



Gwilym  
Morus-Baird  
Jan 24

## Penillion i'r Leri - a summary of themes explored.

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*Penillion i'r Leri* began with a call to local Welsh language poets to contribute traditional folk verses on the topic of the Leri River, verses I would then set to music and perform. The contribution period lasted through Autumn/Winter, 2015, ending at Christmas. I am now completing the music composition and recording, and will address that in another post. Here I'll discuss the lyrics only.

There are several themes that arise often in the contributed lyrics, each in its own way exploring history and emotion. One of the first to contribute lyrics was Carys Briddon, Bontgoch (excerpt):

Through the little village where I was born  
The Leri flows by,  
And in her bright, pure waters  
I hear a song murmur.

As I follow her journey to the sea  
I see my store of memories  
About days of youth long-gone;  
Yet the river is ageless.

In the song, the Leri is a focus for Carys' memories about her birthplace and her longing for the past. In acknowledging days now gone she is a witness to the brevity of her own life compared to the ever-flowing river. The Leri is something ideal, almost immortal, while the shortness of her life is no more than a ripple.

The same mixture of themes arises in lyrics by Bleddyn Owen Huws, Talybont (excerpt):

What's this sound in Leri River  
Rushing on towards the sea?  
What chords are in her waters  
Swelling into one encore?

Is it the mournful sound of melodies,  
Old harmonies of congregations gone,  
Roaring wild in her boiling waves  
Between the hills as she pours on?

Many of the contributions mention the river's ability to sing, often as a central characteristic. The Leri also 'remembers' and transmits the sounds of the past, what is often an almost unconscious metaphor for the *penillion* tradition itself. As it flows from past to present through the poet's memory the tradition gives rise to new songs, the old forms birthing new verses like waves on a river.

In many of the contributions the Leri represents specific aspects of culture. Tied in to the river's longevity is the idea of local culture and its duration though the centuries. As a linguistic community that's witnessed a dramatic change in its cultural environment in the last half century, it's not surprising to see local poets giving voice to what they've witnessed. The dramatic decline of the Welsh linguistic environment coupled with the perpetual drain of new generations to the towns and cities has left once vibrant, rural, Welsh speaking communities facing dissolution in a generation or two.

Identifying the river with such fundamental ideas as the flow of time, cultural adaptation and the continuity of identity suggests that wild water such as this is a basic element in the community's culture. Just as water is a basic constituent of the body, the river is a basic constituent of the area's identity, not seen as a separate figure, but a representative of native life of which the locals feel a part, a convenient symbol to turn to in the poetic vocabulary. In these traditional verses the elements of the landscape itself come alive as communal symbols, the river signifying ideas about change, continuity and the role of the poet as witness.

Bearing witness to the community of the past is the central theme of lyrics contributed by David Jones, Bwlchdyddwyallt. After once again evoking the long history of his local area, he finishes with:

Across the valleys of the highland -  
Weather cold or fine,  
They are a memorial to the past -  
The stones that hide between the rushes.

One room, one door, one window,  
That is what the rough cottage was,  
But they had a hidden wealth -  
the community all as one.

Where there was a hearth I see a ruin,  
the society now has gone;  
Nothing lasts any longer,

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[Owain Jones](#) (192)

None of the family, none of the friends.

The invitation to contribute lyrics for songs that will be heard publicly seems to have invigorated some to express themselves openly about where they live and how they feel about it. Again, most, if not all, of the perspectives are taken with the landscape as a backdrop, a constant figure in the narrative of the past. Here the landscape is a symbolic reserve of memory, the bare stones fitting monuments to the bare lives of those now gone.

Turning to the landscape, and the river in particular, as a symbolic archive has been consistent throughout the contributions that focus on memory and the past. In terms of the river specifically, it signifies a past that continues to flow in the memory of the community; also the rush of the longing that's evoked as that past is considered; it is often a continual presence, steady and sure in the life of the locals, something that doesn't change for all of the history it's witnessed. Emotionally, the river stimulates a cathartic response, allowing the longing to flow and for the poet to return to the present a little lighter having let the past go 'on it's journey to the sea.'

It's this cathartic quality that's central to lyrics by Siân Saunders. More than evoking her longing, this time the river is a way for an individual to face any negative feeling:

I'll go for a walk on the banks of the Leri,  
Will you come and keep me company?  
All the pain that's in your heart,  
You can tell it to the river.

We go on through the ash and the oak,  
There is solace in the greenery.  
Sweet is the song of the river flowing,  
What is there that can cause harm here?

The river is a balm for heartache, walking its course an opportunity to heal. Again, as a basic element in the life of the locals, the water washes heartache away to the sea. Like Carys and Bleddyn, Siân considers the water as a medium for emotions, something ideal, continual and affirmative in the environment that can be trusted. Underlying many of the contributions is a sense of the river's basic power to cause change for the better.



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## Comments



[alex plows](#) 33 months ago

hyfryd Gwilym! alex



[Sara Penrhyn Jones](#) 33 months ago

Mae'n drawiadol iawn i mi fod cymaint o boen yn y gwaith creadigol, a theimlad o golled a hiraeth. Hefyd mae deuliaeth yng ngheiriau Sian Saunders: "What is there that can cause harm here"- mae'r afon yn 'gwrando' ar ein poen, ond mae o hefyd yn achosi niwed yn tydi? Drwy lifogydd ayyb. Mae gan yr afon ei gymeriad a'i bersonoliaeth ei hun- dydi o ddim jest yna i gynig cysur i ni....Nes i fwynhau darllen hyn yn fawr iawn Gwilym, diolch i ti!



[Sara Penrhyn Jones](#) 33 months ago

Cwestiwn twp- ond oes fersiynau yn yr iaith GYMraeg i'w darllen unrhywle Gwilym? Meddwl oeddwn i pa mor braf fyddai cynnwys ychydig o'r gwaith yma ( a dy adfyfriad di uchod) ar brif-wefan Cymerau hefyd. Byddai'n dda iawn petai peth o hyn yn Gymraeg.



[Owain Jones](#) 33 months ago

Hi Gwilym. This is great thanks. It is a really lovely idea to get people writing lyrics that will (or might?) be performed in public. A way to 'bring (some) people out of themselves', to share, and also maybe take extra care as these will be 'in public'. I would say that many classic themes of rivers and literature/poetry are emerging here. About the river and differing registers of time – human – geological etc intermeshing. It is very eloquent of ideas of senses of place created by natural agencies. Also of concerns of loss of place and self – both in the common passing of time and maybe through more novel threats of environmental risk. I am wondering to what extent living ecology of the river is / can be present in such accounts? To gaze at and listen to a river as it runs through the landscape is one thing, (and memories of) – to understand water quality issues, the biodiversity of the river, how that is impacted by things like development and agriculture is another. The "harm" as one person asks can be runoff into the river!!!. Obviously the latter needs some kinds of specialist knowledge (could be local knowledge – anglers) and/or actual scientific data. I just thinking out loud really - in an immediate response. A melding of these deeply held emotional, lyrical feeling about the river with – errr – more ecologically based forms of care and knowing would be really exciting. (Not that these are not). A recent report said only about 17% of UK rivers are in good ecological condition.



[Boz Groden](#) 33 months ago

Interested in the strength of the theme of loss that runs through the poems. Water or time sweeping away a way of life , flowing to the sea . Does the rain on the mountain renew it, or is it a newer, acid rain that scours through these communities. Diolch am cyfieithu Gwilym.

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Sara Penrhyn Jones 33 months ago

These river would also carry heavy metals from the old mines when there is severe flooding I think? The farmland is also contributing to its poor condition.

I was also surprised by the melancholic tone of the poems (beautifully translated Gwilym!). I agree with Owain that it would be good to reflect on the ecological state of the rivers, or at least make this part of a discussion, and see if anything then emerges as part of the poetry. We often use rivers and other aspects of nature as a kind of pathetic fallacy in poetry and literature in general: they reflect our mood. It would be interesting to dwell on how they reflect our human (polluting) activities as well. Quite a bit of melancholia could be in that I think!

According to George Monbiot (Feral, p368): "Almost all the rivers in Wales are in poor ecological condition, which is unsurprising when you discover that the nitrates and phosphates entering the water have risen sharply. Sheep dip residues have been found in almost 90 per cent of the places scientists have surveyed. Sheep dip is especially damaging, as it contains a powerful pesticide—cypermethrin—which can kill much of the invertebrate life in a river. Farming is cited as a reason for the decline of wildlife in Wales in 92 per cent of cases.

Excerpt From: George Monbiot. "Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life."



Gwilym Morus-Baird 32 months ago

Hey folks, thanks for the responses. Boz, I love the sketch. I'd like to link to it from the project website if that's ok?

Owain and Sara, I understand that an absence in an environmental perspective may be a little disconcerting, and it's one perspective that I am keen to promote; alas, I didn't see it as my place in this instance to be so directive.

The type of community engagement I sought was of a particular kind. My intention was to stimulate a natural, uncontrived response to the river. Environmental concerns are certainly part of public discourse in the area, how could they not be. But for their own reasons, the local poets instead decided to express their feelings regarding the linguistic environment before the physical. That was their prerogative.

I suppose it's a question of priority and medium. For almost all of the contributors the opportunity to have a public voice meant they gave priority of expression to what was foremost in their concerns. The recorded songs will be available online and performed live locally, as well as being played on BBC Radio Cymru and perhaps may have some small attention on S4C, we'll see. The project has also had a lot of coverage in the local paper, Papur Pawb. Such a public platform will naturally prompt contributors to ask themselves what it is they most want to say. If their concerns were better listened to in the greater political sphere, they may not have such a backlog of things to get off their chest.

A few more considerations, and I apologise for generalising here. Local people are no longer living that closely to the river. It's something they remember more than experience in the present. This is a reality for the majority of the first world. If people had to drink the river water, or use it to water their own crops, they would have a different opinion of it. I don't think this would be news to the contributors, I guess most of them understand and appreciate environmental concerns. It's simply a matter of priority when it comes to having a public voice, no matter how small. Putting your own medium of expression first (local culture in this case) is a natural prioritisation. Without it, you can't say anything about anything as yourself.



Jane Lloyd Francis 30 months ago

Fydd yn hyfryd i darllen yn y gymraeg ac i weld y iaith yma.

A wonderful evening in Y Blac on Friday. The pub was packed for the launch of the CD of Penillion 'ir Leri. While there may only be a few who were courageous enough to write penillion there seemed to be a whole village worth of people supporting and enjoying this project as it ripples outwards. The evening brought a great mix of people together, it was a convivial, human and nourishing event to be part of.



Sara Penrhyn Jones 30 months ago

How lovely to hear that Jane! Thanks for letting us know about it. 'Ripples outwards' seems apt!

Mae dy ddadansoddiad o'r sefyllfa yn ddi-ddorol iawn Gwilym hefyd- o ran diffyg llais gwleidyddol i bobl lleol. Does dim llawer o 'gyfalaf gwleidyddol' yng Nghanolbarth Cymru nagoes? Ardal wledig, amaethyddol, sydd ddim yn pledleisio dros y 2 brif blaid sydd wastad mewn pwr...pell o ganolfannau pwr a chyfryngol. Ti'n hollol iawn, rhaid cydnabod hwn fel rhan o'r darlun. Hyd yn oed rwan- mae'r hen autocorrect ffiidd yn brwydro gyda fi dros pob un gair cymraeg. 'Hollol' yn dod yn 'hollow' er enghraifft...symbolaidd iawn!



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