansteffan Walk' describes how my daughter dealt with the mental trauma that resulted from being stalked and how she holds the feelings that make her sanity precarious under control. 'Madness carves its own reality' is self-explanatory. 'After the loss of her child', was written from my conversation with a woman who was struggling to find emotional equilibrium again and my witness to our walk through the woods together and her words. 'Sally' is one woman's description of how she related her depression to a tree in the park that she visited weekly that had been killed in a lightning strike: 'Her thoughts are flags pinned / Along the empty branch, / Hopes of survival / From the ruins of war'. 'The Stalker', a story of the horrific murder of a woman which resulted from the betrayal by family members, is told through the eyes of a psychic woman. She is in turn disturbed by her experience to such a degree that the symptoms of her state of mind that she describes are those of disassociation.

Women

As the project developed, I realised how much of my attention had been given to the experiences of women who live or have lived in West Wales. My solo journey along the

²²⁴ Joanne Limburg, *The Autistic Alice* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2017).

²²⁵ Deborah Kay Davies, *Reasons She Goes to the Woods* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014).

²²⁶ Nathan Filer, *The Shock of the Fall* (London: The Borough Press, 2014).

Towy as a woman who has experienced suffering, has given me a perspective that helps me to write about women's lives: women who settled in this area, women who have lived all their lives here. My writing should appeal to women who are interested in philosophies, ideas about culture, who value the Welsh culture and other themes of the work as described above.

The importance that I attribute to the contribution that a woman can make now is seen by my use of the quotation from Blackie near to the end of the book; she sees it as a time when we can work and write differently:

The day of the Heroic quest is over, with its all-conquering, dragon-slaying Hero saving the world, one sword-stroke at a time. The Journey we need now is not a journey of active, world-beating individualism, it is a journey of collective re-enchantment – a re-animation of the Earth. It's time to become native to our places again. It's time for women to shrug off the yoke of the patriarchy, and reclaim our native power.²²⁷

Two women whose writing exemplifies psychogeographic practice in a non-urban environment are Overall and Lee Duggan. Their work includes attention to the visual presentation of their poems and the spacing of their words on the page, which are an essential aspect of their expression. The former is an academic who practises, promotes and teaches psychogeographic practice. She describes her poetry anthology, *The Art of Walking* as a 'collection of responses to movement and place, reflecting the writer's interest in the relationship between walking and creativity, self and setting'²²⁸ – which seems like a pretty good description of the writing from my project. 'Mappa Mundi' relates to themes of my work, including mythologies and relationships and directions.²²⁹

²²⁷ Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2016), p. 361.

²²⁸ Sonia Overall, *The Art of Walking* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2015), book cover.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.33.

mappa mundi

Begin wherever the arrow falls

you may need chalk to mark perimeters
where land and sea meet

borders are not barriers to progress

but stepping on cracks is as crossing continents
(they do things differently there)

crossroads are perfect places to loiter
and bargain for wares, souls or melodies

but beware deep woods, wolves, witches in trees
ditches where bodies may roll, bandits, brothers who
prove false,
lovers likewise, and be sure never to take the

left hand fork

skirt about the hems of lakes
avoid dipping toes in rivers
never board a boat with blackened sails
block your ears when the singing begins

but walk: walk until you meet a man
who asks questions of your oars
your eyes
or your intentions

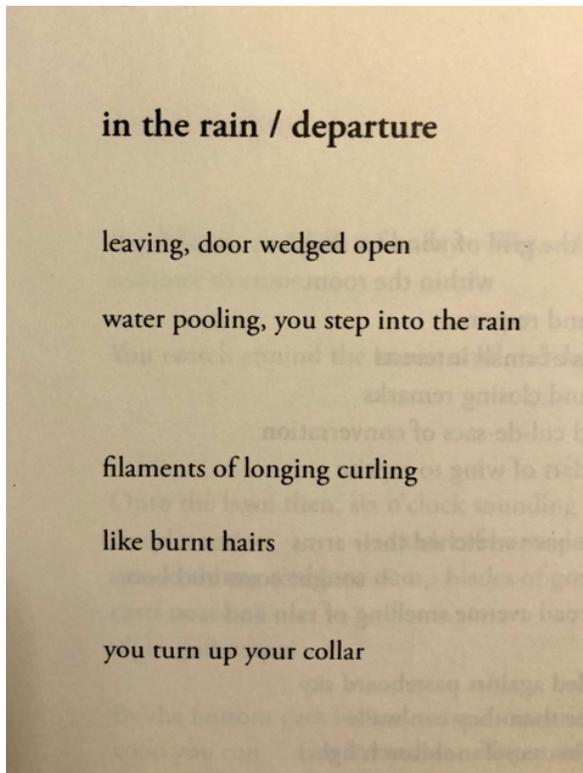
and stop there.

Her poems, too, are reminiscent of the 'postmodern' work of Beat and Black Mountain College poets. I was able to see some other similarities between her content and mine. For instance, my poetry prose 'Wintry storms' has resonance with Overall's 'in the rain / departure':²³⁰

Leaving behind the humdrum, unrecognised comforts of neatly piled orderly existence, I step with decision outside, look up beyond the rooftops feeling the hurricane of other lives swooshing round the corner, attacking my knees, tugging my coat, shoving my thoughts flattened against the wall. I see a kamikaze crow flapping like a black rag, tossed over the chimney, beyond my eyeline.

²³⁰ Sonia Overall, *The Art of Walking* p.18.

Rain stinging the daycare mind, battering the support thinking, drenching hope and heartfelt highs, exposing the barren lows like the skeletons of galleons, ribs protruding through the white wave-beaten sands in an almond shaped memory.



I moved on quite early from the deconstructed approach to form, of which Duggan is clearly a committed practitioner,²³¹ because I felt limited by this type of form and that my poetic expression was better suited to a freedom to choose whatever form felt comfortable, appropriate and relevant.

²³¹ Lee Duggan, 'another brook', in *Reference Points* (UK: Aquifer Books, 2017), p.13.

another brook

across from the car a babble
low but distinct the push of wind
skyline ridges rippled
down to purple ochre smear
sprung over seasons clung to
derelict outcrops a sheep's clean skull
hands coarse as the stone is smooth you moved first
smiled too softly as you spoke of graft hardened as I
laughed
somewhere earlier, nearer pink thrift white sea campion slope
and heather greys unnoticed we were close
rowan red
purple saxifrage and yellow poppy
ragwort and sharp horizoned borders
the landscape shadowed silently
then gasping fields and
blue blue blue caught in washes of white

Duggan lives in North Wales and is a single parent, writing about her response to walking in that area and to her personal situation. While she and I share similar foci as part of similar activity, I found that I did not enjoy writing in such a style, although 'The fallow field' was the result of my experimentation with this and there are obvious resemblances to Duggan's work.

'Ghosts' is a short story about a woman who married into the ancient lineage of Welsh power and yet who is unfulfilled and needs more than the country mansion. There are two poems set in Llandovery about a grandmother who is coming to the end of her life and has lived it as part of a conventional family in her Victorian home ('The point of origins') and has reached a stage where physical reality is uncertain ('Moments in a life'). Then there is the woman who lives in a care home, facing death, 'Pamela', who has lived here twice as many years as she lived in England and, yet, to her, home never will be here – always in exile, always one step removed from belonging.

This poem resonates with my understanding of my own situation as described in 'Participles': 'I pull the shining thread / Into the exiled future, / Entwined in a remote land'. I am

appropriating a Welsh tradition by using the metaphor of weaving and also referencing the transcendent dimension of my journey. The similarities between my life and that of Lynette Roberts, both ‘outsiders’, drew me more strongly to her poetry, although this was not meant to be a visible factor for the reader. Initially, I had found Dylan Thomas’ poetry easier to explore because of the sonorous language. However, I found that I was richly rewarded in all aspects, once I engaged with Roberts’ work. It was not just because of her life experience and her engagement with the Welsh language (to an extent that I could not hope to replicate). Her description of her life in the village near Llansteffan,²³² evokes a lifestyle that epitomises the rural traditional currency of West Wales, including ‘I will offer you a choice bowl of cawl / Served with a ‘lover’s’ spoon and a chopped spray / Of leeks or savori fach, not used now,’ and finishes ‘send an ode or elegy / in the old way and raise our heritage’. The confidence with which she has adopted the Welsh culture as her own differs from my own actions, although this has been my desire in the more than twenty years I have lived here.

Writing trends in psychogeography

In producing a psychogeographic work, I have attempted to indicate the ‘flavour’ of the energies for each area identified along the river Towy and how they impact those who come as visitors or are inhabitants, and to what degree their metaphysical existence may change accordingly. The poetic responses were opened up by the writings of Black Mountain poets, such as Charles Olson’s *Maximus*, which set aside the conventions of poetry and cultural norms to experiment with language and communication pre-civilisation, and Allen Fisher’s *Place* which:

Incorporated influences from Blake, Olson, Pope, Wordsworth, Robert Kelly, Walter Benjamin, Jung, Dickens, Foucault, Wilhelm Reich, Marxism, the Situationists, conceptual art and researches in mythology, linguistics, psychology, mathematics, immunology, topography, zoology and much else.²³³

In Sinclair’s 1996 anthology of poetry, he states that he values work ‘which seems remote, alienated, fractured’²³⁴ and it is clear that these are the qualities in psychogeographic writing that he prefers. One of his choices, Stewart Home, criticises ‘New Poetry’, likening it to

²³² Lynette Roberts, *Poem from Llanybri, Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p.3.

²³³ Reality Street Website, <<http://www.realitystreet.co.uk/allen-fisher.php>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

²³⁴ Iain Sinclair, ‘Introduction’, in *Conductors of Chaos* ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996), p xvii.

Thatcherite or postmodern values, i.e. ‘completely egocentric, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, of love, friendship, affection or tenderness.’²³⁵ These are reasons why I would not wish to settle for this sort of writing, preferring to ally myself with the Romantics and the values they hold, as described earlier. The influences on me, too, progressed to modern metaphysical poets such as Wendell Berry and Snyder. Snyder writes on his book cover of *The Back Country*: ‘I try to hold both history and the wilderness in mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times’.²³⁶

Although I had a longstanding understanding that I was writing in scrapbook style, I was very aware that my own cultural conditioning did not allow me to organise myself quite as randomly and playfully as I might have desired. I was working, too, with the understanding that the human mind makes connections when there are none, because of the brain’s drive when processing, to construct a story. Thus, if only parts of a story are read, the reader will fill in the gaps in order to make sense of it. It may be that every individual creates their own interpretation according to their understanding, which arises from their way of processing, which is affected by their educational, social and personal historical background. So there can be no assumptions on the part of the writer or artist as to the meaning that a reader or viewer will derive from their work.

Fabric

I was, therefore, working from the understanding that a perceptive reader will pick up differing threads that run through the work, which are woven together to create the final effect, as in a Welsh blanket. I found that I could understand the themes of the artist Sarah Rhys’ artist residency in Ystradgynlais working symbolically with coal and exploring the notion of the outsider. In the resultant book, Rhys included a chapter by the artist-researcher Antony Lyons, who describes the lives of generations of inhabitants who have a common relationship because of the land where they live and the routes they have travelled and ‘a largely forgotten palimpsest in the landscape’, which has resonance with my poem about Strata Florida, ‘palimpsest’. He writes of ‘the intimate braiding of people, place, function

²³⁵ Stewart Home, ‘Sixty Years of Treason’, in *Conductors of Chaos* ed. Iain Sinclair pp.165-67 (p.165).

²³⁶ Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (London: Fulcrum, 1967), book cover.

and myth'.²³⁷ In fact, the more I examined what I had written, the more I realised the importance of this as a metaphor and also an actuality throughout the entire work. There are textual and visual references to thread, weaving, material, fabric from start to finish. This is what led me to include a quote from Sharon Blackie in the creative piece about weaving and women, as these are both significant factors.²³⁸ Although there was maybe no obvious connection between the styles of work and their contents, I was aware that I had reasons for the shape and structure of the writing, which I had intimated, and which were for the reader to deduce if so desired.

The use of maps

On one level it was clearly a journey along the River Towy from the source in the Cambrian Mountains to the mouth where it flows with two other rivers into the Carmarthen Bay. I used simplified maps of different sections of the river as a form of chapter headings, (I was not concerned with topographical accuracy). These are designed to make the reader feel more comfortable with the structure of the book. They act as determinants of roughly drawn areas; for me, the importance was in my response to my experience of the identified places that led to writing that arose as a consequence, whilst I was not limited by strict adherence to a proscriptive structure dictated by a detailed map. The first drawing of the whole river acts as a visual form of contents table and shows the places that will be focussed upon. The reader will be able to use this for reference if they want to visit the places themselves and see if they react in similar ways. At the same time, I anticipated that a reader would dip in and out of the book and could dwell on separate areas if they wished, or rest with one piece of writing as a stand-alone if desired.

Found material

As my responses were poetic, my first reference was to the work of poets who were related to the project, either via the geography or via similarities in ideology. I was also thinking as a visual artist may do when in the landscape, being very aware that my approach to writing has always had a visual association. For these reasons, it made sense to me to work with 'found

²³⁷ Antony Lyons, 'Some Geopoetics of Salt, People Places', in Sarah Rhys, *Coal Tree Salt Sea* (Mamhilad Pontypool: coal tree press, 2017), p.59.

²³⁸ Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted* p.361.

materials’, as a visual artist may do, and, so, I used found images, maps and photos and wrote a few centos; being the most pleased with the one using Lynette Roberts’ poems, perhaps because I found myself in sympathy with her experiences and ‘at home’ with her language. Through this process I was also exploring varying styles of writing, from the formal structure of e.g. the Romantic poet John Dyer to the experimental work and deconstruction of the Black Mountain College poets. As a result, there is no consistency of forms in the poems, which reflects the process of the work and my own cultural breadth of experience as part of the activity.

My decision to use specific poetic forms twice in the book were made for reasons of style needed for the content. I was surprised to find later that there is a similar sestina written by Elizabeth Bishop about a grandmother in the kitchen and with reference to an almanac. It seemed to me that the repetitions conveyed the passage of time in her life alongside the shifts in her understanding. The use of a villanelle about sibling relationships in the final ‘chapter’ was made consciously, thinking of Dylan Thomas’ poem to his father ‘do not go gentle into that good night’, even though the content was different.

Seasons and Celts

The use of the seasons also gave shape to the whole and enabled me to give expression to my use of Celtic mythology as part of the method and are explored a little in the prose pieces that are at the start of each section. Thus, I begin with autumn, Halloween, which is the end of the Celtic year and is considered to be Ceridwen’s time, when souls are gathered and remixed for the following year. I end again with this time, going through the full annual cycle. I found, too, that this provided me with the types of experience that describe my inner journey, also matching the seasons with the places. It made sense to me that, for instance, Llandoverly represented winter, Danu and bare-boned death, a time of stillness and cave-dwelling, because my reading of the area is that it is very much a place where time has stopped, and it feels like living in a bubble, cut off from the world. Some of the poems are set in this time – the poems about an old woman reaching her death, the snowfall. Llandeilo and Nantgaredig are places of greenness and growth and where there is the sensation of energy (power) pushing forward, rising to the surface; and Rhiannon as a mythological presence represents the time of late spring when all life is burgeoning and marriage commitments are made. Carmarthen is where the fullness of summer and of the lived experience come into force. It

leads to the harvest, where the results and consequences of previous efforts may be seen. Then as time moves on and the light begins to recede from the world, and days shorten, arrival at Llansteffan sees a return to the autumnal effect and we begin to pull away from the bustle of engagement with the physical reality and the metaphysical dimension begins to reappear. I knew that I was working with this concept, although it may not be immediately obvious to the reader.

As I have already said, the haiku at the start of each chapter were used as a description of the season / an image - as Pound describes, 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' or 'an interpretative metaphor'.²³⁹

The journey – changes and development of form

The sorts of writing differed according to each area, and characters were chosen to describe the places. For instance, the man having the affair would have chosen to go to Strata Florida for practical reasons, and, indeed, some such people do. He also fitted here because of his attachment to his mother tongue and the facets of Welsh culture that are represented by the place. The man who lives in Llandovery chose to come here because he could recreate himself and feel that he was safely separated from his origins (his mother) in Birmingham. Janet fits in the Llandovery 'chapter' because she could live in a socially unconventional way, which has been the reason why those who describe themselves as hippies have settled here over the past fifty years. There is a sense in this area of being disconnected from the rest of the world and that the natural world has an overwhelming presence, encouraging a rural lifestyle. The Lady and her Maid's stories sit within the mansion of Dinefwr Park and also because this area is the seat of power. The Carmarthenshire man fits at the end of the journey of the Towy because the ending of his life epitomises the experience of the river, and as he dies, his soul travels out from the river across the sea. I anticipate that a reader would have a response to each place through the stories of the people there, as much as through the prose descriptions at the start of each 'chapter', which were designed as a development of the 'travelogue' component of other psychogeographic writings.

²³⁹ 'Ezra Pound', on Poetry Foundation Website <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ezra-pound>>, [accessed 31 July 2018], remarks recorded in March 1913, *Poetry* and later collected in his *Literary Essays* as 'A Retrospect'.

I noticed that text was truncated and fractured more in the first two stages of the journey. It was also the part of my inner journey / my pilgrimage, where I had left behind me all those connections and assumptions and was feeling the most separated from all that made me feel comfortable. Then when I reached Llandeilo, the sensation of fertility and prosperity arising from stability lent itself to longer short stories that had a completion in their telling. This is the part of the river that flows most healthily, where fishermen come to catch plentiful sewin and salmon. Alternative spiritual lifestyles fit well with this area, too, because they are attracted to places where the energies have a certain quality and are peaceful and where difference is accommodated. It was the time when I began to confront personal historical patterns and started to look out at the world around me and to examine my relationship with the culture of West Wales. I spent time at one site, Dinefwr Park, where the lineage of its owners had been influential; and now that it is owned by the National Trust, it is being run with a commercial perspective, which seemed to fit with the nature of the area. Abergwili, too, had associations with lines of influence, through the connection with the Bishop of Saint David and in the Renaissance of the Welsh language.

In Carmarthen there is virtually no trace now of its important and prosperous past. The introduction of a shopping centre has rendered it more bland during the day time, although the drunkenness and violence that surfaces at night is a reminder of the potency of the energy there. This was the point in my personal journey at which it seemed that the shadow side was brought into the full glare of the light, and the experience of trauma became an unavoidable encounter – and in so doing, was faced and ‘dealt with’.

The arrival at the mouth of the river is the ending and also a beginning, where the waters flow out and mingle with the sea, travelling onwards, potentially across the world. I was impressed by the difference between Ferryside and Llansteffan, finding the former more limited in its effect and more superficial. The latter, on the other hand, had a delicacy and sophistication, there was something multi-layered, too, both of which contributed to a metaphysical resolution. This somehow enriched my writing and I felt that the poems gained from the encounter and led to a sense of closure.

The poem ‘A Day in the life’ epitomised the way that I was able to draw all the threads together that I had been weaving throughout the project. I placed it before the found works: a

quotation about the strength of women weaving together in a new community, the image of the piece of Welsh tapestry and the Welsh poem about the Madonna, who is a woman of historical placing and also a woman from Llanybri or any other village or town. There is a density in my piece, which is on one layer a pen portrait of people whom I connected with in the community of Llansteffan and to whom I am witness. I am also writing about the point where the river ends and merges with the sea. There is reference to the strength of women, such as the one who lives in the house on the hill who is practising yoga and overseeing the beach and the consultant who has cared for patients before she retired. The choice of the name Ceridwen sites the poem in Celtic myth and the time of year and the belief that this is the time when souls are tipped into the cauldron and made anew for the coming year. She is sitting dispassionately above the others. There is a trope for the goddess in the reference to the bees in the girl's mind and she might be the 'maiden' of the triple goddess concept, with the woman on the hill as mother and the retired consultant as the crone. The broken priest is faced with the consequences of his actions and might be understood as a representative of the traditions of patriarchy. The poet and the reference to visual arts are the representatives of the creative arts with which I have been working. There have been many instances of victims throughout my project and this poem has the converse sensation. I used the Beatrix Potter *A Tale of Two Bad Mice* as an introduction to the scene and finished the poem by touching on the Romantics with reference to Keats' description of 'negative capabilities' in the creak of the broken door. The feeling of endings that permit new beginnings rises throughout 'A Day in the Life', which is reference, too, to the arrival of the autumnal time of year and Halloween, as well as a closure to my journey that has been the project.

Conclusion

In my work, I hope that a discerning reader might detect shades of W G Sebald, including fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose, the use of images, the significance of place, history, memoir, the feeling of dread, the ideas of memory. There are also resonances with Roethke, whose work is known for his self-reflection through nature:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰Theodore Roethke, 'The Waking', in Arthur Eastman (coord.ed). *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1970) p. 540.

All the themes described above may or may not be obvious and only appreciated subliminally. It is intended that there is a deep intellectual hinterland to the work, which does not require explication. If there is such a thing as an ideal reader, the project is intended for a typical *Guardian* reader: someone with a literate background, with socio-cultural interests, and a predisposition for metaphysical matters and psychogeographic themes. I hope, in conclusion, that the end result is as if threads of differing colours and textures are woven together to create a final tapestry effect.

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Black Mountain College USA Weekend, Crickhowell, Wales, May 2018

Appendix 1

The butler's story

He keeps coming back because he can't let go. Over and over he climbs the stairs from the cellars, bringing with him a chill, a thickening density in the air, walking from servants' quarters in the basement up into the Library, unable to halt as the disturbing memories quicken every time.

Even in the blank, undressed room that is awaiting 'interpretation', which visitors to the house pass through quickly, disappointed by the absence of historical furnishings, he enters and pauses. One individual, however, is sitting on the solitary settee, looking out of the window, watching the visitors with cameras slung around their necks in the paved garden, the deer in the distance, and pink roses tapping the windows. She feels him cold, resting just behind her left shoulder, but doesn't turn to acknowledge his presence, preferring to read him as she views the busy summer afternoon outside.

The American Officers in the 1940's, queuing in the corridor, observed his journey while they waited to be treated for war wounds in the converted Book Room. They watched him carefully carrying a tray as he traversed the passageway and entered the room; then following behind him, they found no one there.

Five decades later, the room became a shop for commercial reproductions of antique memorabilia, souvenirs for tourists. Yet the assistants could not miss the expression of his pain, each morning finding items thrown across the room. No one interpreted his repeated actions.

For centuries he has been walking this same route; a tall, thin man with short dark hair, his figure slightly bent into an air of subservience. The mildness of his features belies the despair and anger that hold him in this repeating pattern.

Huw Thomas loved too much and wanted more than he could expect. His parents had always worried what to do with him, for he didn't fit comfortably into the cattle-farming mould. He was too delicate, too concerned by the natural dirt of mud, disliking the smell that farmers found comfortable. Nor was the repetition of the seasons a joy, a reassurance to him. He preferred the sustenance of conversation and different cultural traditions. His father, disgusted, wondered often how he had produced such an alien being, as unwelcome in the family as a brown calf born into the sacred white herd of the Dinefwrs. The cows had grazed in the Park since the time of the first Princes of Deheubarth and it was felt that they safeguarded the land and those who lived there. The disturbingly coloured arrivals called into question the purity of the ancient lineage of the cattle and were, therefore, culled immediately.

His parents were delighted when they were offered the opportunity for him to be a footman at Newton House. Others, too, had noted their son's difference and felt he showed potential for the duties of a servant. He had been very relieved to find a way out of the dullness of the country peasant lifestyle.

Having enjoyed the basic education the local school provided for children of poor families, he was able to read and write, and unlike the others was hungry for more. They were all glad

to be released into the outdoors, to the pleasures of the woods and rivers. He wanted to read and find out about other countries, other civilisations. He felt that further education could be gained through all that the House had to offer, both by learning about the Family's ways and by somehow taking advantage of all the materials that were in the House. After all, there was a Library.

Although he didn't share the privileged activities of the Dinefwr Family, he was aware that the youngest son, Walter, was the same age as he and growing up in close physical proximity. He was able to observe the other's activities on a daily basis. As he set the fires in the reception rooms, cleared the dining table, brought up the night-time hot drinks, he was able to participate vicariously in the education of the etiquette of Welsh aristocracy, ordering ponies for park-wide rides, practising oratory. He was learning the ways of the gentry by default, only able to practise it mentally during the execution of a footman's tasks, while he polished the young master's boots, cleaned the hunting guns, checked the beer barrels, prepared their fishing rods. Sometimes the Lady told him to accompany Walter and his brothers when they went out on the ponies, taking the lead rein of one when they travelled out to the field and then watching as they practised trotting or jumping, expected to applaud supportively when moves were executed well. He often walked beside Walter, who enjoyed talking with Huw about nothing in particular and who found it a pleasure when they made mutually pleasing jokes, liking the sound of his laughter.

He worked arduously, well aware that promotion was his if he showed the right enthusiasm tempered with a willingness to obey orders. His soft voice was pleasing to the Lord and Lady and they found him attractive in an unchallenging way. His bright, dark eyes would shine through long lashes as he glanced up when invited to answer a question and the Lady would shiver quietly with delight at the beauty and intelligence in those eyes. She became very fond of this mild young man who seemed interested in their lives and the running of the estate. She particularly enjoyed the evenings when he would travel quietly through the downstairs rooms carefully lighting the lamps, bringing a soft reassuring glow, banishing the shadows that were creeping from the corners. She felt that his actions were a spiritual benefaction on them all.

In time, he served in the Drawing Room and the Library, overseeing the warmth and comfort of the family. He was a trusted servant who partly shared their conversations, their upsets, their celebrations. He absorbed these treasured moments, feeling that he was being subsumed into the heart of the family. At the quietest times now he was able to creep into his favourite room and would stroke his hands lightly over the books, absorbing them through his fingertips. At times he would take one down at random and stand in the dimmest corner, reading just a part of it, enough to glean the flavour of the subject and some small amount of information. Sometimes he would take the newspaper downstairs to iron, using this as an opportunity to run his eye over the pages, finding articles about events in London, checking on international news. Slowly, he was beginning to feel conversant about the wider world.

The sons, now grown up, would spend much of their time in London, involved in the maelstrom of the political world and the business of timetabled social events there. They returned for festive seasons and the summer months, when they could enjoy a sense of disconnection from the demands of their other life and relax into the daily flow of the sun and languorous evenings as the daylight dimmed.

He was always very glad to welcome them back and to do all the little things that made them comfortable. They appreciated his thoughtfulness, the way that he would set the fire just as they felt the dusk's cold touching their hands and would bring them a drink as soon as they ordered one, almost as if he knew their needs better than they did. He was a barely noted presence as they discussed their worries about impending changes in the government, ways of dealing with the running of the estate and anxieties that their parents were not as effective as they had been. Occasionally, Walter would lean across the settee and look up towards Huw and ask him "What do you think Huw? Am I right?" Huw's response was always measured and given in gentle tones that Walter found comforting and he would visibly relax with the sound. The content was never important to him.

One afternoon Walter was in the Library, the sun soaking the floor while a tune from the piano in the Dining Room carried across the corridor into the room, lightly filling the space around him. He had pulled a book from the shelf and was standing leaning against the wall as he perused it. He wasn't yet committed to full consumption of it. Huw appeared with a glass of whisky on a small silver tray. Walter had not ordered this but showed little surprise, for he felt that Huw understood him exceptionally well. Walter moved to the settee to sit down. Resting with the sun fully on his face, he shut his eyes against the glare. He heard Huw set down the tray on the small table and held out his hand for the glass. Without a word between them, Walter felt the glass pressed into his palm. Huw gently stroked the other man's hand around the glass. The silence became electric. Huw did not pull his hand away and Walter did not let go. After some moments, each became aware of his own excited breathing and of possibilities as yet untried. Walter said "my head hurts", not knowing why he said this, except that when Huw began to stroke it gently, he felt it was the response he had been asking for.

So much more could have happened, but the piano music stopped and both men froze. Huw stepped away and Walter said lightly "Oh, pity". The servant walked without a word from the room. He was thinking he had been presumptuous and that now he would never be trusted again. Afraid he could never trust himself again. In that brief moment he had felt the height of the passion that had grown within him through the years. The shock when their fingers had met had coursed right through him. The bliss of feeling Walter's soft hair and the hardness of his skull, so long desired.

The realisation that his world was unchanged, although he would never be the same again, came later in the evening. The bell summoned him to the Library, Huw came up from the servant's quarters in the basement. Walter was sitting on the settee still, playing a card game across the table with his brothers. Without looking up at him, he said "Thomas the fire needs stacking". Huw filled the grate with logs silently, paused while the increased glow burst into dancing, orange flames, then withdrew, unnoticed.

He descended the dark stairs to the basement's chill, struggling with overwhelming grief. He wanted to turn the clock back to yesterday when he had felt so full of certainties and make none of it happen, but also wanted never to lose that bliss when he and Walter were connected, wanted that never to end. How to cope? Unfulfilled and angry, there was nowhere now where he could feel the ease and self-satisfaction at his place in the world that had been *his* for so many years. He wished they had culled him when they had realised he was different. He twisted the tap of the beer barrel, filling his mug, hoping the liquid would soak up the pain. He drank and drank again, until numbness crept in.

Each day his stomach twisted as he remembered that afternoon, followed by fear of discovery and ensuing shame. The bleak servants' quarters were his sanctuary and any summons upstairs was unwelcome. The Lady noticed a difference in him and was disappointed in the change. She wondered why he should have become so sullen, but did not think to ask him. The strength of purpose that he had generated, reassuring her, sank away. The joy between him and the family had gone and his presence diminished. Like a ghost he passed between upstairs and below stairs.

For him, the ending of life couldn't come quickly enough, although he felt there was to be no forgiveness there. He waited for death to come to him, willing it to be fast; drinking to fill the space of the waiting. His departure came as a physical relief, tripping on the stone steps, breaking his neck as he fell.

The visitor shares his story, feeling the urgency of his agony, as it plays over and over, centuries long. She generates the understanding of a different era towards his energy, and through that understanding of all that he was, a sense of self-forgiveness arises.

Appendix 2

The badger watch

We set off in the dustiness of an evening sun and soft winds that are still cuddling with warmth, a small troupe, united by our focus – to watch wildlife, particularly badgers, from the Dinefwr Park hide. The others in the group are better equipped than I; they have rucksacks, rainproof coats, extra jerseys, binoculars, cameras with massive telescopic lenses. The weather forecast was ‘breezy with showers’ and I just have my handbag and the linen trousers and shirt I have been wearing all day, which were lovely and cooling in the hot summer sun, but now are beginning to feel rather thin – oh, and a hoody I found on the backseat of the car. They all have walking boots and I just have the lightweight trainers I have been dancing around the town in. I do have a scarf, but the cotton sort that makes a pretty accessory, not one to keep out the draughts. I also realise that I have no idea how long this evening will last and as we negotiate the unevenness of the fields and stones on the paths, I wonder how I will cope when we return with only the moon to light our way.

“Should have brought a torch”, I whisper to my companion, not wanting the others to discern exactly how unprepared I am. He whispers back that he has the app on his phone but it only has 6% battery left. “I forgot to bring my camera and don’t have my phone, so can we use yours to take photos?” His bemused glance tells me that he wonders how we will manage that too on just 6%. Oh how I wish that I had done more than glance at the clock, noting that I should have left twenty minutes earlier for comfortable driving, grabbing my car keys and running out of the house, leaving behind house-filled chaos from a family day of painting, eating, playing cars, watching cbeebies.

Mike, the ranger here for 23 years, speaks with a west country burr, leans as he walks on his tree-branch walking stick with an antler handle, and, with longish grey hair poking from below the brim of his hat. He exudes the calm authority of a countryman who knows his chosen world. We follow his lead past the House across the fields, observing as we go the screech of a jay, a buzzard gliding, the fragility of a herd of young deer trotting between the trees and melting into the woods. I am trying to forget the washing up that I didn’t do, the washing that I left on the line when it might rain.

Almost inevitably it seems, conversation between the group touches on the fate of the house from the time when the dynasty relinquished it, breaking the centuries of princely occupation, and its subsequent demise, slowly crumbling away. How a local authority considered making it an Arts Centre and then it was taken over by hippies, who pulled out the fireplaces, removing its beauty and its grandeur. How it could have been had for a song. His friend nearly bought it for £80,000 and that was back in the 70’s when he lived on a farm in Carmarthen. Then talk tailing away with the recall of how the National Trust rescued it.

We reach the hide, all speaking only in whispers now, and enter the long shed with square viewing holes cut along one length and a long bench placed below them where we will sit and watch. I’m still not sure for how long. Am I settling myself for the next four hours? I wonder how well I will manage to keep still for this length of time, hoping that hunger won’t creep up and nibble away at my concentration. I also wonder briefly why I decided to do this when I could have stayed at home on a soft chair with electric light, numbing my mind comfortably watching TV. Of course, I don’t give these thoughts away, trying to look eager and absorbed by our activity.

We each find a place on the bench and settle as quietly as possible. The others place a vacuum flask, binoculars, cameras and rucksacks on the ledge beneath the windows, resting the long noses of their lens on the edges, focussing on the places where the badgers might emerge. I feel an amateur in comparison with my empty ledge and hope that my presence doesn't seem too half-hearted.

Mike tells us that the badgers' strongest faculty is their hearing, that they have little sight, while they also use their sense of smell. He leaves us and enters the glade below the shed, scattering niblets of food to entice the animals out, pointing out where a bank vole might emerge and three separate holes where the badgers live. He clears his way through, cutting away the bracken, using his stick as a scythe; as he slices the fronds they fly into the air. These are the movements of the leader of our pack. "The secret is, don't get in his way", my neighbour makes motions imitating the downward cutting movements of Mike's arm. A short while later, reminding me of this, he makes the same slicing motion and nods his head towards Mike and we laugh silently. Thus is born communication between two strangers.

Mike returns and we settle in for the duration of the watch. I find myself seeking an inner stillness so that I can really appreciate the experience, yet almost immediately become aware how any noise could scare away the wildlife and anxious that I or any one of us may inadvertently disrupt the occasion. What if someone sneezed? Choking down a rising cough, I search my hoody pockets and find a packet of gummy bears, which I have to prise open without any noise, not easy. Relieved I start sucking as quietly as I can. Smugly, I notice another member of our group has started coughing and hand her a gummy bear, noting her grateful nodded smile of thanks. From now on I can let my tension ease.

Immediately to our left is a huge felled tree that has rotted to an almost unrecognisable state into the land, some of it resembling rockface, its exposed upper surface covered with brambles and mosses, bare dead branches protrude from its flank. One juts above our heads like the skeletal form of a unicorn rampant, its mouth open wide, a front leg outstretched across the empty space and ferns growing like a mane flowing across its neck. Another branch is the poised body of a javelin thrower, leaning back, one arm flung back behind holding the javelin ready to throw, while the other arm holds the balance stretched forward in front of it. Aggressive postures are claiming the space, striking poses that dominate the sun-spattered, velveteen mounds below us, reminding me of the tensions that were with us as we walked up the hill.

Every now and then a frond of silvery-green bracken separates from the mass of fronds and shakes vigorously, teased by a jester breeze that is leaping on an irregular, invisible trail. My attention is caught by a nuthatch perched on one of the tree's bare branches seemingly looking towards us. I turn to see if my neighbours have noticed it, but their stares are fixed in different directions. The couple to my left are watching the twitchy movements of the bank vole, so frustratingly fast that they can't manage to capture it in a photograph. The couple to my right have seen movements in the furthest badger hole and her camera is clicking at something before the rest of us.

As the badgers emerge uncertainly into this light-clear evening, we remain silent; yet there is around us a wave of wind rushing through the trees, the roar of a plane, the rumble of traffic on distant roads, the chattering of small birds and another making sharp metallic sounds like small anvil blows. I wonder what sense the badgers are making of these noises. The warmth

of the sun is now fading and there is the coolness of gusts of breezes. A deer enters the glade amidst the bracken, its spotted flank brown against the green, and holds still, head raised, watching, listening. The badgers pause and retreat.

From a nearer hole two smaller badgers emerge, shuffling, lumbering movements, as they snuffle through the grass, detecting the food on the ground before them. We can hear them chomping. Silently I nudge my companion and gesture to him to take photos of these creatures that appear like friends, these furry little head-striped bears. I remember that we are using the last of his phone's battery, which will mean an unsafe, stumbling return over uncertain terrain, but dismiss this worry.

We are all watching as the badgers venture out briefly from each of the holes and then sink from sight. From somewhere music floats in, the bass beat first and then the strains of an incongruous march tune. The dappled sun fades out and greyness of the dusk washes the scene before us. Mike turns to us and whispers that we need to pack up and leave before the sun sets and the temperature sinks any further. I should have trusted our leader would look after us. He says that he hopes we haven't been too disappointed, for badgers hate the wind, and if it had dropped they would have come to the surface more.

As we leave in pale evening light, I wanted to tell him that it wasn't a firework shattering experience, but something much deeper and quieter.