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REVIEWS

Powys and Lord Jim: The Correspondence between James Hanley and John Cowper Powys, 1929–1965, ed. Chris Gostik (Mappowder, Dorset: Powys Press, 2018). Pp. 170. £10.

> His real journeys were inward, back through his own consciousness . . . I have always thought of him as a writer in the corner, one who stood clear of the mainstream, clear of the world that is going on, progressing as they say . . . Let the world keep on progressing, he himself is buried in his own.

The words are those of the novelist James Hanley in a profile, written in 1953, of his friend John Cowper Powys. What Hanley writes here of Powys is, I would argue, essentially true of Hanley himself; both were writers who stood at an angle to their contemporary world, never ultimately writers of the literary mainstream. It was presumably a sense that they had something in common that in 1929 caused Hanley (then probably thirty-one) to write to Powys, who was lecturing in the USA, which he did for some twenty-five years. The two remained in touch for the rest of Powys's life, until his death in 1963: through his return to Britain, his settling in 1935 at Corwen, near Hanley and his wife, and his later move to Blaenau Ffestiniog.

Powys was a prolific letter writer (as well as many letters to other members of his literary family, there is substantial published correspondence with Dorothy Richardson, with Emma Goldman and with Henry Miller) and the great majority of the one hundred and forty-six letters that have survived of the Powys-Hanley correspondence are from Powys (one hundred and twenty-three), with some twenty or so letters from Hanley, and a couple from Hanley's wife, mainly in the 1950s. ('Lord Jim' was Powys's nickname for Hanley, who had spent time in his early years as a merchant seaman. He drew on that experience in a number of his earlier stories and novels, including *Boy* (1931) that was, famously, prosecuted for obscenity.) The whole correspondence has been expertly edited on behalf of the Powys Society by Chris Gostick, who has written about Hanley and his work over many years. Powys's letters are an editorial nightmare, given his habit of writing over the four sides of a single folded foolscap and then crossing and

recrossing the sheet in ever smaller handwriting and with little concern with formal punctuation; to render these letters clear and coherent is a considerable editorial feat. Moreover, Gostick's detailed editorial comments and annotations, interleaved between the letters, serve to form the whole correspondence into a fascinating and enlightening narrative. Partly to redress the balance in the correspondence, the collection also reproduces the whole of Hanley's 1953 profile, 'John Cowper Powys: The Man in the Corner', quoted above, originally broadcast on the BBC Welsh Home Service and later published in *Dock Leaves*, in a special issue on Powys (1956).

In this profile Hanley at one point comments that Powys 'looks far more like an actor than a writer . . . the stance, the gestures all these things proclaim the actor in him'. (Powys happily agreed: '*I am a born actor* and earned my living for 30 odd years as a platform actor using my MA gown', in the USA.) While letters are always in a sense performative, this is very much the case in Powys's letters, especially as he ages. (In 1934, when the two men eventually met, Powys was already sixty-three.) In the 1930s Powys provides detailed critiques, as well as positive support, when Hanley sends him proofs of his novels, including *Stoker Bush* (1935) and *The Secret Journey* (the second of Hanley's *The Furys* sequence, 1936). Later letters are more performative, even slightly 'camp', intercut with literary allusions and Welsh quotations; the syntax is at times, as a result, not wholly under control. Hanley's letters on the other hand, are focussed, often vigorous, and consistently business-like about literary matters.

Although Hanley, especially in his sequence about the Furys family, set in the working-class Liverpool where he grew up, could write movingly and passionately about the struggles of working-class life, his was never a political response. Even as he writes of the plight of south Wales in the 1930s in his documentary study *Grey Children: A Study in Humbug* (1937), the emphasis is on the suffering, not on any left-wing solution. However, the vehemence in these letters of his disaffiliation from politics is striking. It is one thing for him to write as Britain slides into war in 1939: 'This war is being run on the old lines . . . all the bloody old school tie stuff all over again and common humanity is nowhere. It's a farce, and would be laughable if it wasn't tragic' and perhaps shrewd to propose that 'unless a more commonsense and real imaginative view is taken of the whole European mess we shall end up being well caught between the now dual ideologies of Communism

and Nazism'. But one is taken aback by his attitude to the postwar Labour Government; Hanley writes, for instance, in a letter of 1947: 'I hate this Government – of miserable – dull – unimaginative, sneering socialists with the utmost hatred I can command . . . God – how I abominate these people. Who since they were elected have loved saying NO more than any government I know'. It is an extraordinary reaction, from a man born in the working classes, to the Government that was, after all, saying 'Yes' to the development of the Welfare State.

It is this distaste for the contemporary socio-political status quo, for the world of 'Progressing' referred to in his profile of Powys, that caused him to move during the war deeper into Wales, to Llanfechain in Montgomeryshire, where he and his wife were to live until 1963; 'I *never* want live in England again' he writes to Powys's partner, Phyllis Playter, and in 1955 he comments to Powys: 'Wales is *the* only pastoral land now left across which science has [not] already written its devilled message'. However, although he lived in Llanfechain for some twenty years, one wonders quite how well this Liverpool-Irishman ever quite became part of the community ('They are a difficult people to know' he writes in 1942 in an essay, not referred to here, called 'The Spirit of Wales'). Indeed one wonders how much he ever really wanted to be: in his profile of Powys, writers are for Hanley 'people who stand on the fringe, sometimes outside society'. Wales in Hanley's writing is a place constructed out of his own needs and vision, an 'imagination-ridden, soaring and singing land' of eccentrics and loners. His portraits of the men and women of the Welsh countryside in 'Anatomy of Llangyllwch' (1953), a highly-imaginative version of Llanfechain, at times indicate what attracted him in the early poetry of R. S. Thomas, whom he met at this time, and motivated him to draw it to the attention of the London publisher Rupert Hart-Davis. The hill farmer 'Jones Independent', for instance, is '[a] high-up man, a lost man . . . Fighting the hard, poor-yielding miserably rewarding earth. The bone in the ground, and here and there, like miracles, the thin patches of grass'. Iago Prytherch, one feels, is labouring away just over the hill.

John Cowper Powys's nonconformity to the contemporary world was, as Gostick suggests, more temperate. But his Wales was, of course, equally an imaginatively-constructed one, for all the supposed scholarship. It was not enough for him to be descended from the Celts; beyond them were a people of 'true Non-Aryan Berber blood' who were the aboriginal Welsh (*Wales*, July 1943); this is the preposterously romantic

world of H. J. Fleure, where folk in the area around Plynlimon had heads that showed clear evidence of descent from the people who followed the Neanderthals. Presumably, Powys's need was an acute example of the modern need for roots and identity; in his letters the assertion of his Welsh descent recurs. Of modern Wales there is even less sign than in Hanley; Corwen in Powys's *Porius* (1951) is not the small town in which he and Hanley lived in the1930s but Corwen in 499 A.D.

This is a fascinating set of letters about two men from very different backgrounds who forged a warm and creative friendship, two men whose impulse was, albeit in different ways, towards a reality that was elemental and passionate and for both of whom Wales was an imaginatively enabling place.

Tony Brown
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Roald Dahl: Wales of the Unexpected, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016). Pp. 224. £22.49.

The centenary of Roald Dahl's birth in 2016 was celebrated in many ways in many places, but in Wales it was the occasion of a multi-fronted attempt to reclaim this truant son of Llandaff as a true Welshman, a campaign that found its most spectacular expression in the rolling of a giant peach through the streets of Cardiff in September of that year. Less eye-catching, but equally significant, was the publication of a collection of critical essays, *Roald Dahl: Wales of the Unexpected*, edited by Damian Walford Davies, which sought to view Dahl's life and work through the prism of his Welsh origins and identity.

The nine essays (including Walford Davies's introduction) that comprise the collection approach their subject from numerous angles, some more oblique than others. Some pursue 'obvious' lines of enquiry, considering Dahl's autobiographical accounts of his Welsh boyhood, or translations of his work into the Welsh language; but others find Wales shadowed more metaphorically, as one (sometimes suppressed) element of Dahl's imperfectly tessellated complex of national, cultural and familial identities. Wales may be felt in the fact of its absence, or we may be invited to peer into a cloud of semiotic possibility that aligns a landscape, a literary topos, a biographical moment, and to find them

'very like a Wales'. Such essays entice awareness rather than coerce assent, encouraging us to be alive to the flecks of Welsh red gold glinting from the formidable Anglo-American strata of Dahl's lines.

Kevin Mills's discussion of Dahl's short-story collection for adults, *Kiss Kiss* (1960), is a good example of an essay that seems, at first glance, to offer thin pickings to any would-be gleaner of such nuggets. Wales features in these tales only in the abortive form of a dead man's guest-book entry ('Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff') in the sinister story of 'The Landlady'. The protagonist, Billy Weaver, travelling west from London, only gets as far as Bath, stopping well short of the Severn. Mills is aware that it would be 'perverse' to argue that 'the very nonappearance of Wales is enough to make it significant' to the collection, but he makes a deft case that, for 'the reader with Wales in mind', Dahl's story offers at least an air-kiss, a 'peck on the cheek', an echoing peal from a drowned hundred.

As for what it means to read with Wales in mind, Carrie Smith puts it well in her essay on Dahl's archive (held not of course in Wales but in the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre in Great Missenden), writing that 'reading for a Welsh Dahl involves attuning oneself to what one might term subscripts', a concept of which archival research offers a particularly vivid instantiation, with Wales acting as a kind of palimpsest, bleeding through more or less vividly as Dahl drafts and redrafts Welsh material for publication in various contexts. Her discussion of Dahl's account of his friendship with Joss Spivvis (actually Jones), the Dahls's Welsh gardener, is particularly illuminating.

Tomos Owen and Richard Marggraf Turley both connect moments in Dahl's *Charlie* books with scenes from Dahl's literary or biographical experience. Owen's exploration of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) in terms of the tropes of the Welsh industrial novel makes a persuasive case for considering Willy Wonka's (otherwise oddly ungrounded) chocolate factory in a Welsh context, viewing the factory's vertiginous descents, stark juxtapositions of industrial and 'natural' landscapes and melodious workers in the light of recurrent scenes in Welsh industrial fiction, notably the trope of a young boy's first descent in the miners' cage. The power of the vertical is also prominent in Marggraf Turley's alignment of Dahl's experience as a fighter pilot and horror of aerial bombardment with the flights and descents not only of the Great Glass Elevator, but also the giant peach – repetitions that Marggraf Turley reads in terms of trauma theory.

Ann Alston's, Heather Worthingon's and Siwan Rosser's essays focus on language. Alston and Worthington, taking their cue from the Big Friendly Giant's observation that 'there's something very fishy about Wales', view the BFG as Dahl's representative, an identification encouraged by his physical resemblance to Dahl in Quentin Blake's illustrations. Dahl grew up in a Norwegian-speaking household in a place where Welsh was part of the linguistic background (though he himself did not speak the language), but came to identify himself as English. The BFG too is a bad fit for the racial or linguistic categories available to him; he is too big to be a human but a runt among giants, and in his oddities of speech appears equally deracinated, although his puns, onomatopoeias and spoonerisms are also the basis of his unique linguistic power. In acquiring the 'Queen's English' at the end of the novel he gains the ability to tell his own story, but at the cost of the idiolect his readers have valued in him, thus reprising a quandary faced by many speakers of nonstandard English. Rosser, approaching some of the same linguistic issues from the opposite direction, considers the translation of Dahl into Welsh. For there to be no Welsh translation of this well-known Welsh author would be unthinkable; but the market for Welsh-language fiction is a relatively small one, and to invite in a giant like Dahl (however friendly) is potentially to squeeze out original fiction in Welsh. Moreover, in translating Dahl into Welsh, how far should his settings, characters and idioms be transplanted to Wales?

In this context, Walford Davies's focus on Dahl's direct quotation from another Welsh writer in the English language, Dylan Thomas, is particularly poignant. Like Dahl, Thomas was a Welsh writer with strong ties to the United States; the two men also shared a horror of the atomic bomb, and both drew on fairy-tale tropes as ways of crystallising family relationships and fears. Walford Davies's orchestration of these elements provides a curious and telling perspective onto the moment in *Matilda* (1988) when Miss Honey (or Miss Hayes, in her earlier incarnations) stops to quote from Thomas's 'In Country Sleep'.

The volume concludes with poet Peter Finch taking the reader on a walking tour of what, in touristic terms, might be called 'Dahl's Cardiff', although following the Dahl 'ley' offers more than that glossy phrase implies, crosscutting the modern city with personal memory, archaeological ghosts, literary whispers. It is a fitting way to draw together the many threads that have gone into making *Roald Dahl:*

Wales of the Unexpected such an intriguing, elusive and iridescent collection.

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Richard Llwyd, *Beaumaris Bay and Other Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2016). Pp. 201. £10.00.

This latest volume in Trent Editions's ongoing project of recovering and republishing the work of forgotten writers brings us the selected works of the labouring-class anglophone Welsh writer Richard Llwyd (1752–1835), known as 'the Bard of Snowdon'. Previously, the only modern publication of his longest poem, 'Beaumaris Bay', was in Raymond Garlick and Richard Mathias's ground-breaking *Anglo-Welsh Poetry, 1480–1990* (1993), where it appeared so stripped of its vast amount of supporting paratextual matter as to be almost unrecognizable when compared with the original. Elizabeth Edwards recovers the complete text of this, as well as a further thirty-nine of his shorter poems and occasional verses, displaying the full density of his often multi-layered and nested footnotes. In the original publication these often overwhelm the poetry, pushing Llwyd's couplets to the furthest margins of the printed page. Their restoration to the text in a form that renders both the poem and the footnotes equally comprehensible is no mean feat, and is greatly to be welcomed.

Edwards's introduction sketches what can be gleaned of Llwyd's life from very meagre archival pickings – a few letters and notes remain, but no literary manuscripts are still extant, and the only near-contemporary biographical source is a short 'constructed life' prefacing a posthumous reissue of his work. His life, per these reconstructions, seems to follow a pattern familiar to readers of labouring-class writers: an early life marred by tragedies that reduced his family to poverty, a scant education at the Beaumaris Free Grammar School, teenage entry into service, and further self-education through the medium of contemporary magazines and in all probability the antiquarian collections of the gentry houses in which he worked, all of which ultimately resulted in his extraordinarily multi-layered poetry. Contemporary readers often invested the biographical facts of plebeian authors' lives with more significance than their poetry, lauding an

achievement that to their eyes seemed to come from nowhere; Edwards undercuts these reductive readings by placing Llwyd in his larger intersecting intellectual contexts – eighteenth-century labouring-class poetics throughout Britain, Romantic-period Welsh writing in English, his local reputation in north Wales and Chester, and his engagement with the Welsh literary and historical past as well as with contemporary issues of class, society, and language. Locating him in the nexus of labouring-class poets of the Romantic era such as Robert Burns, Robert Bloomfield, Ann Yearsley, William Orr and Thomas Dermody is particularly enlightening. Edwards makes it clear that this is not a modern critical framing, highlighting Llwyd's own self-fashioning in connecting himself with his peers, 'explicitly imagining a four nations framework' for himself and his fellow 'humbly-born Bards' (though in some cases this is done to highlight his sense of exclusion from the club, as in the 'Hymn to Temperance'). Edwards picks up on this archipelagic self-fashioning to identify parallels with as well as highlighting differences between poets of the four nations, showing how Llwyd's own understanding is mediated through a specifically Welsh poetic in that he can write of Burns and Bloomfield in the same poem as Taliesin and Llywarch Hen ('The Vision of Taliesin'), and can celebrate the self-made London Welsh furrier and patron of Welsh literature, Owen Jones (Owain Myfyr), as other labouring-class poets had done their nobly-born patrons. Llwyd's poetry is often more openly 'Welsh' than that of his more famous fellow-countryman, Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg), with less of an eye to a metropolitan readership, rooted very firmly in the North Walian landscape and shot through in almost every line with Welsh people and places, myth and legend, historical visions and contemporary characters such as Kate of Cymmau. This latter poem inspired a plate by Edward Pugh of Ruthin (1763–1813), 'Kate of Cymmau's Cottage', an aquatint of which is reproduced in this volume as further evidence of Llwyd's contemporary popularity and influence.

The outstanding example of the bricolage of sources weaving together poetry, place and history in the collection is of course the titular 'Beaumaris Bay', which accounts for fifty-nine of the one hundred sixty-five pages of poetry in the book. This loco-descriptive poem serves, as Llwyd has it, 'as a vehicle for the introduction . . . of a variety of historical and other matter, now scattered in obsolete or expensive books'. The effect of these nested notes is necessarily

disruptive to reading, as Edwards notes that it would have been for Llwyd's contemporaries, creating a 'resistant topography' that undercuts the sense of contributionism that might otherwise be felt in the poetry. This edition does the best possible job of making Llwyd's text and *hors texte* more readable than they otherwise would have been, though it still takes a deal of work and good will on the part of the reader. This effort will be well rewarded in the discovery of a fascinating topographical and historical poem of great depth. There is a danger that such a tour-de-force of a work overshadows the rest of the poet's *oeuvre*, which to an extent it did during Llwyd's life – Edwards notes that he never had the same success with subsequent collections as he did with this single and singular work. The thematic diversity of his other poetry is emphasised in the rest of the collection, and in his more political work we see the true value of reclaiming Llwyd's unique perspectives. The subjects with which he deals cover such matters as European conflict, social justice, the education of the poor, the Bard's receipt of 'a pair of Garters' made by the hands of two female patrons, the stories of the Mabinogi, translations of Welsh *pennillion*, and an 'Epitaph on a Rotten Borough'. Marginal narratives, such as that of a bonesetter, a thatcher, or the monoglot Kate of Cymmau whose beehives only just keep her on the edge of subsistence living, also figure strongly in Llwyd's work. His radical levelling edge can be seen in 'The Scarecrow', a fable in which a Welsh parliament of fowls gain their meal by working together to brave the farmer's new scarecrow. The second part of this poem is even more extraordinary, as an '[h]onest, frugal, sober, steady' but rack-rented tenant miraculously discovers in the same scarecrow's pocket enough gold (forgotten by the miserly farmer) to pay his overdue rent. Almost all of these poems continue to a lesser extent the pattern established in 'Beaumaris Bay' of explanatory footnotes detailing Welsh history and topography; the editor deals with the problem of needing to explain some of these further to a modern audience by placing her additional notes at the end of the book.

This new edition of Llwyd's poetry is important for reclaiming another lost labouring-class poet's voice, but also in bringing to the fore another eighteenth-century Welsh writer in English, as part of a reconceived Welsh Romanticism stemming from his 'unique coordinates of landscape, language, place, history and form', and to bring a Welsh dimension to studies of labouring-class poetry in the British Isles. Edwards's sensitive and careful editing brings to the fore all the

disparate strands of Llwyd's works, and assists greatly in making sense of his longest work. His place in a nexus of 'natives of each of the United Kingdoms', among labouring-class poets and the more traditionally educated (one poem here is dedicated to the antiquarian Sharon Turner), as well as within the Welsh tradition in both languages, is rightly emphasised. Those who work on any of these genres should certainly add this book to their collections to further broaden the scope of their studies. Llwyd's translation of a Welsh folk stanza provides an apt summation of the labouring-class writer's predicament – constrained by work, compelled to sing – and stands as a good epigraph for the collection:

> The happy bird nor reaps nor sows,
> One only care his bosom knows,
> In Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring,
> The business of his life – to sing.

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