

# *A Cloth of Sounds*

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## Coupled

Welsh damp burning his hip, he leaves the barn,  
a ragged dog at heel, crosses a dung slippery yard  
to the *cegin* where his wife curses the coal scuttle,  
the contrary range, the west wind that brought rain  
to baptise the sheets blowing out on the line.

His pockets and cuffs bring in early Spring air  
spilling into the clock-ticking pool of light.  
Over the sink he rids his hands of  
the stink of sheep, the bend of his back  
tells her how his day has been.

The fleece of their labour is a binding *siôl*  
combed through with bed, toil and touch,  
a life woven together, as tangled as  
snagged burrs on barbed wire.

And she fears, how more than once

he has measured with a look, the length  
of rope between barn beam and stool.

And he grieves for her dirt laced palms,  
her kitchen scissors- shaped hair,  
her best coat hanging, as good as new.

But last night, pulling a lamb to life  
in the after-birth strewn shed,  
he glimpsed at the curve of her neck  
the girl onto whose slim pale finger  
he once placed a fine gold band.

And she looked up at him, found  
still  
her heart in the ploughed field of his face.

### Ram

You can't put a price on a ram, it is half the flock.  
Horns well out, good bones and teeth, testicles, feet,  
strong shoulders for tugging, close knit wool;  
that's what you look for in October markets  
leaning on the pen bars, a watchful eye,  
rank stink of sheep in the air around you,  
the auctioneer's drone an itch in your ears.

You see a fiery spirit in a ruddy neck kemp,

hardy seed for passing on in November  
when raddled, you put him to the ewes.  
Keep you in fat lambs for years, a good old boy,  
his offspring bouncing in your Spring fields,  
sons to the slaughter, daughters to the breeding,  
their fleeces to sharpened summer shears.

### Shearing Saturday

The day starts early, a dry one *diolch byth*,  
rows of waiting benches, oiled shears,  
strong-armed men, a nipping dog,  
the sheep crammed panting and wild-eyed  
soon to escape shorn and scrawny, encouraged  
by boys with sticks and unbroken voices.

Midday air brims with sweat and lanolin,  
banter and stories, muscle and grip,  
wool motes settle like ash from cold fires,  
plates of *cacen gneifio* baked by vying wives  
burst with rich fruit on wooden tables,  
the beer barrel lurks in a corner.

End of day the company is frozen in sepia:  
be-whiskered men capped, suited and booted,  
roaming boys working their three weeks  
for shillings, cider, an eye from a local daughter,  
women aproned against the puddings and cakes,  
rough collie reclining, his work done.

## Spinster

### *Spindle and Whorl*

She gathers burrs in her apron  
plucks from hawthorn, bramble, gorse,  
fingerprick-red roses the soft tangle,  
spears onto the distaff  
carved by her father's hand,  
pulls out lines to wrap her spindle.

On a soft day she follows the flock  
collecting cast-offs, a free bounty  
for her maiden fingers to tease  
a thread, stretched out and twisted  
by the dropping whorl chosen for its  
weight and shape that pleases.

She begins a renaissance.  
Yarns as fine as the silks created by other,  
solitary sisters quietly webbed  
in dusty corners, behind settles,  
are wound needle-ready.

By window light in her *cegin*  
she fashions her *brethyn cartref*  
for the meagre coins that keep her,  
while she waits to cast off  
the binds of her single state;  
to lose her name.

### *Walking Wheel*

The elm once stood in the valley slopes.

Now stripped, planked, planed,  
teased with lathe and chisel,  
steamed, formed by village carpenter  
into a wheel, garnered with joints,  
spokes, holes and axle, legs, seat  
smelling of resin and beeswax,  
it sits by the *cegin* range  
red in the afternoon window.

She stands, revolves the wheel  
with her right hand, sets a motion,  
moves two paces away,  
a rhythmic creak in her ear,  
draws wool from the central spindle,  
twists, twists yarn until strong enough  
to load the cop, repeats, repeats  
until the cone is full,  
her arms and fingers burning.

Spinster, though tied now with a gold band.

### *Mules*

Now she leaves her home for hours at the mill,  
walks arm-in-arm with her work sisters  
past the wooden wheel turning in its mossy cut,  
through the double doors, up the stairs  
to the mules waiting on their sprung boards.

A moment of quiet before the sound and fury.

Outside the mill race brings falling water  
to become a circle of power.

Shafts, cogs, drive belts and gears  
send their energy to the waiting machines  
for the thunderous *twmpath* to begin.

Inside wheels and shafts growl into action.  
With a mate she works the slivers of wool  
stretching and spinning, *tynnu a troelli*  
pulling and twisting out and back  
out and back in and out along the rails.

*Wind the bobbin up wind the bobbin up*  
*Pull pull clap clap clap clap.*  
Floorboards jump to the clatter and rhythm  
of cogs and rods the twirling cops  
fidgeting, fattening and chattering in their rows.

The spinsters' ears will ring forever.  
They will hymn too loudly at chapel Sunday  
thanking their God for sheep and rain,  
lifting their voices to His immaculate ears,  
they will strain to hear a grandchild's laugh.

## Hands

A lifetime of work between them  
in bladed cheekbones, sunken mouths  
the bite of teeth long forgotten,  
wispy white bonneted hair,  
a gaze that does not trust the camera.

The toil is in the hands.

Each node and swelling, knobbled knuckle  
every hard slick coating, grating crepitus,  
each misshapen finger, useless thumb  
holds their labours in a brace of claws.

Sunday shawls clipped with tarnished finery.

## Reading Room, 1901

This January evening, the week's work finished,  
the weaver walks across the stone bridge  
to the reading room for half an hour's peace.  
His way is marked by an early moon  
tilting its light over terraced roofs,  
his breath fogs air that is waiting for frost.

Across the pond drifts the smell  
of paraffin lamps, their yellow light seeping

from un-shuttered windows, feeble in the dusk.

In the woods waiting dimly all around,  
tawny calls and answers reach his ears  
still ringing with the day's looms.

Entering, he nods to neighbours,  
sits and pulls close a light, the flame  
spluttering in its glass globe, opens  
a newspaper bought by his Master  
for mind and spirit.

It saves a hard- earned penny.

*Turn old false teeth into money,  
buy boots at Davies Bros in Lampeter,  
the date of the next Cardigan Hiring Fair,  
the drunkenness of working women,  
six orphans lined the procession  
when Rev. John Davies buried his wife.*

He reads of all these things.

He will take home to his wife  
gardening tips for this month,  
how to force rhubarb, sow beans  
seek and destroy snails.

She will raise her eyes,  
show him her dirty nails.

So he will tell her of the Belle Vue Hotel  
in Aberystwyth, believing she dreams  
of taking afternoon tea in a quiet room  
with matching cups and saucers;



her penny's worth of another world.

### Wraparound

*Mam-gu's* apron smelt of Brasso and vinegar,  
carbolic, sultanas, soap flakes and soup, while  
her own scent of African violets and washing- up hands  
wriggled in my nostrils when, shy with visitors,  
I wrapped around her legs, breathing in her sturdiness.

As a baby she'd squash me against her bosom  
comfy as a cushion, strapped in a fine *siôl*,  
plump, pulling on her neck, her arms and hands free  
to plunge into sink or polish steps while mammy  
worked the clattering looms for our pennies and pounds.

It seemed there was only ever the one, bound to her,  
a constant cover which rested briefly on a kitchen hook  
ghosted in her essence and form, sure of her return  
while she lifted her voice in the dust-free pews,  
let go the ties, tidy in her Chapel best.

### A Clink of Coal

Who hung a coat beneath these stairs,  
strung herbs from ceiling hooks,  
rodded the chimney, swept the hearth,  
trimmed wicks to an inch of light,

spat in the grate, knocked out a pipe,  
filled the attic with apples,  
slept where the bath is now?

I know them only as names  
on dry documents:  
Richard Elias, woollen spinner,  
Mary his wife, six children  
a dozen years of marriage.

Where does spent sound go?  
Hiss of gas lamps, hobnails on stone flags,  
crank of water pump, creak of settle,  
grunts of birthing bed, papery death sighs,  
dustings on beams, collected in corners,  
linger on a quiet afternoon,

wind in the flue, clink of coal in my range,  
the breath of the left behind.

### Reflective Essay

I decided to write a collection of poems on a single subject for my dissertation soon after I had completed one of my modules, *Writing to a Single Focus*. I had completed a set of short prose pieces prompted by images of islanders wearing traditional Fairisle knitwear. As I finished my reflective essay, I recognised that I had a personal local connection with what had once been a flourishing community based on working with wool. *Who once lived in my house?* was a starting point.

My main interest lay in how the lives of working people might have been shaped geographically and socially by the mills that employed them. Sheep farms, evidence of workings, the nearby National Welsh Wool Museum, an intact mill and the millworker's cottage in which I live all served to compel me to respond creatively to the encompassing sense of what has gone before. The concept was to produce a collection of poetry imagining the past intimacies, hardships and endeavours of a particular local community that might appeal to readers who enjoy poetry and are interested in social and industrial history.

I chose to write a poetry collection because it is my favoured genre. So much can be said in a well-formed poem, and in a themed collection tales can be told in as much detail as in stories. The skill of *show, not tell* in a poem leaves the reader to make their own deductions about character, environment or events. For example, 'Folster found a girl/ Who put wounds on his face and throat/

Small and diagonal, like red doves.’<sup>1</sup> in George Mackay Brown’s poem “Hamnavoe Market”, tells the reader a lot about the two characters and where they are in three short lines.

Because wool production was predominantly a rural industry, I immersed myself in reading rural writers, Laurie Lee in particular. His prose and poetry have influenced my own writing over many years; I admire his intense, spare descriptions of landscape, weather and people. His collection of essays *Village Christmas* is a portrait of a changing community, unsentimental, lyrical in its depictions of the countryside so familiar to him. There are passages that are poetic in style; his description of the changes in a wood through seasons for example:

This beech wood,...so empty now, no more than fissures of cracks in the sky – where is the huge lazy heaving of those June-thick leaves, reeking of sap and the damp roots of orchids, rustling with foxes and screaming with jays and crammed to the clouds with pigeons?<sup>2</sup>

The fact that this work has fairly recently been re-published suggests to me that the public readership is still interested in reading about rural life, its people and natural environment and that there might be an interest in a collection about a past community.

Two poets whose collections on a single general topic I have read and admired are Ted Walker and Anna Wigley. In his collection *Fox On A Barn Door*, in the title poem, Walker examines the interaction between man and nature, the Harvest Moon a metaphor for the communion wafer, a dead fox pinned to a barn door the crucified Christ for example. In the poem “Cuckoo-pint” he speaks directly to the plant as if it is a human: ‘I remember/ you – bright hedgerow tarts you were,/flagrant in your big red beads, / cheerful, vulgar and brazen.’<sup>3</sup> I think this is an effective trope and have used it myself in my poem *Teasel*. Anna Wigley shares her intuitive experience of the surrounding world in her collection *The Bird Hospital*. Her poem “Duck-shooting” creates a strong sense of place, as I have tried to do in my work, “Shearing Saturday” and “Reading Room” for example. “The Aran” shares my interest in the graft involved in working with hands to create something from a raw material: ‘She patterns for her own pleasure: /tapestries from this coarse, dun stuff /a rune of insinuating roads and ribbons.’<sup>4</sup> Reading these writers, among others, has immersed me in quality writing, helped me to focus and to assure me that themed collections are publishable.

Before I began to research and then write, I had decided to organise the collection into sections, thereby covering all the aspects of the project that I wanted to. Home and recreational life are as interesting to me as the industrial work. I was also keen to give some attention to the passing of time, the past and the present mingling. I read similarly formatted collections by other poets to inspire me and to assure me that this was a method that could work well. Ellie Rees has organised her collection *Ticking* into sections when examining in detail one particular location that is familiar and meaningful to her. ‘House’, ‘Garden’, ‘Field’ and ‘Cliffs’ let the story unfold from the personal to the general. I decided to begin with the raw product, wool, and take it through the processes, the role it played in shaping lives and what has been left behind. Likewise, Mario Petrucci has organised his commission *Fearnought Poems for Southwell Workhouse* in sections too. In his introduction he comments that he was ‘struck by the potential of Southwell Workhouse as a “text gallery”.’<sup>5</sup> I think this is an excellent analogy; he was referencing the workhouse building as being receptive to the hanging of poems. For me, I imagine poems as pictures and taking readers through a gallery where poems are hung together by connections seems like a good idea.

I had already written the poem “Coupled” for the R.S. Thomas Poetry Competition 2021, and sheep farming seemed a good place to start. I researched wool as a product, different breeds of sheep,

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<sup>1</sup> George Mackay Brown, *Selected Poems 1954-1992*(London: John Murray, 1996)p30

<sup>2</sup> Laurie Lee, *Village Christmas And Other Notes of the English Year*(UK: Penguin Random House,2016)p14

<sup>3</sup> Ted Walker, *Fox On A Barn Door*(London: Jonathan Cape, 1965)p40

<sup>4</sup> Anna Wigley, *The Bird Hospital*(Llandysul: Gomer Press,2002)p44

<sup>5</sup> Mario Petrucci, *Fearnought Poems for Southwell Workhouse*(The National Trust,2006)p5

dipping and shearing, traditions that went with those activities; visited the livestock market in Newcastle Emlyn and watched the business there, even though I could not understand the strong dialect Welsh in use. I found it all fascinating, as was my visits to the National Welsh Wool Museum where staff were helpful and supportive. There I could see and more importantly hear the looms and spinners working, smell the dust and lanolin, look at images and read and listen to the lives of the workers at the Cambrian Mill. Many notes and photographs were taken and such physical research was inspiring. I visited the Ceredigion archives in Aberystwyth to look at census returns to find out who lived in my terrace of cottages, local landowners, farms, maps and buildings. I accessed copies of old local newspapers which revealed social history that I was able to make use of. Internet searches enabled me to discover facts about local chapels and ministers and I went to look around some, particularly the one at Cwmpencraig which appears in "Green at the Altar". The primary school in my local village had just produced a book commemorating the last one hundred and fifty years of its existence and the personal stories recalled were a rich source of inspiration. All the characters in my poem "Cynnar Hau, Cynnar Fedi" once existed and Nansi Nurseries, now in her nineties, still lives across the lane from me.

I had collected a lot of research and had to be mindful that I was not completing a History degree; I had to turn all that I had discovered into something creative. I decided this was best accomplished by focusing on the people, how the work shaped their lives, their futures; how their presence is scattered around the area still. I could only imagine, of course; and living conditions in my cottage, for example, are a whole lot easier now than they would have been a hundred years or more ago. I found out from the 1889 and 1901 census returns for example, that all four cottages in my terrace housed large families and often lodgers. Now only two of us live in my house and it is bigger than originally built. Electricity did not come to the valley until the 1950s and proper drainage until the 1980s. Living two hundred metres from the mill would have been useful for getting to work, but there would have been little respite from its presence, the noise, bustle of delivery vehicles and so on. It would also have been a constant reminder for most that it was where they would spend the greater part of their lives in hard labour.

From my research I formed the impression that although the work was hard and poorly paid, life was not as grim for the workers in the Welsh woollen industry as it was for those in the cotton mills of the North of England or the coal mines and steel works. Mills were smaller, communities tightly-knit. There was not the rapid expansion into overcrowded towns and cities which brought with it air pollution, shoddy housing, poor sanitary conditions that led to serious disease outbreaks as happened in the coal mining town Merthyr Tydfil for example. As in other working communities, Chapel was an integral part of life, also sport and socialising, but these took place in a healthier environment.

My tutor and I discussed the importance of being mindful of portraying the realities of hardship, of stepping back from a rosy picture of the past because of the beauty of the surrounding locations and my own perceptions built on how I feel about where I live now. Having acknowledged this, I did not want to dwell entirely on hardship in my poems, rather celebrate the fact that people were able to live in challenging conditions but were still able to gain some enjoyment from family and community. In this respect I have made what I hope are subtle references to adversity and lack of opportunity. For example, in "Cynnar Hau, Cynnar Fedi", the mill waits for Nansi to grow up, pupils die from now-eradicated illnesses; the wife in Reading Room has dirt under her nails from growing much needed food and dreams of afternoon tea in Aberystwyth; machine noise wrecks hearing, and shearing is back-breaking work.

One of the most useful prompts for a writer is to make use of their surroundings and any known details about it. *Write what you know* is a maxim often suggested but write what might have gone before can also be full of potential. Projecting my own situation on the past was difficult not to do and was one of the areas where I had to do most editing. For example in "A Penny an Hour" I had originally written that a wife's piecemeal income would help to keep bellies full, before discussion

with my tutor that that would rarely be the case. Most families would have struggled to be even half full and often hungry. I had also been able to access from research some primary evidence; an inventory for Maeslyn Mill for example, which I very much wanted to make use of because of its wonderful vocabulary but was not sure how to turn into something creative. My tutor suggested a *found poem*, something that I had never tried before and think works well as a way of presenting facts in this collection, as does the “Words on Wood” poem. I would like to thank my tutor and fellow writers in Lampeter and PenFro writing groups for their critique, advice and support.

An important part of the editing process for a collection is choosing what not to include. I had written this poem “The Flock and the Fleece” because I had found out a lot about ancient breeds of sheep and thought it interesting enough to include in the collection.

I decided on presenting the poem in the style of a hymn so that the sentiment would be in praise of the diversity of the animal who had given up their wool for humans over thousands of years. I am not sure that the form works; the sentiment I wanted is not necessarily evident and the poem is rather over-loaded with facts. Another poem not included is “Lane”, this time because I was trying to capture the sense of the present over-laying the past but didn’t quite manage it. These poems need more work and might be included when I put forward the collection for publishing.

My intention is to present this collection in pamphlet form for publication. There is not quite enough material for a small edition and my understanding is that a pamphlet is a good route into becoming published. I also intend to approach the National Welsh Wool Museum to see if they would be interested in displaying extracts or full pieces to accompany some of their exhibits. I did much of my research there and think that this would be an interesting idea to pursue. Exhibits are accompanied by explanations and personal accounts, but I do not recall seeing much in the way of a creative response. Perhaps this is something the museum might wish to consider, especially as it has had writers in residence and workshops there in the past.

Creating this collection has combined my two main interests history and poetry. It has been a welcome challenge to turn one into the other; a challenge helped by the fact that much of that history is familiar to me as I live among relics of the past. The stones in the walls of my house, the old apple trees in the garden, the woods where generations before me have walked and most of all the mill still standing along the lane have all been there for me to imagine their stories.

In the commentary on her collection *The Bird Hospital*<sup>6</sup>, Anna Wigley says ‘Particular responses in these poems may be entirely personal to me- I cannot tell.’ My collection is a personal response and I hope that I have had some success in shining a light on the lives of the wool workers of Ceredigion.

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<sup>6</sup> Wigley, Anna, *The Bird Hospital* (Llandysul:Gomer Press,2002) back cover

## Appendix

### The Flock and the Fleece

Roam the Welsh hills you ancient breeds  
Siwanod of Preselli, Defaid Rhiw on Llyn,  
give up your fleeces to roundhouse looms,  
the scratchy plaids of warring tribes,  
thread twists and yarns through your line  
to badger-faced Torddu and down  
among the Black Welsh Mountain's coat  
whose gwlân coch-du needs no dip of dye.

Sacrifice to the shears you flocks of Beulah  
the tweeds and soft handling flannels,  
gift your pelts to stockings and felts,  
share your ancestry on shepherded hills  
and through weaver, mill and loom  
bring comfort to those who have cut you.

#### <sup>1</sup> Lane

The lane descends, a brown liquid line,  
ripples corrugate the verges  
merge into grassy mud,  
watery sun dulls the surface  
sheening manure streaks, hedge clippings,  
tractor-tyre rubber necklaces the edges  
where pulling-over stories are written.

Beneath the tarred surface,  
in rutted, ropey strings,  
cart tracks muddle between  
beech-heavy hedges  
faint half-hoop iron shoes  
pockmark in between  
old stories, hidden for a century.

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