Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru
University of Wales Press

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

Reviews

How to Cite:
[Name of reviewer], Reviews, *International Journal of Welsh Writing in Wales*, 10.1 (2023), 1, DOI: 10.16995/wwe.9954.

Published:
August 2023

Open Access:
International Journal of Welsh Writing in Wales is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:
The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The University of Wales Press wishes to acknowledge the funding received from the Open Library of Humanities towards the cost of producing this open access journal.

REVIEWS

John Perrott Jenkins, *Representing the Male: Masculinity, Genre and Social Context in Six South Wales Novels* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021). Pp. 217. £24.99.

One of the remarkable things about this study is that it is so overdue. Given that considerations of gender issues have not only brought about significant shifts in our reading but a redrawing of the canon of Welsh writing in English, one might have expected that the ways in which masculinity has been portrayed in the Welsh industrial novel to have received close critical attention long before now. There have been a couple of excellent doctoral theses, by Aidan Byrne and by Emma Smith, but only the latter was published and not in this country. Thus John Perrott Jenkins's study of masculinity in six novels set in the industrial valleys of south Wales is a landmark. While it begins predictably in the industrial strife of *Times Like These* (1936) and *Cwmardy* (1937), Jenkins's perceptive and subtle discussion extends into the 1970s (*So Long, Hector Bebb*, 1970) and the Miners' Strike of the 1980s (Roger Granelli's *Dark Edge*, 1997, and Kit Habianic's *Until Our Blood is Dry*, 2014). At the same time, in discussing the perspectives of two female novelists, Habianic and Menna Gallie (*Strike for a Kingdom*, 1959), this study tellingly extends beyond the usual canon of male versions of industrial south Wales.

The changed angle of critical approach, viewing the bitter chapters of class struggle through the lens of gender, foregrounds areas of even familiar novels which have previously been marginalised. In Jenkins's reading these novels are in fact seen as examining and challenging the notion that 'Valleys masculinities were uniform and comprehensive', the familiar image of Valleys men, secure in their gender identity, rooted in the homosociality of their physical labour and 'collectively coded by their male-voice choir blazers and rugby-club kit' (2). He argues in fact that the 'hegemonic masculinity' of the Valleys subordinates not only women but, damagingly, excludes those men whose masculinity deviates from the established dominant norms. At the same time, Jenkins argues, the miners in these novels perform a number of conflicting gender roles within the prevailing economic and socio-political struc-

tures: dominant and 'masculinised' within the working-class home, they are subordinated and 'feminised' at work.

I always think of Gwyn Jones as something of a macho writer – those taciturn, resilient men in his short stories, with their masculine integrity under threat from 'supple' women – and Jenkins's reading of *Times Like These* breaks new ground. He pays extended attention, for instance, to the scenes where the striking young miners relax together in the sunshine at the rural bathing pool, scenes which become celebrations of the male body – 'naked', 'glittering' and 'silver' (23). Jenkins analyses carefully the sometimes uneasy tension between Jones's classical pastoral register ('These were the Arcadian characteristics of the strike. […] Tempe and its shepherds') and the actuality of working-class Valleys life. Attention is also paid, relatedly, to the scene, usually omitted from discussion, where an intergenerational group of men come together in bantering comradeship, overseen by the aptly-named Theocritus Jones, to fell a tree.

Drawing on Raymond Williams (*Marxism and Literature*), Jenkins sees the novel as examining three differing modes of masculinity: 'dominant', 'residual' and 'emergent' (14). The mine owner, Sir Hugh Thomas, and his managers, Henshaw and Webber, embody dominant, patriarchal power, intransigent and insensitive, or, in Webber's case, an almost pathological exercise of masculine power. The local agent, Shelton, Jenkins argues, represents 'residual' modes of older forms of masculine conduct, which Jenkins relates again to eighteenth-century pastoral modes of gentlemanly behaviour; the scion of an English landed family, Shelton manifests emotional impulses both towards the men and towards his wife ('He was always sentimentalising, he knew') that might more conventionally be associated with the 'feminine'. Jenkins sees the 'emergent' figure of Broddam, the son of a local plumber, who has become a figure of influence locally by building up a successful transport business, as ultimately insecure in his social status, especially alongside Shelton; Broddam's social registers ('Good heavens', 'Splendid'), as Jenkins points out, are as performative as his masculinity.

Rather oddly, however, two other male figures in *Times Like These* are essentially omitted from Jenkins's discussion. Luke, the young son of the Biesty family at the centre of the novel, unable to get a job, helps with the domestic washing, ironing and cleaning, instructed by his mother. Luke's less than conventional masculinity is evident when he is finally able to marry his girlfriend, Olive, telling her on the eve of

their wedding that '[…] if you don't want, I 'ont touch you that way. I ain't marrying you for that. I could live for ever without touching you'. One wonders too at the lack of discussion of Ben Fisher, Luke's contemporary but polar opposite in terms of his masculinity: the local boy who becomes a Welsh rugby international, he has sexual 'adventures' in Tiger Bay before turning professional and making a successful career in rugby league. There, however, 'he lived the clean hard life of the professional footballer, and sent home money every week'; Gwyn Jones's admiration for Ben's hard masculine integrity is evident and worth comment.

Given Lewis Jones's description of *Cwmardy* as an attempt to '"novelise" … a phase of working-class history' (Foreword), written in moments snatched from his political activity, it is unsurprising that it has been analysed primarily in terms of its political themes. Jenkins's reading of the novel in terms of its portrayal of masculinity reveals a novel which is rather more nuanced and subtle in its achievement than it is sometimes credited as being. Described in his youth as 'a queer lad for his age', Len Roberts has, of course, been seen by previous commentators as marginalised from the prevailing codes of masculinity by his emotional sensitivity, his physical frailty and the uncertainty of his sexual impulses. Jenkins does not subscribe to the sometimes over-simple autobiographical origins of Len, pointing out that Lewis Jones's own rather complex masculinity included his being something of 'a man's chap', whose diary records him going 'on Randy' (171). Nor is Len's story a simple *Bildungsroman*, representing an evolution of new modes of masculinity; rather, Jenkins argues, Len embodies 'an extreme form of liminal, conflicted masculinity unusual, if not unique, in anglophone Welsh industrial fiction' (48). (One might, again, recall the ambivalent masculinity of Luke Biesty.) Len's sexual feelings towards Mary are deeply confused by his early transgressive impulses towards his sister, who dies in childbirth after being made pregnant from a premarital sexual encounter. For Len, Mary's physical body becomes inhibiting through its association with that of the dead sister; indeed physical sexuality becomes associated with death. (In a scene not mentioned by Jenkins, when Len hears his father, newly returned from the Great War, making love to his mother, Len's thoughts 'turned to the bayonet his father had brought home', a bayonet that has been plunged into a man's 'entrails'.) The protective, though less than sensitive, Mary comments that, for all Len's political activism, he is 'just a boy groping for something you

are not even yet aware of' and at the end of the novel Len's masculinity remains unfocused and Len himself something of an outsider. Further texture is given to Jenkins's discussion by his consideration of Len's father, 'Big Jim', whose muscular presence has sometimes been seen in rather comic terms by critics. Jenkins sees his portrayal by Jones as being altogether more subtle and sensitive; his masculinity rigidly defined by the codes of two authoritative systems, soldiering and mining, Jim is seen – for example at the deaths of Jane and of his butty Bill Bristow – as possessed of unexpected depths of feeling. In many ways, as much as his son, he is constrained by the gender codes of his community.

The gender codes in Cilhendre in *Strike for a Kingdom* are constructed very differently; indeed in many ways Gallie's version of industrial south Wales feels less realistic. Events take place in 1926, but the strike is largely off-stage, albeit tensions rise when the mine manager is murdered. The novel is a who-dun-it – Jenkins is consistently shrewd in his discussion of the implication of Gallie's use of this ideologically conservative genre – and it is the investigating Police Inspector who embodies hegemonic masculine behaviour. Vigorously patriarchal and thoroughly anglicised, he orders his force to charge marching strikers and voices his willingness to 'shoot a few of them'; at the same time, however, as Jenkins points out in some shrewd close reading, the portrayal of the Inspector's macho self-importance is also coloured with satiric humour, including echoes of Kenneth Grahame's Mr Toad. In many ways the way in which Gallie draws the men in the community is one of the most fascinating aspects of her novel: far from figures of militancy and masculinity, it is, Jenkins argues, 'passivity and pusillanimity that govern most male structures of feeling both individually and *en masse*' in the book (83). Central to the narrative, and in total contrast to the Police Inspector, is the intriguing figure of D. J. Williams. A graduate of Ruskin College and a miners' leader, he is also a local J.P. and a poet; the middle-aged Williams lives with, and is looked after by, his mother. As Jenkins points out, this is one of three matriarchal homes which we see in the novel. Both D. J. Williams and young Gerwin, whom he supports in Gerwin's sister's illness, live in families which have no patriarchal authority figure. Nixon, the murdered mine manager, has been just such an authority figure, at work and domestically. In reaction to Nixon's domineering, philandering masculinity, his son, John Nixon – 'devoted to his mother' (and, after his father's death, inhabiting another matriarchal home) – is seen in stereotypically 'feminised' terms: he has

a 'thin delicate neck like a flower on a stalk' and tosses his hair like a girl. It was an astute decision by Jenkins to include Gallie's novel in his discussion; what one had thought of as a somewhat slight book is revealed to be altogether more complex and rewarding.

So Long, Hector Bebb is set in a mining valley in decline, though it is unlike the other novels in this study in that the focus is not on masculinity as defined by mining but by the violent world of professional boxing. Jenkins analyses the nature of Hector's masculinity, and the violence it involves, in contexts ranging from Greek tragedy – we notice his name – to the popular influences with which Ron Berry grew up: Tarzan and Cowboys and Indians. Jenkins makes good use of the Berry Archive at Swansea University to trace the slow and revealing evolution of Berry's novel and he comments perceptively on Hector's surprising lack of libido. His manager, Abe, thinks Hector is 'cool in the goolies' and Hector's wife seeks sexual satisfaction elsewhere, with tragic results. (More might have been said about the problematic sexuality in the marriages of the other male characters: Abe himself eventually has to undergo testicular surgery and Sue, the wife of Hector's coach, Sammy, longs for children).

Ultimately Bebb incarnates a masculinity that cannot accommodate itself within the codes and constraints of his community; the violence that is licensed in the ring – by which Bebb is exhilarated – cannot be sanctioned outside it and he has to flee into the bleak wilderness of the mountains, a lonely rural masculinity which echoes a motif which we find in Berry's excellent short stories. Jenkins quotes a revealing unpublished essay by Berry: 'I felt drawn to the wilderness. […] The day by day imperatives of being civilised, are less significant when confronted by oneself under a weight of sky' (112).

The final chapter of Jenkins's study brings together two novels set during the Miners' Strike of the 1980s. At the centre of both Roger Granelli's *Dark Edge* and Kit Habianic's *Until Our Blood is Dry* is a figure whose 'deviant form of masculinity' (121) and acute narcissism manifests itself in aggressive, even violent, behaviour both domestically and in the public sphere: the dispute between the miners and the employers, the latter supported by the macho attitudes of the Thatcher Government. Both men's behaviour, Jenkins argues, arises from their desperate sense of insecurity as they are faced by the threats to their male selfhood represented by profound changes in the community around them. While Gwyn Pritchard, the pit overman in *Until Our Blood*, fears for the

future of his industry and thus his own future, Elliot Bowles, the police constable in *Dark Edge* is given licence by the state to express his feelings violently on the picket line, a violence which is, almost inevitably, repeated domestically as he beats up his wife. More than one reviewer saw Granelli's portrayal of Elliott as lacking in subtlety and, indeed, he is at times perilously close to caricature. But Jenkins argues, valiantly and ultimately effectively, that Elliott almost consciously buys into the commodifying gender clichés of his times and that his narrative 'may [...] profitably be framed within the form of a *roman à thèse*' (124).

Counterpointing these hyper-masculine figures is Elliot's brother, the studious bachelor miner, Edwin. Detached from his community, he is ultimately inspired by a visiting academic studying women's roles in the strike to leave the valley and seek new opportunities elsewhere. Jenkins sees Edwin's equivalent in *Until Our Blood* as the thoughtful, moderate Iwan Jones, though he has a family around him, including his fiery Italian wife, Angela, a woman who, uniquely in these novels, runs her own business, a small local café. In sharp contrast to the marital relationships of Elliott and of Gwyn, Iwan and Angela's marriage, though at times tense, is one of negotiation and equality. Jenkins sees Iwan as having the attributes of the 1980s 'new man'; Jenkins points out, for instance, that, to his daughter-in-law's astonishment, Iwan cooks meals for his family. The canvas of Habianic's novel is wider than Granelli's and for the first time in these novels we see a gay relationship. Jenkins' analysis of this relationship, between the hairdresser, Siggy, and the young miner, Matt, is skilful and perceptive, especially in the discussion of the inner tensions which Matt experiences, given the macho world of the pit.

Jenkins's study has its origins in a doctoral thesis and unfortunately more needed to be done to translate the thesis successfully into published form; the book is at times a less than engaging read in that, in whole sections, scarcely an assertion or suggestion is made without reference to, or quotation from, a critical or theoretical source. This is a shame, since when Jenkins throws off the shackles of his secondary reading, gets close to the texts and reads more directly for himself, the discussion is fluent, convincing and engaging. There is, though, no doubt that that this is an innovatory study and that John Perrott Jenkins has made a major contribution to our reading of the Welsh industrial novel.

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