

Writing Welsh Environments: Changing Climates

AWWE Conference 12 – 14 May 2023

Abstracts

Keynotes

Earthsplaining: Welsh Literary Environments after Donahaye, Or (Mis)Adventures in Nonlocality

Matthew Jarvis, Aberystwyth University and UWTD

Timothy Morton's concept of the hyperobject brings together a genuinely valuable set of ideas through which the massively distributed environmental challenges that face us in the present can be understood. However, integral to the hyperobject concept is Morton's far more problematic understanding of nonlocality. This paper offers a sustained critique of Morton's approach to nonlocality, and via Raymond Williams and issues of environmental justice, proposes an alternative model which avoids Morton's ethical pitfalls on this matter. It finds particular focus in Jasmine Donahaye's recent volume *Birdsplaining*, which demonstrates the urgent necessity of overturning Morton's reading of the nonlocal – and which points us towards the key challenge of doing justice to what it means to live in, and (for many) to suffer in the environmental hyperobjects from which we cannot escape

Protecting the Land, Safeguarding the Future: Ecofeminist Approaches to Women's Writing in Wales

Michelle Deininger, Cardiff University

Women's writing from Wales has long been concerned with environmental damage, whether from pollution, contamination, or land lost to industrial expansion, while more recent work emphasises the perils of climate change. This paper draws on ecofeminism, a dynamic yet often misrepresented approach that explores the correlations between the degradation of nature and the oppression of the most marginalised (often, but not exclusively, women), to trace some of the thematic interconnections running through environmental fiction and poetry published in Wales. By drawing on different forms, such as the short story, the novel, and eco-poetry, this paper explores some of the complex ways in which women writers have brought attention to significant issues affecting women's health, bodies and the land itself, ranging from Greenham Common and Chernobyl to building on greenfield sites and inadequate housing insulation. At the same time, it underscores the importance of emerging voices in environmental literature, especially women writers of colour, through the changing landscape of publishing in Wales.

Above all else, this paper identifies hope, interconnection, and community at the heart of Welsh publishing contexts and outlines the ways in which new projects and platforms endeavour to safeguard the future for generations to come.

Walking Wales

Edward Thomas and Walking

Geraint Evans, CREW Swansea University

Edward Thomas's first book, *A Woodland Life* (1897), was a precocious celebration of his delight in the natural world and for the next twenty years, until he was killed in the Great War, he continued to write books and essays about walking through a rural landscape which was being compromised by industrialisation and modernity. In *The Icknield Way* (1916) he completes one of his longest journeys at 'the "Dolau Cothi Arms" at Pumpsaint, in Caermarthenshire'. In *The Icknield Way* and elsewhere he reflects not only on the countryside he walks through but also on the fragility of the landscape and the communities which it supports. This paper will explore some of Edward Thomas's writing about the natural world, and about Wales in particular, and will consider how Rebecca Solnit's idea of walking as a 'subversive detour' allows Edward Thomas to challenge the constraints of modernity and to find, in his walks through Wales, a fresh perspective which anticipates many of the concerns of eco-criticism.

'Man to the hills, Woman to the Shore' The coastline of North Wales walked by R.S Thomas and Kate Roberts

Bernadette Horton, Bangor University

This paper compares the representation of the north Wales coastline in poetry by R.S Thomas, and Katie Gramich's translation of Kate Roberts' *Traed Mewn Cyffion*.

Representations of the Welsh coastline are a critically neglected area. Within Welsh culture, the sea has not received the same level of attention as other bodies of water like reservoirs and rivers. It has not suffered from the 'erasure of place' as described by Kirsti Bohata. In this paper I argue that both Thomas and Roberts portray a north Walian seascape that is a feminine space. The Welsh landscape has traditionally been viewed through a masculine industrial lens - Wales as the land of arduous back-breaking toil, described by Raymond Williams as 'invariably dark, smoke-ridden, huddled.' However, the sea blends with the openness and light of the sky, offering solace, nurture and hope for a better future. The sea offers a reprieve from the hard labour and battles associated with north Wales' hard mountainous landscapes.

In particular, I want to suggest that Thomas in poems like 'He and She' - represents the sea as a metaphor for an intimate relationship within a marriage - 'Were there currents between them? There were fathoms in her too.' There is a restrained tenderness in this poem of maritime imagery, that isn't found in the majority of Thomas' works with predominant themes of nationalism and the loss of Welsh language. Roberts, on the other hand uses the sea as a space for quiet contemplation, reflection and a thing of beauty - in contrast to the darkness of the steely grey, 'men only' domain of the slate quarries. Her characters escape from the mountains, only to yearn for the sea 'William came home from the south every summer...by the end of the fortnight he was talking less about the south, and he took to lying around in the fields, gazing out to sea.' Wales's internal landscape and border counties are bound to Welsh national identity, but it appears the space the sea occupies on Welsh coastlines is not loaded with national significance, but becomes a place of respite and tranquillity.

The tremendous exaltation of North Wales” in Kenneth Rexroth’s The Dragon and the Unicorn (1944-1950)

David T Lloyd, Le Moyne College

In 1947 American poet Kenneth Rexroth applied for and received a Guggenheim Fellowship that he used in part to support the writing of a long poem provisionally titled *The Unicorn and the Wyvern*, a sequel to his 1944 book-length poem *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. Rexroth drew from the unrestricted funds to journey from his home in San Francisco to tour Wales, England, France, and Italy during the spring, summer, and autumn of 1949 – hiking, hitch-hiking, biking, and riding local buses. Rexroth had organized these excursions to provide primary material for his proposed Guggenheim poem-project. In 1952 New Directions Press published the resulting book-length poem, retitled *The Dragon and the Unicorn (1944-1950)*, treating politics, culture, and the environment in a Europe decimated by the second world war.

A crucial six page section at the beginning of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* chronicles Kenneth Rexroth’s journey from Liverpool (where he arrived by ship from New York on 18 April 1949) to Chester, then across north Wales to Conwy, and down to Llanrwst, Capel Curig, Betws-y-Coed, Bethesda, Pont Aberglaslyn, Porthmadog, Pwllheli, and Aberdaron. After four days waiting in poor weather for a boat to Ynys Enlli (Bardsey Island), Rexroth continued on to Dolgellau, Llangadfan, and Welshpool. On 1 May 1949 Rexroth crossed the Welsh border to Shropshire for his tour of England. My paper explores how Rexroth uses the landscape, people, flora, and fauna of north Wales to develop his environmentalist, pacifist, anti-capitalist, and anarchist world view in *The Dragon and the Unicorn*. In this prominent work of Rexroth’s long literary career, north Wales is both an intensely-experienced physical environment and an emblem of what post-war human life could be, expressing an “idealist anarchism” that opposes “capitulation to Stalinism and American fascism” (quoted from Rexroth’s introductory note to *The Dragon and the Unicorn*).

Challenges in Representing Environmental Crisis

Filmmakers

Colin Thomas

Filmmakers in Wales in the middle of the last century could see for themselves the waste and dereliction that came in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Dylan Thomas expressed his anger about it in a poem he wrote into the commentary for the film "Wales Green Mountain Black Mountain" and Humphrey Jennings's experience of shooting his 'Silent Village' in Cwmgiedd led to talks about the impact of industry at the Miners Institute and then to his book "Pandemonium". In her film "Blue Scar", shot in Wales, Jill Craigie made a direct link to the writings of William Morris who had deplored the crushing of nature wrought by capitalism. The proposed paper would combine a talk with film extracts.

Why on Earth Produce an Anthology on Climate Change?

Robert Minhinnick, Cardiff University

“I began working in the environmental movement in 1980. I now realize climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic mean that politics for the rest of my life will be characterized by desperate, totally inadequate crisis management”. Introduction to *Gorwelion/Shared Horizons* (Parthian), 2021. Because of this, the

environmental group I work for, Sustainable Wales/Cymru Gynaliadwy decided to produce a global anthology about the particular effects of climate change, by particular writers who were required to look outside their own front doors and imagine the future in 1000 words or poetic equivalent. I edited the anthology and Parthian Books agreed to publish. Ultimately, after a tight deadline, it contains poetry or prose from five Indian authors, two Scottish, and nine Welsh. Ten are female, six male. They include Tishani Doshi, Christopher Meredith, Sampurna Chattarji, Aditi Angiras. The anthology has been reviewed in 'Poetry Wales', 'Planet' and elsewhere. As editor and Gregynog presenter, I will read extracts from the essays by Mandy Haggith (Caithness) and Tishani Doshi (Tamil Nadu), and answer questions on the purpose and value of such an approach to climate change.

HyperConcepts - How does speculative fiction (especially cli-fi) conceptualise Hyperobjects in the face of the climate crisis?

Sophie Squire, Aberystwyth University

Timothy Morton opens the conversation about how Hyperobjects might be far beyond our comprehension: climate change is something that we can talk about, but not something we can tangibly consider compared to one lifetime. The debate of when the climate crisis began, the scientific desire to find evidence in GSSPs (boundaries in the geological timescale through observing rock layers), and the build-up of jargon used in the news and scientific papers can all leave people behind on the topic of the climate crisis.

Climate fiction (cli-fi), such as Welsh author Cynan Jones' 'Stillicide', allow the reader to latch onto an object as a symbol in the narrative. In this case an iceberg making its way to the Ice Dock becomes a reader's point for conceptualising the climate crisis. People are going to be displaced for this enterprise, this slow-moving, ever-approaching object. It's an object that they know must have existed before arriving, but they might not have been able to fathom its existence before it affected their lives. Much like the hyperobject of the climate crisis, this iceberg (and other symbols in Jones' work) is large and unavoidable, hard to conceptualise, but a HyperConcept all the same.

I will investigate this thread alongside other works, e.g. 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' by Ursula K. Le Guin. Although not necessarily cli-fi, the theme of a concept being condensed into one character or object in a narrative allows a reader to conceptualise the difficult hyperobject. And therefore, further conceptualise the climate crisis as a hyperobject that spans and surpasses their experience of the world.

Haunting / Drowning

“the poor souls of Vyrnwy”: A Drowned Village and Uncanny Waters in W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz (2001)

Prof. Mererid Puw Davies UCL

This paper proposes a subaquatic expedition to the drowned village of Llanwddyn in W.G. Sebald’s long prose fiction Austerlitz (2001).

This novel is acclaimed as one of this century’s greatest to date, and its insistently cosmopolitan, multilingual character resists being pigeonholed (only) under ‘German literature’. Moreover, in Anthea Bell’s

distinguished translation from German in collaboration with the author, it is established as a key work of (near-)contemporary English-language letters. It tells the life story of its eponymous protagonist, a fictional Jewish child refugee from Nazi-occupied Prague, who comes to Britain on a Kindertransport in 1939, and is fostered by a couple in Y Bala. Consequently, a substantial segment of the novel imagines Wales in intensely poetic ways.

Sebald is not a 'Welsh writer' in any conventional sense, and at first sight his Welsh landscapes seem merely, generically Romantic. However, comparisons with modern and historical maps, and real-life explorations, suggest genuine knowledge of the terrain. Sebald's archive indicates that Austerlitz draws on Welsh historical documents, and attentive examination reveals that it engages intertextually with writing about Wales of various kinds in English, and with writing in Welsh too. Thus, Austerlitz offers rich comparative dialogue with the work of this conference.

In this context, especially remarkable in Austerlitz is the story of a man from Llanwddyn who tells the protagonist about the flooding of the village in 1888 to create the reservoir Llyn Efyrynwy, known in the novel as Lake Vyrnwy. Llanwddyn's spectral afterlife haunts Austerlitz, and he experiences Lake Vyrnwy itself as profoundly Uncanny. In addition, the novel links the reservoir, via a dense network of signification, to other, apparently unrelated locations, notably the Rhine valley. This representation subtly identifies the drowning of Llanwddyn as an extremely violent act, obliquely associated in the novel too with other horrific events in modern European history.

Austerlitz therefore speaks to a human intervention in the Welsh landscape and its long-term symbolic and psychological consequences. The novel also presents that event as a symptom of what Sebald saw as a larger, disturbing Modernity. Simultaneously, it highlights the power of literature to illuminate critically the impact of such violent human interventions into landscapes and cultures. It deploys Uncanny modes of representation which convey something of the legacy of past catastrophes without seeking to present them head-on, an enterprise which to the author's mind would be doomed to failure. As such, in Austerlitz, Welsh and wider European pasts break forth from the unsettled waters of Wales to demand our attention in the present.

Drowning, Submersion and Exposure: Tracing the fate of Blodeuwedd in the haunted landscape of Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide-race* (1962)

Francesca Brooks, University of York

'[T]ales of catastrophic sea-floods, real or imaginary', as Jan Morris writes, 'haunt the Welsh folk-memory'. This paper will use the Welsh landscape and the perpetual flux of submerged, drowned and exposed sites of heritage, as a means of thinking about Brenda Chamberlain's increasing ambivalence towards her Welsh identity in writing that straddles the mid-twentieth century. I will draw on two landscapes subject to the flux of tides and rising sea levels: the island of Bardsey where Chamberlain lived from the 1940s until the early 1960s, and the Ceredigion coast, site of the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth where Chamberlain's archive is located. In poetry, short fiction and non-fiction sketches from the 1940s Chamberlain returned, almost obsessively, to the figure of Blodeuwedd from *The Mabinogion*, in explorations of the ethics of desire and adultery. In her 1962 memoir of life on Bardsey, *Tide-race* (1962), all trace of this interest in Blodeuwedd has almost completely been submerged. However, the losses and betrayals that led Chamberlain to the island continue to haunt the narrative. This paper will argue that the spectre of Blodeuwedd lingers in Tide-

race too – a ‘fog at the edge of the tide, sad and cold, ancient and out of time’ – and will suggest a new reading of the text by offering an account of this haunting.

Political Ecologies (hybrid)

‘How Green was My Story: Exposing the Capitalocene in the Literature of South Wales.

Jane Aaron

Climate theorists suggest that rather than entitling the current epoch the Anthropocene it would be more accurate to call it the Capitalocene, thus identifying the capitalist system specifically, as opposed to human practices in general, as the cause and driver of the climate crisis. From the mid nineteenth century onwards certain writers reared within the industrial communities of the south Wales valleys have sought to expose the manner in which human and natural worlds have been poisoned by capitalist developments. A capacity convincingly to expose emergent threats has long been held to constitute a valuable feature of culture. This paper argues that because the natural environment in which they lived was heavily damaged by industrial development, and because their early commitment to socialist politics heightened their awareness of the capitalist exploitation of those industries, writers of the south Wales valleys were uniquely positioned to provide ecological critiques of the Capitalocene long before such warnings became more general. Through exploring the writings of certain representative valleys writers, who emerged from the ranks of the heavy industry workers and from their families and communities, the paper assesses their particular contribution as early exposers of the Capitalocene and its threat to the global climate.

Conservatism in the face of the Conservatives: Niall Griffiths's immutable landscapes and the resistance of radical politics

Martha O'Brien, Cardiff University

Published in 2019 and Winner of the 2020 Wales Book of the Year Award, Niall Griffiths's eighth novel, *Broken Ghost*, opens with the ghostly apparition of a woman on a ridge in west Wales witnessed by three unspiritual, troubled individuals. The novel follows Emma, Adam and Cowley after they see this vision, depicting the bleak reality of three lives marred by Conservative policies of austerity and far right-wing politics. In the face of such desolation, the site of the apparition begins to hold promise, its antiquity eventually becoming a symbol for the endurance of the Welsh working-class and the ridge emerging as a site of protest. *Broken Ghost* appears to mark an end to Griffiths's fictionalised Aberystwyth as characters from his other novels appear to protest against the Conservative government and are all killed in a typically Griffiths-style scene of horrific police brutality.

This paper seeks to investigate the problematics of Griffiths's anarchic Aberystwyth, suggesting that the depiction of the landscape as sacred and immutable might act less as a resistant force to Conservative policy and instead promote a conception of Welshness that tends towards the fetishistic. In fighting dominant Conservative ideology with conservatism, Griffiths's novels associate the Welsh nation with values of tradition and inheritance instead of development and progress. As a result, a dogmatic, immutable version of Welshness emerges which prevents new and multiple visions of the nation and Welsh identity from being

able to develop. In all, this paper seeks to challenge the suspicious eye with which Griffiths glares at societal change, suggesting that policies as radical as those of his hated Conservative government, employed to different ends, are necessary for imagining a future Wales which can not merely sustain its ecological landscape, but meaningfully improve it alongside the lives of its citizens.

Environmental Literacy – Using Welsh and everyday English to communicate the environmental crisis and potential solutions

Julie Brominicks

Given the gravity of the environmental emergency it is tempting to assume a widespread understanding of environmental issues. This is not necessarily the case as evidenced by Rishi Sunak in 2022, whose response when asked how householders can best address climate change was ‘recycling.’

Assuming that our audience members have various degrees of understanding, our challenge is to equip them with necessary knowledge about the crisis and potential solutions to it whilst neither condescending nor overwhelming.

Furthermore, our audiences also comprise people with differing, sometimes emotional opinions as to how the crisis should be addressed. Regarding the impact of agriculture in Wales for example, reactions to proposed solutions from polarised camps such as often non-Welsh-speaking vegans or re-wilders, and generally Welsh-speaking livestock farmers can lead to stalemate and conflict rather than action.

If we wish to generate cooperation and action on the climate crisis our choice of language in presenting these issues is crucial. Cultural and linguistic heritage as well as environmental literacy needs to be taken into account. Certain terms such as ‘re-wilding’ and even ‘environmentalist’ can repel some readers. Conversely, using Welsh language or references to ‘cymreictod’ (Welshness) can engender respect.

I drew on my previous career teaching sustainability to a range of audiences across Wales when writing my book *The Edge of Cymru*. By demonstrating empathy, inclusivity and a sense of community, my aim was to inspire participation, cooperation and action. My proposed presentation will expand on the decision-making process I used regarding my choice of language – (including the Welsh language) when addressing climate change problems and solutions.

Welsh Landscapes

‘Out of the dry and the desert of my dark dream’: Coleridge’s ghost in the environments of Robert Minhinnick’s *Diary of the Last Man*

Laura Wainwright

In an interview for Wales Arts Review in 2014, John Lavin asks Robert Minhinnick if he considers any writers to have been 'a particular source of inspiration'. Minhinnick lists Ted Hughes, Jorge Luis Borges, John Clare, 'hundreds more'. But the first name he gives is 'Coleridge'. In *Diary of the Last Man* (2017), Minhinnick draws on what Ian Gregson has identified in the earlier collection, *After the Hurricane* (2002), as 'a wide range of linguistic resources' and 'diverse registers'. These include 'scientific registers' which, Gregson argues, invoke 'ways of perceiving the world which are unsettlingly different from the subjective mode of traditional poetry'. The poems in *Diary of the Last Man*, however, also often call to mind Coleridge's intensely subjective, musical attunement to the natural world, as well as the Romantic poet's arcane and non-rational poetic discourses – the language of magic, the supernatural and the mystical, for instance; and of vision, delirium, the dream and other enhanced or altered psychological states. As Minhinnick writes in 'The Mystery Trip', from his 1996 collection of essays, *Badlands*, in which he discusses opposition to windfarms in England, encountered during his work as an environmentalist:

'Despite the farcical nature of such reactions, I prefer to imagine what Shelley would have said about wind-farms. Or more aptly Coleridge, wet and tired, with one of the more delirious passages of 'Christabel' on his lips as he ascended a rise beyond Broughton[in-Furness], nearing the end of a thirty mile fell expedition, suddenly encountering the white semaphore of the windmills on the already pock-marked hill'.

This paper will suggest that Coleridge's ghost can be found transposed and wandering in the 'littered' environments of *Diary of the Last Man*, and consider the role that it might play in Minhinnick's complex ecopoetics.

References

- John Lavin, 'Building Driftwood Fires: An Interview with Robert Minhinnick' in *Wales Arts Review* <https://www.walesartsreview.org/building-driftwood-fires-an-interview-with-robert-minhinnick/> [accessed February 2023]
Ian Gregson, *The New Poetry in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 53-54.
Robert Minhinnick, 'The Mystery Trip', in *Badlands* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), pp. 63-95 (p. 72).
Matthew Jarvis, *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 83.

Bio-and Linguistic Diversity in Zoë Skoulding's *A Marginal Sea*

Andy Webb, Bangor University

This paper explores the representation of biological and linguistic diversity in Zoe Skoulding's latest collection *A Marginal Sea* (2022). I argue that in Skoulding's hands, languages become a form of playful experimentation - in poetic form, visual format, voice and perspective - which defamiliarizes and re-figures its subject matter: the multiple species inhabiting the 'marginal' coastal areas of/off Ynys Môn/Anglesey. Close readings of poems including 'Weather This', 'The Island', 'Red Squirrels in Coed Cynol' and 'Adar Môn Birds of Anglesey' will show how Skoulding re-situates us - the animal at play with words - within a biosphere whose dynamic flux is experienced anew again and again in 'this body's opening' each 'good morning'. Through poems about encounters with the red squirrel, the cormorant, the curlew, and the oystercatcher among others, Skoulding's speakers experience and question themselves in relation to these other species. The paper will argue that in response to the environmental crisis of our times, Skoulding's work reaches towards a politics of cross-species community, one that recognises the ultimate otherness of the world around us: 'Why should you give yourself up / in a code I can read'.

Tension, Nation and Place in Welsh Mountainscape Literature, 1930-1955.

Amy Le Grys, Bath Spa University

In the early twentieth century British mountain writing shifted away from the topographical, sporting and 'climb and conquest' narrative of the nineteenth century. The emerging genre instead straddled tour-writing, nature memoir, and drew from the literary influences of Romanticism and late modernism. However, whilst the peaks of the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands were explored and idealised for their subliminal beauty and its working communities seen as the pastoral ideal, the Welsh peaks were often not afforded the same designation. Popular writers who travelled from England to Wales often described the mountainscape as steeped in the medieval age; as being a place of myth and legend, and they saw the people as backwards or belonging to the Celtic Britons of ages past. Simultaneously, a rise in Welsh writers such as Idris Davies and R. S. Thomas spoke back from the land of Wales, giving a voice and form of representation for the mountains and their peoples. The mountainscape to an English travel writer may be seen as a spectacle or 'other' - a mechanism for a good vista or an inspiration for an Arthurian tale. However, the mountain to a South Wales miner, or a working farmer, is not 'the other' but rather an intrinsic part of community, livelihood and national identity. This paper will comparatively explore a selection of late modern non-fiction prose and poetry and seek to understand the Welsh mountainscape as a place of tension that is bound up with ideas of nation and nationhood.

Biodiversity, Climate Change, Landscape (hybrid)

Climate Change in the Writings of Gillian Clarke

Professor Linden Peach, PhD supervisor School of Traditional Arts

This paper argues that Gillian Clarke's work has a relevance for the twenty-first century that has not been fully appreciated. It examines the theme of climate change in Gillian Clarke's poetry and journals since the 1990s and how anxiety about climate and environmental change has influenced the language and structure of her writings. The subject is discussed in the context of her interest in science, especially geology and geomorphology, and cosmology and is traced to the mid-twentieth century when the term entered popular understanding through works intended for the general reader. There is a particular emphasis on how Clarke's work pursues the impact of anxiety about climate change on well-being generally and on herself in particular.

The Desolate Call: The More-than-Human Role of Birds in the Poetry of Leslie Norris

Luke Peterson, Brigham Young University

Birds ever wing through the poetry of Leslie Norris. Over forty percent of the poems in Leslie Norris's collected works reference birds – whether in passing or as sole subject. Norris does not confine himself to either one species or one continent, but rather herons, curlews, pigeons, buzzards, hawks, sparrows, thrushes, waxwings, doves, and owls all make an appearance. Nor do birds serve a single function and receive a single type of treatment as Norris changes dramatically in his use of birds over his long career.

All this is consistent with two central facts about birds to which Norris appears to hold in his poetry: their transience, and their unknowableness. Norris is at times dismissed as an aspiring Romantic unworthy of serious study. I submit, rather, that in his poetic treatment of birds, Norris shows himself a sophisticated craftsman of ecopoetics, capable of illustrating this transcendent more-than-human avian person.

Norris never ceased to write about the people, land, and places of Wales. Yet, most of his life was spent away from his beloved homeland. Norris returned often to Wales in peregrinations, but never stayed, ultimately dying in Utah, USA. Through the avian, Norris found an expression of his paradoxical sense of connection, loss, and isolation from his home. His avian poetry might best be understood as exilic. Turning to Edward Said and Gyorgy Lukacs, I will demonstrate how this exilic imperative drives Norris to choose, in his poetry at least, a rare asceticism: for his more-than-human subjects he solemnly eschews anthropomorphism. In this he sets no easy task for himself for, as I will endeavor to show, he also uses them to powerfully illustrate both our connection and utter isolation from the natural world.

Welsh Industrial Ruins and Queer Ecology in Jo Walton's *Among Others*

Huw Osborne Royal Military College

In her deeply allusive semi-autobiographical novel *Among Others*, Jo Walton overlays fantasy and science fiction onto Welsh industrial ruins to link ostensibly opposed visions of pastoral and industrial Wales. In doing so, she collapses binaries of nature and artificiality, progress and decline, and success and failure to transform industrial Wales through queer ecological fantasy. The novel is written in diary entries by the 15-year-old protagonist, Mor, between May 1979 and February 1980, so it provides a snapshot of a period of economic and industrial decline about to be exacerbated by Thatcher's assault on the Welsh coal industry. We may read this fantastic Wales, therefore, in relation to the economic decline of the nation, and I will argue that this science fictional, apocalyptic fairyland provides a queer ecological recovery of Wales outside of narratives of "progress." In de-essentializing, de-categorizing, and de-hierarchizing nature, Walton's novel reveals how the queer visions of Welsh ecology help to unmoor the nation from harmful anthropocentric perspectives.

Sheep, Farms and Borders

Death and Farming

Kirsti Bohata, Swansea University

In 'A Peasant', R S Thomas describes Iago Prytherch battling through the 'siege of rain' and 'wind's attrition'. He is 'a winner of wars / Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.' An icon of cultural endurance, the farmer is connected in past and present narratives with the survival of the Welsh language, tradition and – via the 'family farm' – the nation itself. Despite this association with survival, contemporary farming narratives are full of tropes of death. This paper offers a preliminary survey of some of these tropes in

contemporary writing, including the work of Cynan Jones, and asks some questions about death and farming in the context of the climate and ecological crisis.

Finding the border of the field: 'pletching' the border identity into the natural world amidst changing relationships to language and the Chthulucene

Dr Ben Gwalchmai, University of South Wales

Finding the border of the field: 'pletching' the border identity into the natural world amidst changing relationships to language and the Chthulucene

When Raymond Williams started his 'Finding The Border' essay, he never finished it but recent works from Morgan Davies, Tom Bullough, and Mike Parker are finishing it for him by creating works of fiction and creative non-fiction that deeply examine the border between England and Wales as both a lens with which to examine identity and universally significant questions but I propose it is also as a metaphor for the fraught relationship between man, nature, and language in the face of a loss – a loss of nature and language that the writers push back.

When Davies writes about '...the ghost of the line...' (Davies, 2022, p37) in describing the border, he is echoing Haraway when she says 'Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think. Like the crows and with the crows, living and dead "we are at stake in each other's company."' (Haraway, 2016, p.39). Just as she says we must make kin in the Chthulucene, so too do these works make kin in the diversity of possibilities, the diversity of futures for border identities and thus Welsh and English identities.

Penned Sheep

Tomos Owen, Cardiff University

Descending in the middle distance upon the cover image of the current edition of the Lonely Planet Guide to Wales is Trên Bach yr Wyddfa, the Snowdon Mountain Railway. It is returning down to the bottom of the mountain, a cloud of fluffy, cloud-like white smoke trailing behind it. Crossing the foreground of the image from right to left is a sheep, roaming and grazing the mountainside, its white fleece a kind of visual echo of the smoke of the departing train. The image – particularly when displayed upon the cover of a travel guide – might figure the sheep as a foregrounded icon of an authentic Welsh experience. Emblazoned upon the Lonely Planet guide, the sheep might be read as a symbol, an emblem of a genuine encounter with Wales between the tourist and the Welsh terrain. Yet while the human, industrial and social worlds symbolised by the train descend and depart, the sheep remains.

Sheep-like, this paper follows the important work of Julian Yates, William Welstead and Linden Peach into the field of animal studies. In doing so it paper looks (sheepishly) at a series of ovine encounters in modern Welsh literature. Mifanwy, heroine of Allen Raine's 1897 novel *A Welsh Singer*, describes a lost sheep 'as dead as a red herring'. While 'romantically arranged' to the untrained eye, the sheep of R.S. Thomas's 'Welsh Hill Country' are ridden with disease. Thomas Morris's short story 'Big Pit' gives the word for sheep in Welsh – 'defaid' – before tellingly mispronouncing it 'Div-ide'. Rarely bucolic, the penned sheep of Welsh writing are more frequently responses to a set of crises and anxieties around agriculture, identity, and

environment. If these works are a token of a Welsh pastoral tradition, then this paper argues that it is a pastoral tradition of lost sheep.

Margiad Evans and Nature (hybrid)

The nature writing of Margiad Evans: a review.

Jim Pratt

From January 1941 to the end of the war, Margiad Evans. [1909 to 1958] and her husband Michael Williams lived in Potacre, a farm workers' cottage, whose only concession to modernity was a single cold tap. Before he was called up for active service in the Royal Navy, Michael worked in two farms close by Potacre, in the Hereford village of Llangarron.

The comparative isolation of Potacre on the outskirts of Llangarron and its position on an elevated ridge, looking directly into the Black Mountains of Wales, provided Margiad with the opportunity to experience the purity and sanctity of a truly simple life. This she imagined to be not dissimilar to that of Thoreau: somewhere free from distraction and disturbance where she could think and write. It was in contrast to the three previous, ebullient years she spent with her sister Nancy and Helen Blackwood running a writer's guest house in Ross on Wye. In Potacre she was able to complete one book *Autobiography: 1943*: recently reissued by Honno) and wrote innumerable letters to her husband and to her brother, Lt Roger Whistler, who was a prisoner of war in Germany.

The objective of this paper is to review these writings in relation to the descriptions they provide of the environment (the climate and wildlife) where she lived, and to attempt to isolate what they tell us about her character, her intellect and her response to the rather unusual conditions under which they were written.

To put them into context, I want to consider whence her nature writing arose, using family documents (Margiad was my aunt) to describe her early life, and to consider whether this genre of writing was curtailed by her development of a brain cancer (which she described in *A Ray of Darkness* 1952 and *Nightingale Silenced* 1954) that led to her death at the age of 49. Finally, and briefly, I consider the extent to which her writing on nature might have value in the urgent need for significant changes in the way we all lead our lives to mitigate the effects of climate change and to remedy loss of wildlife.

An important objective of this brief, summary paper is to stimulate proper academic research into her nature writing, since it is both topical and arresting.

Wind/Water/Weather: writing the elements in Margiad Evans's *Autobiography* and 'The Old Woman and the Wind'

Diana Wallace, University of South Wales

Margiad Evans's *Autobiography* (1943) and her short story, 'The Old Woman and the Wind' (first published in June 1944) have much to say about the weather as a critical factor in our relationship with the natural world, shaping our experience of place/space as well as the construction of personal and national identity. An account of living in the border country first in Ross-on-Wye and then from 1941 in a cottage, Potacre, on

the summit of a hill above Llangarron, *Autobiography* is an attempt to 'translate' Evans' sensory perceptions of the natural world into language. She finds inspiration in Potacre's openness to the elements: 'The cottage wedges into the south-west emptiness, the sky comes pouring over, the wind shreds the shadow of the lilac bush'. The wind provides a key metaphor for Nature 'running like the wind over the body of life'. Images of water – the river frozen in 'wonder-whirls', the 'song of the stream', the rain saying 'Look, listen, open' – also run through the text. In 'The Old Woman and the Wind' these elements are reframed. Mrs Ashstone initially hates the wind which batters her cottage and 'dwindl[es] her sparrow frame'. But the flooding of the village in the valley below leads to the recognition that the wind is her 'friend', a familiar who voices and perhaps enacts her desires. Read comparatively Evans's texts thus explore wind and water as elemental forces which are both energising and restorative (particularly in the face of human war-fare) but also ungovernable and potentially dangerous.

Reading *Autobiography* as a nature writer

Steven Lovatt

The journals and sketches of the natural world written by Margiad Evans in 1939-40 at Llangarron, later published as 'Autobiography', are a series of attempts to assemble and live through a synthesis of self, local place and cosmos. Precisely because they so often achieve this synthesis, they are resistant to the deeply entrenched academic practice of analysis into components, sources or explanations: the value is rather in the effect of the living whole. It is metaphorical. For Evans the individual phenomena of the natural world were something akin to marks of a divine script simultaneously manifesting and withholding full revelation. So this paper contends, to borrow an idea Adorno applied to Walter Benjamin's own analogous efforts at material-historical synthesis, that not systematic analysis but the less intrusive method of commentary, or exegesis, is the most rewarding way to get close to the value of *Autobiography*.

I will approach the book as a nature writer myself, and my principal interest will be to show how Evans' use of language both extends and threatens to undermine established conventions of nature writing. Close commentary on selected passages will seek to demonstrate the part played by Evans' astonishing feeling for language - her precise lexical choices and freedom within grammar - in achieving her synthetic effects. I will also relate this to the physicality of Evans' descriptions (including descriptions of her own bodily activity), and suggest that in this respect Evans was an unwitting forerunner of a 'physical turn' among contemporary nature writers such as Elizabeth-Jane Burnett. The value of the paper (which I dare to hope may take place as part of a panel alongside Jim Pratt and Diana Wallace) will be to open new appreciation of, and methodologies onto, *Autobiography*.

'The blue slates and greener pastures':

Welsh women writing place, new frontiers in archives and editing

Francesca Brooks, Daniel Hughes, Michelle Deininger and Diana Wallace

This roundtable will bring together researchers and scholars working on twentieth-century Welsh women writers who were engaged in literary and creative acts of place-making. It will consider the possibilities of

the archive and recuperative editing projects for enriching our understanding of these writers and their ecological visions of Welsh landscapes. Discussion might include: the relationship between the romantic, rural vision of north Wales in Brenda Chamberlain's unpublished, archival letters to John Petts from the 1930s, and the post-war landscape of her memoir of life on Bardsey Tide-race (1962); how the Lynette Roberts Collection housed in the Harry Ransom Center expands our conceptions of Roberts's literary landscapes, including the familiar sights of rural Welsh estuaries, villages, and standing stones, and the less familiar Portuguese villas and islands; the ways in which Lynette Roberts's medieval, historical fiction *The Book of Nesta* draws on the wartime landscapes of Carmarthenshire; and Margiad Evans's 'earth-writing' in the recently republished *Autobiography* (Honno, 2022).

What emerges is a strong tradition of twentieth-century place writing by Welsh women writers in English, which speaks not just to the past histories of these landscapes, but also their possible ecological futures. How can we bring Welsh women writers in English into the centre of new developments and scholarship in Modernist Studies on the archive and textual editing? Can we recover their work from the 'precarious and persistently marginal position within Wales and beyond', as Kirsti Bohata puts it, that Welsh writing in English finds itself in? What might we gain by taking Rowena Kennedy-Epstein's advice and following the 'unfinished' work of the archive, choosing to read not just the published works, but also the unpublished manuscripts