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Queer Square Mile: Queer Short Stories from Wales, ed. Kirsti Bohata, Mihangel Morgan, Huw Osborne (Cardigan: Parthian, 2022). Pp. 664. £20.00.

The editors of *Queer Square Mile: Queer Short Stories from Wales* offer us forty-six stories in six groups. The groups are, 'Love, Loss, and the Art of Failure', 'Disorderly Women', 'Transformations', 'Hauntings and Other Queer Fancies', 'Queer Children' and 'Internationalisms'. These creative and stimulating arrangements, thematic rather than chronological, create 'dialogue across times and places' between the stories, as discussed in the Introduction. Nevertheless, the chronology of the stories at the end of the collection is instructive, suggesting two distinct periods of Welsh queer writing. The first might be thought of as writing 'between the acts': stories published between 1885, the year in which Section 11 of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act made all sexual acts between men punishable by law, and 1967, the year in which homosexual acts between men were partly decriminalised, 'in large part', as the editors tell us in their fascinating and wonderfully informative introduction, 'due to the reasoned and eloquent support and advocacy of Leo Abse, Labour MP for Pontypool'. The second might be thought of as writing after decriminalisation, although a new tradition of confident writing that depicts queer identities openly only emerges towards the end of the twentieth century. The editors include only seven stories published between 1950 and 1995, a forty-five year period. However, eighteen stories published since 1996 showcase the exciting range of contemporary Welsh queer writing. Another sixteen stories published between 1926 and 1949 – including five by Rhys Davies, three by Kathleen Freeman, three by Glyn Jones and two by Margiad Evans – are wonderful little masterpieces of intimation, all of them published at a time when books with explicit fictional representations of male homosexuality or lesbianism, such as those found in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915), Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) or James Hanley's *Boy* (1931) were banned. (Boriswood, the publisher of *Boy*, was advised that it was useless to fight the obscenity charge because of the novel's representations of 'intimacy between

members of the male sex'.) As *Queer Square Mile* shows, writers often escaped censorship by hinting at rather than representing intimacy directly – the reader of such subtle fiction is in effect a joint creator of the text, filling in the gaps. Physical objects, such as green gloves or fried chips, become powerful symbols that give us imaginative release into queer worlds. Dramatic interactions between the characters allow readers to articulate in their minds what the stories leave unsaid.

One story meditates on the role of stories, offering us a metafictional analysis of the power of queer stories. John Sam Jones's 'The Wonder at Seal Cave', first published in 2000, depicts the repressive forces of the past at war with the emergence of queer desires and the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ culture. The young protagonist, Gethin Llyr, asks his biology teacher, Kevin Bateman, for advice about being gay, but Mr Bateman is worried about helping Gethin because of Section 28, legislation explicitly prohibiting 'the teaching … of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship': 'the school's policy on sex education and the laws which guided it' makes it difficult for a teacher to talk to a pupil about gay issues. Mr Bateman resorts to writing Gethin a note with the phone number of a 'gay help-line in Bangor'. Although Gethin's accursed progenitors regard homosexuality as a sin or a psychological disorder, his family is a battleground between religious tradition and secular modernity, a modernity which provides its own spiritual succour. His father, the Reverend Llyr Jones, had recently urged his 'congregation at Tabernacl (Methodistiaid Calfinaidd – 1881) to write to the local MP urging him to vote against lowering the age [of consent] to sixteen'. His mother, a doctor, believes homosexuals 'were disturbed and needed psychiatric treatment'. But his brother, Seifion, tells him he has made gay friends at university, and tells him about AIDS activism in New York; and his sister, Eilir, a doctor in Liverpool, tells her family how much she admires an 'AIDS patient's partner' and her patient's 'gay friends'. His mother is aware of new combination therapies for HIV infection – she has read about them in the *BMJ* – but her views on homosexuality show the influence of '1960s medical science'. 'Where there is power, there is resistance,' Michel Foucault famously observed, and Gethin counters his father's Calvinism with his own religious vision, a vision of Saint Beuno, the seventh-century Welsh abbot associated with Enlli, the island of twenty thousand saints, telling him, 'The glory of God is the fully

alive human being … and as it is your providence to love men, love them well, in truth and faithfulness'.

While visiting his sister in Liverpool, Gethin goes to the cinema to see *Beautiful Thing*, the 1996 romantic gay comedy scripted by Jonathan Harvey, based on his 1993 play of the same name. *Beautiful Thing* reveals a new world for Gethin: 'Jamie and Ste, two boys his own age, falling in love with one another'. Jamie and Ste's story, Jones tells us,

> had begun to give that unspeakable part of Gethin's life a shape. For the first time Gethin really understood what his father had so often preached to his congregation – 'that stories give shape to lives and that without stories we cannot understand ourselves'. Of course … Gethin knew that his father wouldn't include Jamie and Ste's story alongside those of Jacob, Jeremiah and Jesus. Llyr Jones wouldn't see the two boys' story as a 'beautiful thing'.

Queer Square Mile offers a range of stories by which Welsh readers might 'understand themselves', not merely as *queer* – whatever that might mean – but also, in the words of the editors, as queer (or *cwiyr*) in relation to '"this place" – one's *milltir sgwâr* [square mile] as it is called in Wales'. When Gethin, in Liverpool, sees an English gay movie set in Thamesmead, we are reminded that one's own square mile is connected to other square miles.

In Margiad Evans's 'A Modest Adornment' (1948), Miss Allensmoore and the ailing Miss Plant might live together 'in a cottage just outside a small village', a village that is 'only a dozen or so cottages', but many years previously, Miss Plant had walked 137 miles to London; the villagers believe it was to meet a man. Miss Allensmoore does not tell them that 'Miss Plant had come to London just to say to her, "I can no longer to bear to live away from you"'. The villagers believe that 'a host of women … go queer in middle life'; Mrs Webb thinks that Miss Allensmoore, after the death of Miss Plant, will 'end up as one of those queer women who are found dead one day, dressed in newspaper, after they have shut themselves up for years'. Both Miss Allensmoore and Miss Plant, 'squalid, eccentric and original', and 'rather old', are regarded as 'queer', but the story leaves it unclear what 'queer' might mean – it is defined negatively, as not conforming to the norm. (Paradoxically, the Nonconformity which shapes Welsh attitudes towards sexuality all too often insists on rigid sexual conformity.) 'A

Modest Adornment' reminds us that unspeakability and silence are not the same as a lack of awareness: rather they can be the façades concealing awareness. Miss Plant keeps silence – 'A sort of blind silence' which 'wasn't a quiet silence': it is, evidently, a silence that speaks but its message is ambiguous. She cannot tell Mrs Webb why she went to London: 'she had forgotten'.

Queerness in this story is powerful precisely because it is never pinned down: it has so many meanings. Miss Allensmoore, a 'fat black cauldron of a woman', shares Quentin Crisp's attitude towards cleaning ('After the first four years the dirt doesn't get any worse'). The dust in the cottage 'could be felt on the teeth', she cooks 'atrocious' food in a kitchen choked by a 'prowling smell' and crowded with 'sagging black cobwebs', 'pailsful of refuse' and 'tusky cabbage stalks'; her feet, 'little hobbling feet which turned up at the ends', feet 'dark as toads', trample a floor strewn with hundreds of burnt matches; the chips she fries on her oil-stove are 'long and warped and gaunt as talons'; she threshes the chips like crows' or ravens' feet in her gums and spits them out at her cats. How are we to read her? She might be the lesbian as witch, or the witch as lesbian, domestic disorder signifying sexual dissidence and sexual difference. But much is left for the reader to conjecture. Like the villagers wondering if Miss Plant will reveal her 'secret' before she dies, the reader is left trying to work out the dynamics of the triangulated relationship bringing together Miss Plant, Miss Allensmoore and Mrs Webb. Miss Plant tells Mrs Webb that she finds music 'too queer', as if resenting Miss Allensmoore's relationship with her oboe, or her 'instrument', the instrument with which, after Miss Plant dies, Miss Allensmoore faces 'the biggest silence she had ever known'. She resents Miss Plant for having 'destroyed that profound, if secretly weary, fidelity which had bound them', having betrayed her for Mrs Webb, the childless, orphaned, widow 'attached to Miss Plant' who 'was as neat and clean in the early mornings … as if she sat up all night watching that no dust fell on her'. Orderly, prim, respectable Mrs Webb might think of slovenly Miss Allensmoore ('the old slut in that awful cottage!') as 'one of those queer women', but she is haunted by her own queerness. At the Tower of London she sees, when told of a great man about to be beheaded, 'poor Miss Plant … wandering over to the tragic corner' – this vision was 'queerest of all'; while sleeping on the bus back to the village Mrs Webb has an 'odd' dream, that 'Miss Plant was in the next seat, asleep too and leaning on her'. Mrs Webb, after Miss Plant's death,

remembers her 'very, very pretty' friend, with her 'great silky green eyes and soft silver hair with yellowish patches in it'. Mrs Webb pays homage to those green eyes by knitting for Miss Plant a pair of green gloves, gloves that Miss Plant had asked to be buried in, gloves Mrs Webb decorates with 'sprightly woolly flowers that were to bloom in the grave'. As she remembers her friend, Mrs Webb 'felt how easy it would be to see Miss Plant's ghost'. The apparitional lesbian haunts the Welsh village and Margiad Evans's story, and many of the stories in *Queer Square Mile*. But so too the Welsh village is haunted by other queer square miles, in this case the square miles of London.

The editors discuss the term 'queer' in their introduction, acknowledging the problems that come with a term historically used as an insult. Yet the stories show that this history is in part what gives the term 'queer' its power. 'As soon as the boy got into the compartment he felt there was something queer in it', is the first sentence of 'Fear', a 1949 story by Rhys Davies, this anthology's most significant chronicler of queer Wales. Queer is indeed fearful, and this is just what makes it so exciting. At the end of the story the boy is fleeing the train's queer compartment 'like a hare that knows its life is precarious among the colossal dangers of the open world and has suddenly sensed one of them'. It is difficult not to wonder if Davies compares the boy with a hare because of classical and early Christian views of the hare as sexually aberrant, and Christian diatribes claiming that men who violate the laws of nature are imitating hares. (This history of Christian thinking is famously discussed in John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 2005.) The hare is not the only deviant creature in 'Fear'. The source of the train compartment's queer power is a snake charmer, and the story abounds in sexual innuendo linking boy, man, and snake, confusing the dynamics of repulsion with the dynamics of attraction. The 'slight, dusky man' gives off 'a faint sickly scent', a 'musk odour' that terrifies the boy; the boy is afraid of some 'other fearful thing' that 'lurked in the compartment', and feels there is something 'evilly antipathetic' in 'the man's long pinky-brown hands'. The man's brown lips are 'stretched in a mysterious smile', and '[h]is eyes, dark and unfathomable, never moved from the boy'. The boy fears the man but he is also attracted to him. He sees the man's 'lips part in a full enticing smile', and 'teeth dazzling white between the dusky lips'.

'Something coiled up in the boy … The boy sat stiffly.' The compartment is 'plunged into blackness' when it enters a tunnel. 'You not like

dark tunnel?' the snake charmer asks the boy, smiling seductively. He offers the boy 'pomegranates from the East', but the basket he opens does not contain 'magically gleaming fruits … yellow-and-rose-tinted rinds enclosing honeycombs of luscious seeds'; rather 'from the basket's depth rose the head of a snake'. The pomegranate and snake are Biblical, of course; they also recall the poems of D. H. Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923). And just as Lawrence, overcome with horror, throws a log at the 'earth-brown, earth-golden' snake he encounters by a well in Sicily, the boy recoils in horror from the snake rising 'from its sleepy coil, rearing its long brownish-gold throat dreamily'. This uncoiling bring to mind something uncoiling in the boy himself.

'Fear' is very short, and its power is the power of short stories at their best, an ability to disturb the reader and to leave the reader with a sense of wonder, rather than a sense of being in control, in command of the material. The individual stories leave much to the reader's imagination; reading them together, patterns emerge, which give the stories a power they might not have on their own. In particular, Welsh queerness emerges as rooted in village life. Glyn Jones's two stories of colliers – 'Knowledge' (1937) and 'The Kiss' (1936) – both portray the eroticism of communities of men working in close physical proximity with their 'big and powerful' bodies. Similarly, Rhys Davies's 'Nightgown' describes a family of father, mother and five sons, the father 'lordly in his maturity', the sons 'secure in their own bone and muscle'. Davies delights in describing the men washing in a wooden tub before the kitchen fire. The father 'slung his pit clothes to the corner, belched, and stepped into the tub', rubbing his 'curls – still black and crisp after fifty years'; he has 'a certain power, lordly in his maturity', as he displays his 'naked, handsome, and well-endowed' body. One after the other the sons strip and wash each others' backs. The eldest son, Ieuan, might be six foot two, but this doesn't stop the mother giving him 'a ringing smack on his washed behind' after he spits into a pan of fresh water; Trevor advises Ieuan to 'wash [his] best face again; that shovel's left marks'. The physical intimacy seems to depend on the absence of the possibility of sex, and sexual attraction, but the powerful homoeroticism of the spectacle – like that of the workman changing the bandages of his wounded brother in Glyn Jones's 'The Kiss' – makes these stories queer. Can a culture worship masculine bodies while always denying the possibility of these bodies being attracted to each other? Similarly, story after story depicts durable bonds between women in Welsh villages, leaving it up

to the reader to interpret the significance of these bonds. Yet the hints are often clear enough – Dr Morgan, in Davies's 'The Doctor's Wife' (1930), has no idea why his wife Phoebe wants to leave him, as he is unable to see the possibility of her being attracted to an 'unmarried woman'. Again and again, the question of how to read these queer short stories is answered by the playful dynamics of knowledge and naivety.

In one of the most recent stories in the collection, Thomas Morris's 'all the boys', a group of Welsh lads travel to Dublin for a stag party. 'all the boys' are straight, of course, apart from those who might be secretly gay, a secret that may or may not be guessed at by their friends. In contemporary Wales, sexual identities are still not straightforwardly legible, and the revelation of queer identities remains fraught and anxious. The revelations of *Queer Square Mile* are rich, moving and enchanting.

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