

**'Dexion-lined stakeout': some thoughts on Welsh innovative poetry at a time of Covid and Brexit**

GOODBY, John

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# **Issue 25: Welsh innovative poetry**

## **Introduction by John Goodby**

### **‘Dexion-lined stakeout’: some thoughts on Welsh innovative poetry in a time of Covid and Brexit**

i.

This is a selection of recent work by eighteen poets who were born and / or brought up in Wales, or who are from elsewhere but work and write in Wales, or who have other meaningful ties to the country. Most of it was written in the last twelve months or so and therefore dates from the fraught countdown to Brexit, and a good deal of it was written during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, directly or indirectly, it often reflects a strange and changeful period. Some of the poetry has been published before, but in chapbook or pamphlet form only; the bulk of it is new and previously unseen.

The origins of the anthology go back to a professorial pizzas-and-beers lunch in Sheffield with Adam Piette in epochs-ago early March 2020. I'd just moved to Yorkshire to take up a post at Hallam University after twenty-five years working and living in Wales, and Adam asked me if I'd be interested in putting together a feature for Blackbox Manifold, later in 2020 or during 2021. I was happy to agree, thinking I might make it about Welsh poetry, drawing on my work as co-editor of *The Edge of Necessary: an anthology of innovative Welsh poetry 1966-2018* (2018). But when the first lockdown began, a week or so after meeting Adam, I decided not to curate it for the very next issue, in 2020; and then - faced with the kinds of pandemic pressure we'll all have experienced - forgot about it for several months.

It wasn't until autumn that I was able to return to the task in hand. The prompt arrived from a rather unexpected quarter. During the summer of 2020, it seemed as if every poet I knew owned and was spending their enforced spare time on an allotment, and that they were all busy discussing it on social media. Horticulture and poetics counterpointed and were co-involved with each other continually on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Whatever the motivation - an extension of already existing eco-poetics for some, a chance to explore open field forms for others, perhaps - it was at this moment that one of the allotmentees, my friend and collaborator on the Hay Poetry Jamborees of 2009-12 and co-editor of *Edge of Necessary*, Lyndon Davies, sent me parts of a new, long poem titled 'An Allotment' which had just emerged from this context - a perfect example of a new genre, what one might call Allotment Pandemic Pastoral.

The excellence of 'An Allotment' - and a feeling that it ought to have an audience as soon as possible - prompted me to think of the Blackbox feature and how I might frame the poetry I managed to gather for it. There would be the issue of its 'Welshness', naturally enough, and how that might have shifted under the impacts of Brexit and the pandemic. I was also curious to see whether the surge of work by women poets in recent years, which had been a feature of *Edge of Necessary*, had continued. Also, had the growing general momentum of innovative poetry as a phenomenon been maintained? From 1997 to 2018, *Poetry Wales*, the nation's flagship journal, had been edited by three editors sympathetic to, and practitioners of, innovative poetry.

However, in 2018, the successor to Nia Davies, the last of the trio, had been Jonathan Edwards, a poet whose own work, accomplished though it was, was decidedly not formally experimental. Had this impacted on the innovative poetry scene? Then there were other issues linked to these, such as the state of Wales's small presses (*Boiled String*, *The Literary Pocketbook*, and *Aquifer*) and online poetry outlets, the most important of which was *Junction Box*. Finally, I felt that Lyndon's poem raised the issue of the reception of works of exceptional quality by older poets, and that perhaps might say something about the shifting balance of influence and prominence between generations in the poetry world.

In what follows I'll briefly describe how I put this anthology together and say something about each of the contributions, drawing on what the poets themselves said, if anything, when they sent me their work. I will then make a few summary points by way of conclusion, relating back to the issue I've broached above. These, however, will be short and in no way conclusive; those wishing to know more about the subject (and there really ought to be more curiosity about it) are referred to the Introduction to *The Edge of Necessary*, where the history of the only anglophone poetry to come of age during the high modernist era is dilated on at more length.

When I began casting about for other contributors, I initially approached just a dozen, expecting maybe half to respond. But in the event they all sent me work; and, having gone so far, and being informed that space wasn't too much of an issue anyway, I fired off a few more invitations. (Moral: be warned - give a guest sub-editor an inch and he'll take a yard!) The result is therefore something that falls between two stools. It's more than the select handful I first envisaged, but it's some way short of being a full anthology.

In some ways it's an update of *Edge of Necessary*, since six of the poets here - Ann Matthews, Robert Minhinnick, Guinevere Clark, Natalie Holborow, Margaret Popp (and Amy McCauley too, Nia Davies's collaborator) - weren't included in that volume, and in two cases have only become known to me since it was published, at the end of 2018. But it's a bit more than merely a supplement too, since the final number of contributors, eighteen, make it a useful survey.

Inevitably, of course, some poets in *Edge of Necessary* and some of the new voices aren't here. Because speed was of the essence by the time I got round to compiling it, and because not everyone could be included, I left it too late to contact many I'd have normally included; and, given the need for a hassle-free operation, I avoided those with a known aversion to answering correspondence, or who had stopped writing. Even so, what is here is, I think, a pretty well-balanced and in-depth reflection of what's been happening.

One poet I'm very pleased to include - indeed, who should never have been omitted from *The Edge of Necessary* - is Robert Minhinnick, the first of the Poetry Wales editorial triumvirate already mentioned (and it pleases me mightily that the other two, Zoë Skoulding and Nia Davies, were also able to contribute). His contribution typifies the radical change of direction in his work since the late 1990s, when it became daringly expansive and dithyrambic, drawing on ecological activism, myth, an expanded geographical sweep, and fierce opposition to the Gulf War and invasion of Iraq.

The piece included here is typical of this style. It seems to take its cue from 'chemistry' in the service of archaeology which has identified the 'yellow' colour of clothing worn by a Bronze Age chieftain of the time of two burial cairns on the summits of Pen y Fan in the Brecon Beacons. These are seen to the east from another mountain summit - the Mynydd Llangeinwyr of the epigraph - and the vista, on this clear day, then widens to take in Steepholm island and Gwrhyd in the Black Mountain range to the west, and the Welsh Valleys to the south.

The Bronze Age exists visibly within a history of industrialisation, its later greening, and the present moment of street parties following the first pandemic lockdown. But despite being so all-encompassing and, up to a point, celebratory in tone, the poem hints that these 'invisibles' may be missed. The 'chemistry' is specifically 'language chemistry', conveyed in the slippage between 'rubbing' eyes (to see clearly) and 'robbing' them - a wordplay anagrammatically ghosted in the Welsh names 'Gwyr and the Gwrhyd' - and it is probably

worth knowing that 'yellow' is by no means an innocent colour in Minhinnick's anti-war poem, 'The Yellow Palm', or his other Gulf War poems' descriptions of depleted uranium as 'yellow'.

A similar seeming simplicity perhaps concealing more difficult matters can be found in the work of two other older poets included, Peter Finch and David Greenslade. In preparing this feature, Peter was exceedingly generous in allowing me to select items from the entirety of his unpublished work; the poems I chose are the most recent, dating from, or updated in, 2020. There are many issues touched on in this varied material, which combines undiminished energy and youthful verve with some of the considerations natural to age.

In this case, as in *The Machineries of Joy* (2020, Seren), his latest collection, both experimental and mainstream modes are deployed. The subjects include illness and physical fading, likened to that of magnetic tape in 'Old', and religion, in 'A Memorial Water Poem For Rawlins White', the Protestant martyr burnt at the stake in Cardiff in the reign of Mary the First, and 'Ways To Get To God Expanded', which both expands (on) the meanings of individual words, and is also an actual expansion of the shorter poem 'Ways To Get To God' in *Machineries*. Religion features not as organised belief in these pieces, it seems to me, so much as one of several ways of thinking about last things, as a Buddhistic 'uncreated light' (but the phrase is Miltonic) when any certainties we thought we had have disappeared: 'Eventually it'll all be gone', as 'Truth and Petroleum' puts it.

If there is anything close to a specific deity for Peter Finch, I would venture that it is likely to resemble the city of Cardiff, the subject of so many of his psychogeographical prose works, and of most of the other poems in this selection, all brimming with gusto, 'the desire for a great city that boosted the past and irradiating the future. Where we go still.'

David Greenslade's recent work makes more manifest the dark comedy, or Welsh surreal, which always lurks within Peter Finch's work - to the extent that he has often collaborated with surrealist visual artists, here and in Romania (a country which has become a second home), and recently edited an anthology of surrealist collages and poems about imaginary meals by Welsh poets, *Imagined Invited* (2020, Hafan Books).

As so often in his work, in the poems provided for this selection, taken from a series written over the last two years, a seemingly naïve narrator lures us into a seemingly straightforward lyric, only to confront us in a deadpan-cheery manner with the most outrageous concepts - a 'potato fatwah', say - and lexis and syntax which suddenly demand more work than we were ready for: 'Our agents spotted you / dusting spiders' / webs from inside / your mutton knees / designed to trap / and sabotage / until the last.'

Zoe Skoulding's work is also disconcerting, although her effects are usually subtler than Finch's or Greenslade's, if just as radical. English-born, she established the alternative

poetry imprint Skald in Bangor, North Wales, in the 1990s, collaborating at times with Ian Davidson. Her clarity of purpose has much in common with the expanded sense of Welsh poetry proposed in *The Edge of Necessary*: 'Wales is where my writing took shape', she has observed, 'I write in English in a bilingual country, and ... this makes me see English as a provisional circumstance ... my national identity as a writer is therefore a set of negotiations rather than a fixed position within clearly defined national boundaries'.

As the most Europe-aware and -involved of all the poets featured here, she has engaged in many collaborations with the Belgian poet Jean Portante, published a trilingual chapbook (in English, German, Czech) *You Will Live in Your Own Cathedral* [2009]) and a Paris-located Boiled String chapbook *Teint: Pour La Bièvre* (2015), while her *Remains of a Future City* (2009) drew on the work of the Situationist Ivan Chtcheglov.

Her new chapbook, *The Celestial Set-Up* (2020, Oystercatcher), from which the poems here are taken, derives its title from *Direction Finding By the Stars*, an old military guide to astronomy. As Zoë notes, the poems 'explore locatedness and lostness in various ways [they were] written in different locations, from Paris to Puebla [and are] perhaps concerned with my wish to be distanced from isolationism, and a desire for new archipelagos.'

That Brexit-era lostness / locatedness is memorably apparent in the chapbook's opening poem, 'A Rose for Rosa', in which the female revolutionary is both everywhere and nowhere, omnipresent and ever-absent; I may not be the only reader who sees this as a lament for socialism itself just a year or so after the general election defeat of a Labour Party which had presented, for the first time in generations, a socialist manifesto.

The response to Brexit, which sank the Labour Party at the ballot box, is more overtly registered in the extract from *Ooze Disco* by Nia Davies and Amy McCauley. McCauley, who has worked for *New Welsh Review*, is also the author of *24/7 Brexitland*, a 'polyphonic nightmare which pursues the English psyche and finds it riddled with contagions', and the description applies to *Ooze Disco* too, about a third of which is excerpted here.

One might say that Davies's Welshness interacts with McCauley's Englishness, but both have experience of both countries, and Davies (with McCauley) draws on her own dual inheritance - Welsh parentage, raised in England, living in Swansea - to probe the contradictions in English identity, following 'An', a figure with the indefinite article for a name (in the form which would precede a vowel-fronted proper noun, such as 'England'), who is also a condition which can be 'lived by' each of us 'differently'. Two socialist heroes, Tressell and Orwell, also make a brief appearance, but apparently to little effect.

The reference to Beethoven / Schiller's 'An die Freude', the EU anthem, makes clear that the love An craves is an allegory of gammon-ridden, Brexit-bound England, which wants a frictionless 'love-relation' but is incapable of giving what that requires, afraid of reciprocal

intimacy, and simply wishing to selfishly 'come and go without conditions of sexual or emotional fidelity'. The reference to a traditional anti-enclosure song wittily glosses this: 'The law locks up the man or woman / Who steals the goose off the common / But leaves the greater villain loose / Who steals the common from the goose', it runs. Yet the song's conclusion - that 'geese will still a common lack / Till they [the poor] go and steal it back' - reveals the revolutionary dimension that An's reactionary, tabloidised resentment lacks.

Engaging with languages other than English is one way a necessary self-awareness might come about, of course, and Davies and McCauley tellingly deploy the Welsh word 'teimlad' at this point. It has several meanings, among them 'touch', 'feeling', 'emotion' and 'sentiment', all bitterly apropos.

'Teimlad' suggests itself as a term applicable to the work of Lee Duggan, one of the women poets previously mentioned as swelling the ranks of Welsh innovative poetry in the 2010s. Lee's development has been remarkable; her first collection, *Reference Points*, was swiftly followed by the excellent *Oystercatcher* pamphlet, *Green* (2019), and two more books are will soon be forthcoming.

*In Those Shoes*, excerpted here, is an unpublished work, arguably her most confident, engaging and powerful to date. It challenges the reader linguistically - the play on diseased / dissect / deceased, for example, midway through, the inspired word-meiosis of 'the woman womb in tact', the marked paratactic leaps - but without pose or pretension. Standard syntax flashingly returns, as do the down-to-earth details of 'swirling wallpaper' or 'pizza', to flicker amid the more abstract speculations, in an expertly choreographed and rhythmically varied interweaving of natural world and social interiors. Duggan, it should be added, has a great line in wry humour too, and an enviable ability, as a result, to 'dance new rhythms / out of domestic turmoil' 'under the hammer / viral stocktake' of the pandemic.

Alertness to the physical body - often a marker of women's poetry in its flight from the sterile cerebralism of some male poetry - is still more pronounced in the work of Guinevere Clark, another English-born poet who has found her stride, like Lee Duggan and Zoë Skoulding, in Wales. If Duggan's work might suggest Tom Raworth or Joanne Kyger at times, Clark's poetry has more in common with mainstream models - the Liz Berry of *The Republic of Motherhood*, or Sylvia Plath. Clark, however, has her own distinct style; she never gives her cadences and narratives a too-glossy finish, as Berry sometimes does.

There's an edge, a challenge in her frankness, a crackling unpredictability about her lexis, that forestalls any settling down or easy reaching for the aah-factor (take, for example, the *tour de force* skitterings of 'December Unslept', or the jump-cuts in 'Leaps and Estimations', which moves from the recognisable *mise-en-scène* of a child's birthday to a brilliant staccato abruptness: 'Bury into the lock. Dirty kisses. Dropped / fever. Crown us with spring's puff and fervour. / Evolution. Mortis. New family. Split // skin. Plastic will save

us. Push a window, / sing, *clap.*'). It's a particular pleasure to be able to introduce this new, so far little-known Welsh voice to a general readership here.

In Natalie Holborow's recent poetry, collected in *Small* (2020) from which the selection here has been made, there is a similar awareness of the female body. In this case it is one which is prone to illness (diabetes), self-punishing rather than maternal-sexual as in Clark's work, centred on the struggle with an eating disorder personified in the figure of *Small*. Holborow is a precocious talent, with an intuitive, unteachable gift for cadence, phrasing and Keatsian-sensuous imagery, and she has already had a significant impact on the broader Welsh poetry scene, both as a reader and writer, with her first collection *And Suddenly You Find Yourself* (2017).

The temptation for such a naturally-gifted writer, of course, was to repeat the winning lyric formula; and it is to her huge credit that she did not do so in *Small*, bravely opting to challenge her poised earlier persona and to confront tougher, thornier issues. The necessarily self-contradictory, self-revising labour involved in this extension of her poetic range is formally reflected in the gapping, italicised voices and slashes of the poems included here, and this adds to the hesitant richness of the verse.

Even so, Holborow's perfect pitch is never displaced; even in what seems a throwaway, prosy lyric by her standards, 'Bodkin', the sonic and semantic exactitude of such apparently dud monosyllables as 'bug', 'puff', 'crush' and 'short' is at least as impressive as the allusive play with the 'bare bodkin' of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy.

Clark's and Holborow's work interestingly tests the distinction between 'mainstream' and 'innovative', inclining as it were from the former to the latter (and it's arguable, I think, that it is Welsh women poets, less burdened by the territorial defensiveness of their male counterparts, who have made the running in challenging the demarcations inherited from the poetry wars of the 1970s).

In Ann Matthews's work the allegiance to modernism and its successors is flagged up more openly, and the stylistic relationship is based less on subjective interiority, and more on the materiality of language and landscapes which the self is seen to flow out into and return from. Imagist and concrete styles lend themselves particularly well to this phenomenological stance, and the layered, contemplative verbal textures this requires; additionally, poems such as 'Wernllaeth fields' and 'Wernllaeth spring into summer' are also examples of radical pastoral and the distinctively Welsh psycho-ethno-geographical tradition. Other poems, such as 'between gales' and 'Goldhill woods', threaded through with its highlighted mesostic 'skindeeper', are a reminder that Wales played more than its fair share in the development of concrete poetry in the 1960s, in work by Alison Bielsky, Peter Finch, Philip Jenkins, and John Powell Ward.

Later, from the 1970s onwards, the Québécois-Cambrian Peter Meilleur (aka Childe Roland), based in Llangollen, was its chief Welsh practitioner. (It is to Peter, who was included in *Edge of Necessary*, but who died early in 2019, not long after its Bangor launch, that I dedicate this feature.)

The work of the Irish-born Margaret Popp, another concrete / landscape poet, and one who explicitly takes her cue from Peter Meilleur, ramifies in several directions suggestive for the future of Welsh poetry, it seems to me. Irish-Welsh links were relatively insignificant while the UK was a member of the EU, but Brexit is set to greatly expand the role of Welsh ferry-ports (Pembroke, Fishguard and Holyhead), which have now become key portals between the two jurisdictions.

I've included here some of Popp's earlier work which centre on the 11th century *Leabhar Ghabháil na hÉireann* / Ireland's Book of Invasions; like all her recent writing it plays with the idea of invasions, migration, and contemporary asylum-seeking and the fortress mentality that confronts it. 'Invasion', in Popp, includes health, human rights, genealogy and belief systems, and the climate crisis; and it is significant that her current research centres on the biodiversity, cultural significance, role in carbon capture, etc, of a peat bog in the Irish midlands, and uses medieval Welsh and Irish triad and quatrain forms as well as those of concrete poetry.

This Irish dimension - regarding Wales from the west, rather than from the (English) east - is apparent in two other poets, Ian Davidson and Nerys Williams, both of whom, Wales-born and Welsh-speaking, live in Ireland. Davidson's sequence 'In Security' turns, through the wordplay of its title, on the ambiguity of 'security', various aspects of which - military, economic, social, experiential, psychological - relate to each other in complex, often contradictory ways.

The sequence draws on the varied historical manifestations of the term, from the Good Friday Agreement decommissioning of terrorist weapons to Welsh deindustrialisation (where a metaphorical 'rust belt' has cut into 'actual flesh'), referring to various borders, all within the context of the Brexit débâcle. They include, among others, the political one by which Britain divided Ireland and the geological one of Beaufort's Dyke, a marine trench between Northern Ireland and Scotland into which the British government dumped unexploded munitions and radioactive waste for half a century (this briefly made the news when Boris Johnson proposed building a bridge linking Northern Ireland and Scotland, only to be informed that the material in the Dyke made this hazardous, if not impossible). All of which is given an additional Welsh twist by reference to Frongoch Camp, in North Wales, where 1,800 Irish republican prisoners were interned after the Easter Rising of 1916.

Frongoch is linked to the 'blanket-men' of the H-Block protests, which in turn points back to the disease-infected blankets used by British colonists to wipe out Native American tribes, while the 'green / fields of Bala' conjures up the 'four green fields' of the Irish

Republican song to suggest a common purpose for all those struggling against the imperial centre.

The prose poems from Nery Williams's *Republic*, each 20 sentences long, arise at a fascinating intersection of 80s Welsh indie music, the protest movement, bilingualism, growing up in West Wales, and experience as a care assistant.' But they are 'not all a bleeding "I"', as she adds, and eschew the 'saccharine loss found in mediocre memoirs'. They are, rather, anti-memoirs, in a language - English - which the speaker both 'love[s] but resent[s]'.

This stance foregrounds a trend in the best recent anglophone Welsh poetry, to avoid an easy, generalised guilt at writing in English in order to carefully delineate the complexities of language interaction and decline; Welsh self-betrayal as well as English oppression is involved, and if owners of second homes are not demonised and othered in retaliation, then broader cultural strategies must be devised, the language reinvented and repurposed.

Without preaching, Nerys's poems shows bilingualism enhancing her ability to deal with modernity and modernism, and how Welsh is not to be confused with the backward look; on the contrary, it is shown to have conferred openness to experiment, equipping her from an early age to deal with Olson's 'Projective Verse' and make 'H.D. memorial bricolage' a natural activity.

David Annwn is another poet fond of drawing on other artistic media, usually visual art and film, and 'Arcs in Bold' takes as one of its jumping-off points the vegetable, fruit, and flower portraits of the Mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo. It's also a good illustration of the variousness and versatility of his styles; more than any other poet in this anthology David has a mastery of different genres and modes (concrete / typographical, discursive, lyrical, neomodernist paratactic, etc) and the ability to switch between them in the course of a single poem (the best comparison for those seeking one is probably Edwin Morgan).

This is often reflected in the metaphysical daring of his conceits and disparate assemblies of images, personae and ideas; in this case the 'Grand Conjunction' of Jupiter and Saturn on December 21, 2020, and the histories of astronomy, meteorology, mathematics, and dance, among much else. It could result in a mere jumble, especially given an incorrigible taste for wordplay, and at times the poem pushes - like a Shakespeare comedy - towards a point at which disentanglement, let alone harmony, seems quite impossible.

And yet, using the governing image of the spiralling cycle (planetary orbit, DNA, maypole dance, jazz improvisation, cyclone, corkscrewing seed-root), it manages to miraculously draw all of these back within its orbit at its close, which affirms and embodies, unsentimentally yet movingly, the simultaneity and similarity of destruction and renewal. If this is reminiscent of anyone in the Anglo-Welsh tradition it is Dylan Thomas - we're in 'The

force that through the green fuse' territory - albeit in a completely different manner, although Thomas would surely have applauded the way the poem's shape embodies the dialectical torque-talk of its subject-matter, and the management of its quiet close with the kind of wordplay which earlier threatened to shatter the poem.

'Dialectical', an essential term, is hinted at in the splitting of 'diamonded', which produces a near homonym of 'dynamo' and (almost) Italian '(an)diamo' ('let's go') deriving a driving movement from verbal brokenness, as well as making the 'nded' recall 'Yea all which it inherit' of earlier in the poem, and hence Prospero's pronouncement that 'Our revels now are ended'.

In 'Striae Across Preiddau' and 'Palimpsest' two stylistic polar opposites, modernist-dense and narrative-discursive, are on display (both are from a just-published collection, *Resonance Field* [2020, Aquifer]) and yet, as always with David's work, the unique rewards of poetry - visionary dream, musicality, textual palpability - are not crowded out by the bravura display: it is always 'as if the forgotten writing / were dreaming, mind through mind / of writing dreaming writing under the writing.'

This materiality is also to the fore in the work of Rhea Phillips, who is with Natalie Holborow the youngest writer here. I've very recently written about Rhea's work in an Afterword to her first collection, the Boiled String / Hafan Books title *Grandiloquent Wretches*, so I'll confine my comments here to simply observing that these poems, in which she replicates the Welsh medieval poetic patterns collectively known as *cynghanedd* in order to creatively deform English into provocative new patterns and senses, are among the most thrilling and radical being written in Wales today, in either language (and to recommending, of course, that you buy the book!).

Their unique textures, composed of different fonts, crossings-out, aberrant punctuations, slashes and other diacritical markings, rear from the page, and yet are curiously calm, the work of someone totally in control of her unruly element. They seem simultaneously to be abstract verbal constructs, avoiding at all costs making normal 'sense', and at the same time to be following a rigorous argument. The level of the struggle by which each prevents the other from gaining dominance is a measure of the energy and success of the poem. In this poetry, above all others presented here, it is necessary to attend to every single word: just to take one very minor example, 'decanter' in 'Weathering Reptilian Eyes that stayed the Storm' requires to be read as a verb as well as a noun, the action of the 'scent' as well as its container. It is the clash between languages - even though Rhea is an early stage Welsh learner - which produces this poetry, and it could only have occurred within a Welsh context.

Steven Hitchins's *Coaglorhythms* shows a similar linguistic density to Rhea Phillips's poetry, although in a more systematic late-modernist form. Or rather, it presents a striking combination of resistant images and short poems which, as the title suggests, represent

coagulations of rhythms of various kinds. As Steven himself puts it, 'I've been thinking about cut-ups and algorithms, Henri Lefebvre's idea of rhythmanalysis, Shannon Mattern's writings on the datafication of place, Hugh Everett's Many Worlds theory of quantum mechanics, and my usual melange of geology, alchemy and Pontypridd.'

He takes cut-up as the textual equivalent of the process by which, in the Many Worlds theory, parallel universes are created by the act of observing a quantum event; the consequent copying of the self in different parallel universes, this giving rise to our feelings of randomness, chance, 'observer-branching'. Importantly, this takes writing to be a 'working with matter' - that data or information, whether in the form of buildings, streets, signs, signals, airwaves, voices, or etheric media, is always matter and therefore involves the transfer of energy (and so has a carbon footprint, among other things).

The poet is thus akin to Lefebvre's rhythmanalyst who is 'always listening out' capable of detecting not only words, but the music of 'a house, a street, a town'. Whatever the theory, however, the ultimate proof of the pudding is in the eating, and this work - which has much in common with Hitchins's last collection, *The Lager Kilns* - is dense with unprecedented collocations, neologisms, collisions between linguistic registers, and, in the last analysis, speech and the language of the streets: 'Ah fuckinks. Tink innit. / Frozen vomit in my hands. / Woolly puffa skullhead / stares me out.' In this 'Ponty [Pontypridd] duskwork', critical theory and urban Welsh oral culture meet and, in a wholly unforeseeable way, creatively engage with one another.

If Steven Hitchins engages with contemporary Welsh urban culture more than might be suspected at first sight, Zoë Brigley Thompson has recently involved herself with Wales's literary tradition. Of all the poets here, she is perhaps the one least likely to be seen as 'innovative', yet her often verbally dense poetry with its complex frameworks 'tests the standard success narrative' her Gregory Award and Poetry Book Society Recommendations might suggest, as *Edge of Necessary notes*, and it is open to surrealist and OuLiPo influences. The three poems presented here are from a sequence which involve a 'working through [personal] trauma via the inspiration of Gwerful Mechain', the fifteenth century Welsh poet.

Gwerful Mechain (1462-1500) is an extraordinary figure whose work stands as bawdy and sophisticated testimony to the energy of Welsh society in the period just prior to the Reformation. Independent, assertive, proud of her sex, she is a model proto-feminist poet. One of her best-known poems, 'Cywydd y Cedor' ('Poem to the Vulva') is a spirited riposte to the notorious 'Cwydd y Gal' ('Poem to the Penis') by Dafydd ap Gwilym, one of the leading Welsh poets of the previous century, an unabashed celebration of the female genitalia which places them on a par with their male equivalent.

Other brilliant and equally undemure poems speak frankly of female desire, berate violent husbands, and celebrate drinking, feasting and song. Zoë Brigley Thompson's poems are a

by-product of her ongoing translation of Gwerful's poetry, which put its feisty spirit to contemporary feminist purpose. Each of the three poems offers a different outcome of female desire for the male; the victim of 'Aubade After a French Movie', the surrender to 'good death', orgasmic or actual, of 'Because This Love', and the celebration of positive masculinity (and implicit critique of the toxic variety) in 'The Men We Are Meant To Love'. 'Because This Love', Zoë notes, is 'a litany or hymn to Gwerful and Lady Ishtar, ancient goddess'; it is 'intense poetry ... embracing female bodylines and spirit'.

Which returns me, finally, to Lyndon Davies's 'An Allotment', an equally beguiling work although one which is rather tougher to get a toehold on. The title plays on the two senses of allotment, horticultural and existential, offering a mini-pastoral filled with the experiential and environmental contortions of lockdown. (Among other things, it is crammed with allusions to climate crisis and the impact of lockdown on carbon emissions.) It isn't specifically 'Welsh' in subject; Welsh poets are not obliged to perform or discuss Wales or Welshness, and in some ways it is a sign of the maturity of the poetic culture that this is the case. What matters is that it's a rich, playful, dense and imaginatively involving work.

When I first responded to it in an email to Lyndon I described it as a 'tapestry'; this turned out to be wiser than I knew, since the key figure, as he then informed me, is Bottom the weaver, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bottom is joined by other presences from the play, including Titania, Puck, various insectival fairies, and others still more shadowy. Serious musings on existence-as-process are counterpointed by novice efforts at vegetable cultivation in the growing season of 2020 on an allotment by the River Usk, set out in stanzas of an allotted thirteen lines each, one short of sonnet-length, perhaps to signify a slightly less than green-fingered accomplishment.

This may be enough for some readers, but I will finish this part of the Introduction by offering a sample of a hesitant, more detailed reading I offered Lyndon of the final stanzas, warts-and-all, in order to encourage those who may be interested in grappling with what, with its predecessor 'Mont Saint-Jean', is one of the best long poems to have come out of Wales this century:

The next stanza, xxii, is very complex. It has the longest lines of any, and crams in the widest range of reference. Wikipedia tells me that the Medici escutcheon is six red balls on a gold field, the balls being *bezants*, or Byzantine measures of weight, and that they appear ubiquitously and unexpectedly all across Firenze. This links to the preceding insufficiently 'byzantine' 'adventure playground', and I'm trying still to work out the relationship between these.

In the first appearance it seems to apply to art and its insufficiency purely as a game or distraction in the face of the reality of 'you are where you are', but I think I'm simplifying things. Whatever, the 'veiny mace-head' seems very destructive-potent again, both

phallic and the brassica overrun with horrid excreting caterpillars; are we looking at the instant of gametoid fusion and life-creation here? What are we granted at the moment of our creation: 'sweet money' (life energy) and 'obols' (money associated with death) and the Medici red 'knobs' (backing up the phallic image, but also nipple-like and maybe having a more abstract symbolism).

Thence on to sexual being, as the hormones and genes - with their 'different time scales' - impel us ('constrained'), with puns on 'bush', both blatantly pubic and 'under shelter where we keep the organs' (this passage evoked the MSND Pyramus and Thisbe episode in which I think a bush plays a major part; weirdly, it also reminded me of Under Milk Wood, with the scratchy undergrowth of the wood itself and all the erotic business that goes on in it, and echoing the name Organ Morgan). The language of 'regulatory systems of alignment' and circuits is something I'd like to know more about, however - I suspect I'm missing something important here.

The penultimate stanza xxiii seems a summary - the new replaces the old, what we think is the established order goes 'arse over tip', as in MSND in which Bottom briefly, literally, becomes top - the King, as the paramour of Titania, Queen of the Fairies. It's all paradoxical / oxymoronical - that's how things ultimately work ('none of this adds up') and we have to embrace this. I initially read 'cam' as the kind you get on a machine, where it regularly knocks or kicks something, with shades of the Cam (River), but then it struck (!) me that this was a reference to a Steadicam, a camera, such as Penny uses for her films, so what you're saying is: I want the unevenness, the jerkings-about, that's what's human. I was thrown a bit by the 'horizontal face of Elvis' - but I take it that this is Bottom characteristically going for a popular entertainer as mystical / mythical vision.

I liked the final stanza - the weaving of 'illiterate enzymes into pulp / and fibre' is the endless composting / creation cycle of the natural and human worlds and up into the universe - 'galaxies'. With 'galaxies' at the same time sweetly returned to earth and the domestic sphere by 'come to roost', which, in turn, isn't quite 'come *home* to roost', because that would be too pat, too consoling maybe.

The 'iron core' is that of the planet, so we go from there up to the surface of it on which we live and the 'altar' is 'weaving'. This is very nicely put - it's both sacred and always 'altering', which undoes fixity - encapsulating many aspects of the poem. I like 'drowsy rite', too, but more for its sound than anything more I understood. (Perhaps I was getting drowsy at this stage!) I guess the poem is at the point in MSND when Puck comes to tell us it's bedtime, everyone is tired; it's great that the last word is left to 'bottom', an earthy ending. And as a whole, because it's a kind of wrestling with and hymn to cyclical process, the poem is a 'comic' one, in the technical, Aristotelian sense - for all its darkness and covid-broodings.

Many of the issues I raised at the outset of this Introduction will, I think, have been answered by my discussion of the contributors above. However, to reiterate some of the most important by way of conclusion, I'd note, first of all, that the general self-sustaining spread of innovative poetry in Wales, and by Welsh writers outwith the country, has maintained the momentum it picked up in the 2010s. Poetry Wales, while it has changed tack, as one might expect, has not become overtly hostile to it - as might have been the case, say, twenty years ago, if an editor with different tastes had taken the reins.

A new-ish Cardiff-based literary journal, John Lavin's adventurous *The Lonely Crowd*, has emerged in any case. Similarly, while *Boiled String Press* has left Wales, *Aquifer Press* has more than taken up the slack, while *The Literary Pocketbook* has been increasingly active and, like *Aquifer*, now has a UK-wide reputation (something *Boiled String* never fully achieved). New young poets are writing in innovative ways partly because it is no longer a route to semi-oblivion and years on hard tack. The conservative Welsh literary establishment has been forced to concede yet more ground to this poetry, and its future seems assured, although it is unlikely to ever get its fair share of official limelight.

On the issue of work by women poets, progress can be illustrated by noting that of the first ten poets in *Edge of Necessary*, those with birth dates falling between 1915 and 1943, just two were female. Of the final ten poets in the anthology, with birth dates between 1971-1989, six were women. In assembling poets for this feature I wanted to see if that reversal had been sustained, and I was pleased to see - despite my somewhat ramshackle methods of selection - that it had.

Of the eighteen poets, if we include Amy McCauley, Nia Davies's collaborator, eleven are women, and they also account for five of the six poets not in *Edge of Necessary*, confirming the trend. It's good to see, too, that several of the female poets included are those who have overcome the inordinate domestic and childrearing demands so often placed on women under patriarchy to emerge successfully as poets in middle age.

On the generational issue - which is linked to this one - it needs stressing that while youth must be encouraged and nurtured, the work by Peter Finch, David Greenslade and Lyndon Davies, among others, is a reminder that - especially in the wake of attempts to deepen the generational divide over Brexit - we badly need a more nuanced sense of how 'careers' in poetry work. This is a general, all-UK point, of course; I make it because of the impact 'Mont Saint-Jean' and 'An Allotment' had on me and the fact that, increasingly, it's only the start of a poetic trajectory that is deemed attention-worthy by those who make the big decisions.

At least one major British poetry publisher now refuses to add a poet to their list unless they're on their first collection. This fetishisation of youth and 'new' voices is market-driven

('New Gen', 'Next Gen', etc) and it is linked to the short-termism of British society more generally; but it distorts attention and is an evasion of reality, since objectively speaking the population is ageing, and will continue to do so.

It's perhaps worth noting at this point, too, that during the Brexit *déba*cle (although Wales voted for it) and through the shambolic handling of the Covid crisis, the devolved Welsh government has gradually been forced to distance itself from Westminster. Although this process has gone nowhere near as far as in Scotland, separatist tendencies are likely to increase, and this may take the form of a turn towards the western flank of the EU in Ireland, and a boost for the Welsh language.

Gymreig in any case features increasingly in innovative anglophone Welsh poetry, partly because such work, with its greater willingness to use varied formal devices, such as collage, OuLiPo, expanded translation and cut-up, and to relinquish control of a single viewpoint or voice, it is more welcoming to macaronic and multilingual textures than mainstream work. Even where the poet is not a Welsh speaker, it is increasingly the case that s/he will be a learner and this is one reason why Welsh words and phrases feature prominently in so many of the poets.

The urge of Rhea Phillips to write through Welsh poetic forms in English in an explicit attempt to bridge traditions is a good example of this development. The language issue, formerly a source of antagonism, has become an enabling force, and one of the things that makes Wales / Welshness a good place to be for innovative writing. By which I mean its suspicion of a fixed linguistic centre, an uncertainty on which innovative poetry thrives, and its corollary, a relative absence of the class divisions found in England, with all the implications that has for attitudes towards accent and (il)legitimate language use. This is not to say there are no problems, since the historic ones of lack of resources, poor internal communications and paucity of population centres, plus the ideological opposition of nationalism - which prefers a reflectionist-realist to an experimental aesthetic - remain, and are unlikely to be ever wholly overcome, even if the new technologies of the web, print on demand, and social media have undermined the old gatekeepers.

The dangers of absorption and neutralisation within the academy, for example, are a very real future threat. Even so, it can be said, I think, that anglophone Welsh innovative poetry is enjoying sustained growth and has healthy prospects. Despite the political and economic vicissitudes of the last couple of years, the view of the current scene from 'An Allotment's 'dexion lined / stakeout' - dexion being a brand of shelving unit on which volumes of poetry may sit just as easily as trowels and seed-packets - looks good. It is certainly a silver age, and with more tillage and good luck vis-à-vis caterpillar infestation, it may yet become a golden.

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Further information on Welsh innovative anglophone poetry can be found in two digests of the Introduction to *The Edge of Necessary* published by Wales Arts Review:

- [walesartsreview.org/wales-and-innovative-poetry-part-1](https://walesartsreview.org/wales-and-innovative-poetry-part-1)
- [walesartsreview.org/wales-and-innovative-poetry-part-2](https://walesartsreview.org/wales-and-innovative-poetry-part-2)

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Finally, this essay and the poetry selection it accompanies are dedicated to the memory of Peter Meilleur (Childe Roland), 1943-2019: poet, pioneer, provocateur, inspiration, and friend.

**John Goodby** is an academic, editor, poet, translator and arts organiser. He is the international authority on the work of Dylan Thomas and the author of Irish poetry since 1950: *From stillness into history* (MUP, 2000), *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (LUP, 2013), and *Discovering Dylan Thomas* (UWP, 2017); he also edited the New Casebook title on Dylan Thomas (with Chris Wigginton) (Palgrave, 2001), the centenary edition of the *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (2014) and the *Fifth Notebook of Dylan Thomas* (with Adrian Osbourne) (2020).

His poetry collections include *Illennium* (Shearsman, 2010) and *The No Breath* (Red Ceilings, 2017), and he has published translations of Pasolini, Heine, Reverdy and the Algerian poet Soleiman Adel Guemar (with Tom Cheesman). He is the editor, with Lyndon Davies, of *The Edge of Necessary: innovative Welsh poetry 1966-2018* (Boiled String / Aquifer, 2018).

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