Edward Thomas's Ancient Example

Martin Brooks

> And when they came to the middle of the ford of the Severn, Iddawc turned his horse's head, and Rhonabwy looked along the valley of the Severn [...] And when they had overtaken the host, Arthur and his army of mighty ones dismounted below Cear Badou, and he perceived that he and Iddawc journeyed the same road as Arthur.[1]
>
> Then the army crossed the Severn and the river swelled over its banks with the multitude of men and horses. Iddawc and Rhonabwy and his companions rode with them, not dismounting until they looked up at Badon Castle and heard the wind roar in ten thousand beeches on Badon hill; whether this were Bath, or Baydon in Wiltshire, few care and no man knows.[2]

In his version of 'The Dream of Rhonabwy', Edward Thomas departs from his source, Charlotte Guest's English translation of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* and other Welsh prose tales (1838–49), to dismiss any debate about where Arthur's Britons journeyed out from Wales to fight the Saxons ('few care and no man knows'). In Thomas's telling, Ancient Britons were associated with Wales but were not confined there. Throughout his career, Thomas wrote about Wales with an English focus. He rendered Wales as a source for how the English should aspire to be like Ancient Britons, whom he romanticised as experiencing intense, historical belonging to local places, and quite distinct from the modern, imperial Britain which he viewed with disdain. Writing on Welsh and Irish stories in translation, he held 'the beliefs and ideas of the composer have faded away and have left a skeleton to be clothed by some mysterious process of the reader's mind, where those beliefs and ideas are not dead but metamorphosed'.[3] For him, Wales gave 'an ancient wind [...] ceaselessly remembering ancient things' that he could

[1] *The Mabinogion* Trans. and Ed. Lady Charlotte Guest. London, 1902, pp. 167–8.
[2] Edward Thomas, *Celtic Stories* [*CS*] (Oxford 1911) p. 114.
[3] Edward Thomas, 'The Celtic Spirit', *Bookman*, 40 (1911) p. 218.

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reclothe for his English readers.[4] Doing so allowed him to disguise his inability to speak Welsh, never quite revealing it while always suggesting that he had found historical Welsh roots for the values he endorsed.

Thomas was Anglo-Welsh by descent, and he was raised among Welsh-speakers in London.[5] However, as Hazel Walford Davies has written, he had little Welsh 'beyond a smattering of phrases'.[6] His books of Welsh topography and his short fiction collections are in English and frequently inspired by the relationship between Wales and England. His edited collection of John Dyer's poems (1903) situates 'Grongar Hill' as a 'necessary link in the chain of English literature that deals poetically with Nature' so strong it was even 'paraphrased in Welsh'.[7] His *Beautiful Wales* (1905) repackages English landscapes from his notebooks as anonymous Welsh countryside, mixed in with his imitations of Welsh poetry and song.[8] Other topographies drop in Welsh references for illuminating contrasts to his travels in England, and his semi-autobiographical novel *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (1913) combines real and invented locations to idealise Wales as a seat of intensely local belonging that drives self-discovery. He expressed his love of rural Wales–urban Swansea is a 'dirty witch' of a town – but rarely, if ever, suggested he might want a Welsh person to read what he had written.[9]

Writing from England, however, he positioned himself as an authority on a historical land of liberty and brotherhood to which his English readers should aspire. As his rewritten 'Rhonabwy' shows, he had little interest in sifting documents to build a reliable historical record. He preferred to offer himself as an expert in English-language newspapers and as a teller of Welsh stories in his short fiction. In his wartime essay, 'England', for instance, he gives Gerald of Wales as an example for how the English should feel at home, 'like a maggot snug in the core of an apple'.[10]

[4] Edward Thomas, *Beautiful Wales* [*BW*] (London 1905) p. 199.

[5] Brian Ll. James, 'The Ancestry of Edward Thomas', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 28 (1993) pp. 81–93.

[6] Hazel Walford Davies, 'Edward Thomas: Twelve Unpublished Letters to O.M. Edwards', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 28 (1994) p. 339. Edwards sent Thomas a Welsh-language copy of *Rhys Lewis: Minister of Bethel* in 1902. Thomas's letters to Edwards confirm it arrived but not that he read it (343–4).

[7] Edward Thomas, 'Introduction', in Thomas (ed.), *The Poems of John Dyer* (London 1903) p. 10.

[8] Sally Roberts Jones, 'Edward Thomas and Wales', in Jonathan Barker (ed.), *The Art of Edward Thomas* (Cardiff 1987) p. 79.

[9] Edward Thomas, 'Swansea Village', *The English Review*, 17 (1914) p. 317.

[10] Edward Thomas, 'England', *The English Review*, 20 (1915) p. 94.

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Thomas traced his intellectual lineage back to the oldest Britons in Wales: 'We belong to the days of Wordsworth, of Elizabeth, of Richard Plantagenet, of Harold [Godwinson], of the earliest bards'. These bards were mystics and storytellers, and he drew them from twelfth- and thirteenth-century renderings of yet older Welsh history. In Thomas's eyes, they connected the ages by standing for the wealth of rural traditions, for a sense that individual liberty was mirrored in their national spirit, and for a localised historical awareness. The events associated with a single stream, tree, hill, or furrow could show his readers how, even in England, 'our original country is "the region of the summer stars"', as he quoted from the *Tale of Taliesin*.[11] The idealised bards let him connect the nations together. Thomas uses the quotation here to describe Southern England, but he also saw it as coming from a time 'when Wales and Ireland were entirely independent of England'.[12]

Yet, Thomas did not treat Ireland and Wales (or Scotland) as a cross-pollinating 'Celtic' whole. He was familiar with the characterisation of a 'Celtic' temperament, as in Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), but more as a literary appellation than a demographic. Wary of the 'professional Celt', he seemed to prefer linking Wales with Ancient Britons because it gave him licence to write with an individual voice rather than risk being absorbed into an established style with its own expectations (*BW*, p. 12). Edna Longley identifies the outline of this dynamic when she writes how *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* shows 'ways of finding England: finding it in terms that draw on Welsh and Irish terms'.[13] Thomas divided the two for the novel's social commentary. Wales connoted the ancientness he wanted to recover, Ireland the sad modernity that made recovery desirable.

As *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* shows, when Thomas would connect Welsh and Irish identities, it was often to suggest that England was losing its way. The novel was written at the time of the Home Rule Crisis of 1912–1914 and it suggests English responses to the Irish demand for Home Rule show a need for more attention to the positive values he associated with Ancient Britain. He was often scornful of English behaviour as an aggression abroad that made life worse at home. For instance, he

[11] Edward Thomas, *The South Country* (London 1909) p. 152. The quotation is likely from one Thomas's longstanding reference texts: Thomas Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry: Being a Critical Essay on the History of the Language and Literature and Literature of Wales During the Twelfth and Two Succeeding Centuries* (2nd edn. London, 1876) p. 175.

[12] Thomas, *Celtic Stories*, 126.

[13] Edna Longley, *Under the Same Moon: Edward Thomas and the English Lyric* (London 2017) pp. 263–73.

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derided Fletcher and Kipling's *School History of England* (1911), which tells 'the story of Great Britain and her Empire', because of the social and economic hierarchies it endorsed in England.[14] However, although his notes to *Celtic Stories* (1911) look at parallels between Welsh and Irish traditions, he kept them separate when he represented his lineage (*CS*, pp. 127–8). He did not try to represent himself as a 'Celtic' author with ancestry from both. When it is seen, the suggestion of a dually Welsh and Irish voice in his writing signifies Thomas giving a more directly political version of his writing on Wales alone. He describes values that he associates with Wales, which are framed as a comparison to England, more so than he seeks to represent contemporary Welsh or Irish voices.

Although these behaviours recall a Romantic-period emphasis on individuality, they also echo what Thomas knew as the contemporary English language scholarship on Wales. As Lucy Newlyn has observed, when Thomas was an undergraduate studying History, he was in a rare position to see Welsh literary culture as manipulable by individuals. He had a close relationship with his tutor, O.M Edwards, who 'went on to become the champion of Welsh national culture' and 'did "more than any other man to revive Welsh as a literary language."'[15] Producing an intensely local view of Welsh history propelled through attachments to place – a response to the geopolitical nation-state building that dominated later Victorian historiography – Edwards's work offered what the historian Neil Evans calls 'a romantic popularism which gestured toward geographical determinism'.[16] When Thomas went on to review Edwards's *Wales* (1902) in *The Academy and Literature*, he picked out the significance of 'innumerable facts scattered among difficult authorities, now for the first time combined'.[17] Two motifs were emerging in his encounters with Welsh writers: a bardic past that evoked an ideal type of belonging and a modern sense that he could interpret its significance by combining his impressions for English readers.

[14] C. R. L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A School History of England* (Oxford 1911), n.p.; Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* [1913] (London 1916) pp. 221–2.

[15] Lucy Newlyn, 'Introduction', in Edward Thomas, *Oxford* [1904] (Oxford 2005) p. xxiii.

[16] Neil Evans, 'Writing the Social History of Modern Wales: Approaches, Achievements and Problems', *Social History*, 17 (1992) p. 479.

[17] Unsigned [Edward Thomas], review of Owen M. Edwards, Wales (London 1902) in *The Academy and Literature* (8 February 1902) p. 141. Collected by Thomas in a scrapbook now Cardiff University Special Collections and Archives 424/3/3/1/3, 6.

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In his fiction, Thomas sometimes alluded to his lack of Welsh language. In 'Mothers and Sons' (1911), the narrator Mr Philips is 'the stranger who knew no Welsh' ('Philip' was Thomas's seldom-used first name).[18] However, most of his contemporary readership would not have known about the problem. He used his newspaper reviews, country books, and short fiction to suggest he knew the language, providing apparent weight to his thoughts about Wales. He would insert Welsh words into his sentences, and he had a habit of discussing translations as though familiar with their methods and sources. His *Isle of Wight* (1911) jokes about George Borrow translating Dafydd ap Gwilym, for instance.[19] These behaviours built up his association with Welsh in the English newspaper atmosphere. Even when the Welsh translator H. Idris Bell wrote to the *Daily News* to rebuke Thomas's 'arrogant English assumption' in a review that a bad translation of Dafydd had left the poet 'under lock and key', he attacked the notion of English primacy rather than suggest Thomas, with 'his well-known interest in things Welsh', did not have the language.[20]

In a youthful letter of August 1898, Thomas had speculated 'my present writings would have given me a sort of name if written in Welsh'.[21] As an adult, he followed the thought and made hay of his ability to resemble a Welsh translator. The main way he did this was by writing about the excellence of the designated source texts. In his environment, it was not given that a translation is a new work written for an English marketplace. Translators were bringing Welsh words and thoughts together to make an imported resource for English speakers. And so, Thomas's approach centred on promissory excellence, treating Welsh as an inaccessible language that was important because it could not be imported. He would tell readers Welsh books had meanings that he perceived but could not transport into English for them. Often, this approach involved using 'untranslatable' to suggest the words, both individually and in syntax, have meanings which exceed English. They have only a 'sweetness' to an English ear.[22] Thomas's frequent use of 'untranslatable' to describe Welsh absorbs two positions without fully reconciling them. He never confirms whether a Welsh word must be represented in an English word,

[18] Edward Thomas, *Rest and Unrest* (London 1911) p. 81.

[19] Edward Thomas, *The Isle of Wight* (London 1911) p. 53.

[20] Quoted in Martin Brooks, 'A Welsh Translator's Reply to Edward Thomas', *N&Q*, 68 (2021) pp. 435–5.

[21] Letter of 28 August 1898 to Helen Thomas. Quoted in R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas* (Cardiff 1972) pp. 70–1.

[22] Edward Thomas, *Annotated Collected Poems* [*ACP*]. Ed. Edna Longley (Tarset 2008) p. 92.

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one-for-one. Equally, he suggests the meanings of Welsh utterances are untranslatable because an English version, even expanding one word into many, is incapable of coherently representing something he has found in Wales.

If lacking Welsh made him an unwilling 'stranger', or outsider, in Wales, then the appearance of Welshness provided with him an additional perspective to wield in England. His overarching suggestion was that knowing about Wales distinguished him from even the writers he admired for their attention to Ancient Britain. For instance, in a review of Charles Doughty's *The Clouds* (1912), the suggestion arrives as 'a Welsh bard speaks as in the morning of the world, albeit his fairies are certainly not Welsh as they are certainly good'.[23] Similarly, in his review of Edwards's *Wales*, he describes Wales's 'unique sense of nationality which is mirrored in its glorious literature, even to-day substantially untranslated, and perhaps untranslatable'.[24] When Thomas implies he cannot find matching English words, the underpinning assumption then is any attempt to write this glorious 'sense of nationality' in English would fail. In *Beautiful Wales* he presents translation in a similar way: he can do it, but it only shows him that Welsh has resources beyond English. He presents his pseudo-translation 'Eluned' as a bard's song, 'reduced to its lowest terms by a translator', with his strict tone suggesting censure for the act of English translation, especially in comparison to some higher terms that he might know (*BW*, p. 82). In another scene of a harper playing 'Land of our Fathers' – romanticised toward innocence because 'he was an immortal harper, doomed forever to go on' unlike the mundane people of 'Swansea Village' – Thomas prints the first verse and chorus in Welsh on stave and comments, 'The words cannot, of course, be translated', before of course providing his literal prose translation, 'as a photograph of Snowdon is like Snowdon' (*BW*, p. 158–62).

When he anthologised Welsh stories, Thomas likewise wrote to suggest his greater awareness of historical Welsh-language literature. His selective acknowledgment of sources steers his reader toward believing he knew the underpinning scholarship in Welsh. In *Celtic Stories*, his 'Note on Sources' discusses the provenance of the *Four Branches* rather than the books he has used. It suggests he has bypassed Charlotte Guest's translation, to which he notes in a foreword, his 'debt [...] is as plain as it is huge'. The tales were 'written down at the end of the Middle Ages, and translated from Welsh into English by Lady Guest in the nineteenth century' (CS, p. 2). But Thomas's assurance that he has not rewritten the

[23] Edward Thomas, 'Two Poets', *Bookman*, 42 (1912) p. 176.
[24] Unsigned [Thomas], '*Wales*', 141.

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stories overmuch also comes with a suggestion that he knows the Welsh: 'Many of these tales have been re-written by poets and others in our own time. I have kept them as nearly as possible in their mediaeval form' (*CS*, p. 128). The statement overlooks his regular addition of interiority to characters whom Guest describes externally by their actions (for instance, his 'Kilhugh' (Culhwch) is 'itching to be gone' when the giant Uspathadden Penkower lists the tasks needed to win Olwen) (*CS*, p. 100). More, by withholding his limited ability with Welsh, Thomas suggests his greater knowledge about the provenance of the texts.

He does the same when he offers his interpretation of the famous 'double pluralisation' in the word 'Mabinogion': 'The name "Mabinogion" means something like "twice-told tales": it means precisely the old tales on which a young writer practised' (*CS*, p. 126). The jump from 'means something like' to 'means precisely' has Thomas go from saying Welsh words have connotations English words do not possess to him specifying the historical information his reader should absorb. However, he did not seem to know that Guest had supplied the word for the collected stories. As Sioned Davies writes, 'She regarded it as the plural form of *Mabinogi*' (which is already plural) and so 'the term *Mabinogion* is no more than a label, and a modern-day one at that'.[25] By contrast, Thomas's English reader would have presumed *Celtic Stories* was based on authoritative knowledge of Welsh history.

Although Thomas had alluded to personal advancement in the August 1898 letter, he was trying to be instructive. He sought to present treasured ideas he associated with Wales, 'so that a man to-day could walk in the steps of Kilhugh and Rhonabwy' (*CS*, p. 126). They could be used in England for his egalitarian vision of a society based on local belonging. However, because he associated these ideas with Ancient Britain, he wanted them to remain bound to a past from Wales when they are received by English speakers. They would then be authorised by early tradition rather than swallowed up by modern urban expanses, commuting, and hierarchies. So, Thomas wrote to show his personal, English-language associations with Welsh. In his stories and poems, he is less concerned with learning Welsh than with conveying a sense of idealised Welsh-ness in English. In 'Words', he alludes to 'some sweetness/From Wales' seeming characteristic of the language for an English ear (*ACP*, p. 92). Rather than translate a Welsh word and then perhaps suggest the associations it could have for a Welsh ear, he would write it and then associate it with an ancient culture for English speakers. This is where one of his most famous habits seems to come from: his fascination with placenames.

[25] Sioned Davies, 'Introduction'. Trans. Davies. *The Mabinogion: A New Translation*. Oxford, 2007, pp. ix–x.

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Thomas's short story 'The Castle of Lostormellyn' (1910) sees him executing Welsh sounds as placenames to evoke ancientness for the English. Collected in *Light and Twilight* (1911), the story is an Arthurian quest narrative and was first printed in Douglas Goldring's English magazine, *Tramp*.[26] A 'young prince' goes on a quest to a series of castles with Welsh-style names, seeking the haven of Castle Colommen (for 'Colomen', English: 'dove') to be reunited with his bride, Cariad ('Love').[27] Thomas invented a bundle of Welsh-sounding places that the prince chants as he quests: 'Colonagry', 'Larmontandro', 'Filontry', 'Carno', 'Sarnollyn', 'Mentissat', 'Caleeny', 'Brintacalleg', 'Carthinnis', 'Morannog', 'Atheen', 'Lostormellyn', and 'Colommen'.[28] The chant rings out their suffix sounds, which evoke Welsh noun endings dissimilar to English.[29] It suggests Thomas's enduring interest in placenames having localised, illustrative meanings, with 'sarn' ('causeway'), 'llyn' ('lake'), 'mor' (for 'môr', English: 'sea'; with the '-og' suffix it suggests a place shaped by the sea), and 'carn' ('cairn'). However, other names are less meaningful in Welsh. The disjointedness is unusual because Thomas knew plenty of Welsh placenames: he provides four catalogues of them in the first chapter of *Beautiful Wales* alone (*BW*, pp. 7–24). Some of the placenames are more historic than Welsh specifically, evoking Classical ('Atheen', 'Carthinnis') and Anglo-Saxon ('Lostormellyn') sounds.[30] The explanation might be they are meant to evoke a foundation myth where any illustrative placenames are artefacts of an Ancient British culture. Although the evocative names depart from Welsh, for Thomas, who was writing for an English readership, they could share a sense that local belonging had come from Wales.

[26] Edward Thomas, 'The Castle of Lostormellyn', *The Tramp: An Open Air Magazine*, 1 (1910) pp. 327–30.

[27] The prince seeking 'Colommen' but losing 'Cariad' evokes Thomas's 'No one so much as you', where he cannot love and is but 'a pine in solitude/ cradling a dove' (*ACP*, 110–11).

[28] Edward Thomas, *Light and Twilight* (London 1911) p. 186.

[29] In 1911, Thomas wrote an introduction to Isaac Taylor's *Words and Places* (1849). Taylor had given the common Anglo-Saxon placename suffixes as 'ton', 'yard', 'worth', 'hay', 'ham', and 'ing'. None appears in 'The Castle of Lostormellym', but Thomas did invent a 'Coldiston' for *The Icknield Way*. Taylor, *Words and Places* (London 1911) pp. 100–5.

[30] Serendipitously, if Thomas had John R Clark Hall's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* to hand, he might have prepared 'Great Lost Battle' from 'los' (n. 'loss'/ 'destruction'), 'stor' (a. 'great'/ 'strong'), 'mæl' (n. 'talk'/ 'speech'/ 'battle') (London 1894). Guy Cuthbertson cautions against overinterpretation, noting Thomas was not minded toward the 'highbrow wordsearch puzzle' of slipping meaningful syllables into larger words. '"I should want nothing more": Edward Thomas and simplicity', *Journal of the British Academy*, 7 (2019) pp. 109–10.

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In this way, the story recalls Thomas's 1902 review of *Notes on Staffordshire Place-Names*, that the book seems 'to be on the scent of a Celtic origin'. Thomas was enticed by the possibility all meaningful place-names in England were descendant from an ancient sense of local attachment he could say came from Wales, that 'the fancy might be more credibly derived from the Celts, whose vivid pictorial names must often have been literally translated by the Saxons'.[31] In this frame, his poem 'Words' pairs Welsh 'sweetness' with 'the names, and the things' of English villages (*ACP*, pp. 92–3). In *The Icknield Way* (1913), he includes road-naming in the thought, speculating that Geoffrey of Monmouth's influence carried a North Welsh tradition across the island:

> He [Geoffrey] may have used some tradition which was the basis also of the Empress Helen's road-making in 'The Dream of Maxen'. He may have used the so-called laws of Dynwal Moel Mud – 'before the crown of London and the supremacy of this island were seized by the Saxons' – who measured the length and breadth of the island, in order to 'know its journeys by days' (*Laws and Institutes of Wales: Vendotian Code*).[32]

Given the differences in grammar and spelling from his source, Aneurin Owen's *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales* (1841), Thomas likely copied these sentences into a commonplace book as important.[33] They resonate with his approach to Welsh placenames being foundational to an English culture which does not acknowledge its roots. Within this approach, he could alter or translate names to show their illustrative purpose. *Celtic Stories* has his editorial note on names 'changed so that English children may at once be able to pronounce them, as Uspathadden Penkower for Yspaddeden Pencawr. I hope this will give no trouble to bilingual Welsh children' (*CS*, p. 2). It mixes a belief the names are different from English with an expectation that rewriting them will not change their function. As in 'Lostormellyn', the Welsh words in his English texts are there to paint an ancient past dually foreign and familiar.

[31] Edward Thomas, 'Place Names.' Review of W. H. Duignan, *Notes on Staffordshire Place-Names* (London 1902) in *The Academy and Literature*, (22 March 1902), 296.

[32] Thomas, *Icknield Way*, 37.

[33] Aneurin Owen, *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales*, ([London] 1841) pp. 89–90. Owen's English text gives 'Venedotian' and 'Dyvnwal moel mud', Thomas gives 'Vendotian' and 'Dynwal Moel Mud'. For Thomas using commonplace books, see Martin Brooks, 'Displayed Quotation in Edward Thomas's Short Fiction', *Essays in Criticism*, 75 (2025) pp. 33–4.

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Thomas treats the Wales–England border as temporal, a back-and-forth between ancient and modern, and facilitated by geographic similarity. The locations in 'The Dream of Rhonabwy' mattered far less than knowing the story. Thomas did not trust the historical accuracy of Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), notably avoiding mentioning the apocryphal Brutus, but would look at its widespread influence in spreading Arthurian stories in England. In his poetry, the Arthurian quests and castles he identified with Wales are contained within a lyric speaker's perspective rather than within borders or set at designated points on a map: 'The Other' chases through 'Cloud-towers', 'House and Man' gives 'miles/Of forest silence and forest murmur', and 'Wind and Mist' offers a 'cloud castle', all without placenames (*ACP*, pp. 41, 60, 74).

Even when he describes his own journeys from England into Wales, he alludes to returning to ancientness, represented as temporal passage back to a romanticised rural past where individuals think as they please. In *Beautiful Wales*, he recalls 'the entry I best remember and most love', metaphorically travelling as a child by staring at a painting of a ruined 'Early English chauncel' where his pareidolia transformed the 'pile of masonry and a muscular ivy stem' into Sir Launcelot (*BW*, pp. 29–31). The short story 'Home' (1911) has Johnny and his father take a train from London into Wales, heading to an historic landscape of castles, mists, harpers, 'wizard faces waiting, and the strange tongue that was the boy's was spoken'.[34] 'Home' was one of Thomas's favourite words but even its power was not enough to transmute Welsh from being 'the strange tongue' in his revealing phase. 'Home' gives a fantasy of going to the past, not of assimilating in the present. In the lyric 'The Ash Grove', written in London in 1916, Thomas evoked the nineteenth-century English lyrics for the older Welsh folk tune 'Llwyn Onn'. He recalled being 'welcomed' into a grove once such that any other grove he might enter can summon 'a ghostly gladness, as if I heard a girl sing//The song of the Ash Grove soft as love uncrossed' and, with a suggestion of questing, he gains 'what I had most desired, without search or desert or cost'. Any ash grove will do; this Welsh past can always be conjured up.

Recall how Thomas worked to suggest his connections to Welsh language in his newspaper writing. Something very similar was happening in his poetry, and his use of the nineteenth-century version of 'Llwyn Onn' to evoke an older past seems unwittingly ironic. Although he said Geoffrey was unreliable, Thomas had elected to endorse a later fabricator, Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams), the pivotal figure of the Romantic-period Welsh national literary revival and 'a forger, an

[34] Thomas, *Light and Twilight*, 34–5.

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inventor of selves, texts and traditions'.[35] Ignoring evidence that Iolo had invented his bardic pseudo-traditions, Thomas was captivated. To him, Iolo represented the exemplary Wales, 'an Ancient Briton' in *Morgans*. Iolo was an ancient, 'that poet, great discoverer of manuscripts and splendid human being' in *Beautiful Wales* (*BW*, p. 96). For Thomas, the bardic style Iolo claimed to have inherited stood for individual liberty being synonymous with experiencing historicised belonging.

His Iolo's Wales could exist anywhere on the map. Thomas drew from Iolo's biography far more than Iolo's poetry, which barely features in his writing. His habit was to describe Iolo as both peripatetic and representatively Welsh, a combination which frames Wales as temporal and cultural rather than geographic. In *Morgans*, Thomas devotes a chapter, 'Ned of Glamorgan' to the characters Mr Morgan and Mr Stodham discussing Iolo, who 'went hither and thither over a large part of England and Wales' and although 'a bad poet he was a Welsh bard'. Mr Morgan reads like Thomas, having his focus on exemplary values and his idiosyncratic understanding of Welsh poetic traditions. Mr Morgan's dialogue reconceptualises the Welsh 'triad' from a structural mnemonic into an intellectual one, and he claims Iolo could recite poems because 'he never forgot the bardic triad, "Man, Liberty, and Light."'[36] *Morgans* finds Thomas collating the stages of Iolo's life in Elijah Waring's *Recollections and Anecdotes of Edward Williams* (1850) to draw a constant pedestrian, travelling across English and Welsh geography, 'unweariable in his search for the remains of Ancient British literature'.[37] In *Beautiful Wales*, Thomas had said that Iolo's 'well-set legs were vouchers for the great peripatetic powers he was well known to possess' (*BW*, p. 97). Thomas skips past Iolo's cottage life and manuscript production, seemingly less interested in these chapters of Waring's biography than in propagating the idea of a travelling ancient poet who discovers and shares lost traditions.[38]

Although Thomas was writing before G. J. Williams could show Iolo had forged poems supposedly by Daffyd ap Gwillym, he was in the shadow of O. M Edwards, John Morris-Jones, and Thomas Stephens, all of whom were writing that Iolo had invented the supposedly ancient bardic traditions.[39] Thomas reframed these complaints as justifications for his Iolo,

[35] Mary-Ann Constantine, *The Truth against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery* (Cardiff 2007) p. 5.

[36] Edward Thomas, *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (London 1913) pp. 188–9, 197.

[37] Thomas, *Morgans*, 203.

[38] For how Iolo wrote at home, see Ffion Mair Jones, *'The Bard is a Very Singular Character': Iolo Morganwg, Marginalia and Print Culture* (Cardiff 2010).

[39] G. J. Williams, *Iolo Morganwg a Chywyddau'r Ychwanegiad* (London 1926). Discussed with translated extracts in Marion Löffler, The Literary and Historical Legacy of Iolo Morganwg, 1826–1926 (Cardiff 2007).

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links to an ancient Britain that could support his values. *Morgans* has Mr Morgan quote from Waring to say Iolo 'studied whatever he could come at concerning Druidism, with the "peculiar bias and firm persuasion" that "more wisdom and beneficence than is popularly attributed to them" would be revealed'. However, and elided by Thomas, Waring went on to suggest Iolo's theories were troublesome and unprovable:

> This is still a *vexata quæstio* among antiquaries [...] The question is involved in a remote obscurity, that forbids anything like mathematical demonstration: each theorist has, therefore, a wide field of his own; but there can be little doubt, that many gross misrepresentations have long been entertained as authentic [...] It was not easy to make him listen patiently when the rectitude of these impressions was called in question – 'You are talking of what you don't understand–of what none but a Welshman, and a British Bard *can possibly* understand', was his common form of speech on these occasions, and the objector was silenced, if not convinced.[40]

Waring had Iolo as brittlely impatient when challenged on treating 'impressions' as 'authentic'. Thomas, lover of individualistic takes on tradition, transformed the picture into a demonstration of Iolo's rectitude. He gave it a new context in Mr Morgan's dialogue. There, Iolo is said to have argued with historical certainty on his side, contending against flawed depictions of ancients: 'Of course, he connected the bards with Druidism which he said they kept alive [...] He hated the stories of Caesar and others about human sacrifices, and would say to opponents, "You are talking of what you don't understand–what none by a Welshman and a British bard *can possibly* understand."' Waring's doubt, metamorphosed, now says that Iolo possessed the knowledge and vigour of an ideal bard. This emphasis on using 'you don't understand' as a defence of ancient values echoes how Thomas would use 'untranslatable' to gesture at his appreciation of Welsh that would elude anyone who tried to capture it in English. Ironically, its outspokenness also recalls Thomas's uninhibited teenage love for Shelley's lyrics, satirised later in the novel.[41]

Making Iolo an ancient rover had put Thomas at odds with scholars he admired, including Edwards and Stephens. Shortly before becoming

[40] Elijah Waring, *Recollections and Anecdotes of Edwards Williams, the bard of Glamorgan; or, Iolo Morganwg, B.B.D* (London 1850) pp. 32–3.
[41] Thomas, *Morgans*, 199, 292–5.

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Thomas's university tutor, in 1896 Edwards had written an English-language article on Iolo's fabrication of tradition in *Wales: A National Magazine*: 'Professor J. Morris Jones is showing, in a number of vigorous and most interesting articles in *Cymru*, that the Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain is a sham gorsedd, and that the bards are sham bards'. Writing 'with regret that I see the veil torn off the truth relating to mildewed forgeries and hoary frauds', Edwards noted, 'the Gorsedd has no possible connection with druidic times'.[42] Although not named in the article, it was known Iolo had held the first Gorsedd ceremony in London in 1792. In *The Literature of the Kymry* (1849), one of Thomas's enduring references, Thomas Stephens was fierier. The trend for treating nineteenth-century bardism as descendent from pre-Saxon druidism was a pretence from Iolo:

> It was not the real Druidism of history; but that of tradition purified, modified, and altered to suit the taste of a more refined age, and superior intelligence; there was probably as much difference between the moody and tyrannical Druid of reality, and the gentlemanly Druid of the age of chivalry, as there was between the latter and the democratic Druid of Iolo Morganwg. Both the latter were fictitious; they were psychological–not historical truths.[43]

Given he most likely knew this passage, Thomas was being highly selective. It was as though he was compelled to make Iolo a representative of Ancient Britain. A roaming Iolo could carry liberty unconstrained by geography but always irrevocably rooted in the Welsh past, an ideal metaphor for the jurisdiction Thomas wanted his ideas to have in the present.

Consider 'The Combe':

> But far more ancient and dark
> The Combe looks since they killed the badger there,
> Dug him out and gave him to the hounds,
> That most ancient Briton of English beasts (*ACP*, p. 48).

Edna Longley observes 'ancient Briton' evokes Thomas's use of the same phrase to describe Iolo in *Morgans*. She suggests 'Thomas may also rebuke imperial "Britain"' with the connection between ancientness and

[42] O. M. Edwards, 'Stray Leaves', *Wales*, 3 (1896) p. 52.

[43] Stephens, *Literature of the Kymry*, 104. See also 114–7: 'it would be improper for me to close this sketch of the bards, without entering a protest against the pacific character claimed for them by Iolo Morganwg and Dr. [William Owen] Pughe' (114).

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individual liberty.[44] Such a rebuke would be based on the killing having military overtones and evoking social stratification. Moreover, Thomas is doing what he said Iolo did: he tells the history of a place through a local story that leads back to an ancient example. In Thomas's metaphysics, the story associates the 'badger' with the combe indelibly. It has made the combe 'more ancient and dark', giving it a lasting association with an ancient history that 'they' dug out.

Recalling the otherworldly underground questing of *Preiddeu Annwfn* in the *Book of Taliesin*, Wales is hidden within Thomas's poetic world. In his poetry, Thomas uses contrasts of light and dark, above and underneath, and visible and within to suggest he has uncovered the values he associated with Ancient Britain. 'Roads' alludes to 'The Dream of Maxen' to find hidden old truths:

> Helen of the roads,
> The mountain ways of Wales
> And the Mabinogion tales,
> Is one of the true gods,
>
> Abiding in the trees,
> The threes and fours so wise,
> The larger companies,
> That by the roadside be,
>
> And beneath the rafter
> Else uninhabited
> Excepting by the dead (*ACP*, p. 107)

Although Thomas discovers Welsh 'gods', the writing is from an English-speaking perspective. Thomas refers to 'Helen' instead of the Welsh 'Elen', as he had read in John Rhys's lecture on 'The Dream of Maxen'.[45] Likewise, his phrase 'the Mabinogion tales' follows his rhyme with 'Wales' (picked over 'Cymru') to make a probably accidental compound tautology from his earlier suggestion, '"Mabinogion" means something like "twice-told tales"'. In this anglophonic rendering, Thomas hides Helen 'in the trees' and 'beneath the rafter/Else uninhabited'. As

[44] Edna Longley, 'Notes' in *ACP*, 171.

[45] John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (2nd edn. London, 1892) pp. 160–75. Thomas quotes the *Lectures* in *Celtic Stories*. Rhys derides the 'charlatans' who 'pretend, of course, that it is *Helen* and not *Elen*' (167 n.1).

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the First World War went on, and he progressed through military training, he began associating mud and burial more with battle, as in the 1916 poems, 'No one cares less than I', 'As the Team's Head Brass', and 'Gone, gone again'.[46] They evoked death, with bodies either falling like ploughed clods or being covered over by them. Those ideas seemed far more important to him than the prospect of pain. Simultaneously, he also used mud and burial to distance himself from other wartime poets: 'As the team's head brass' expands on a poem he redrafted, 'The Private', to undo the separation between pastoral and war landscapes in Thomas Hardy's 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', and 'No one cares less than I' dismisses Rupert Brooke's 'Nineteen-Fourteen: The Soldier' with indifference to 'Whether I am destined to lie/Under a foreign clod' (*ACP*, p. 123).[47] It is as though Thomas desired to keep his death away from his contemporaries. In poems written earlier, however, he frequently treats dark and hidden spaces as holding a common, ancient history that he is then seen uncovering.

The contrasts that Thomas uses redress how his geography often seems superficially imbalanced between England and Wales. Although he had said place-naming came from Wales, Thomas fills his lyrics with English placenames, and remembers 'Adlestrop', but does not use Welsh placenames at all. Poems inspired by or set in Wales do not establish where their speaker is. 'An Old Song (II)', 'The Mountain Chapel', and 'The Child on the Cliffs' are instances. This compositional choice suggests he thought Wales was better floating. The symbolism of an ancient, discoverable Britain let him hide the association of Wales with ancientness anywhere he might cast his eye.

As made clear in his *Maurice Maeterlinck* (1911), Thomas disliked allegorical symbolism, the type where red is a symbol for blue and the poem can be deciphered with a gloss, 'like St. Melito's Key to the Bible'.[48] He was closer to Yeats's more wistful mythic symbols, as Longley has argued, but he usually diverges by describing how he had discovered the past. As Longley quotes from a December 1908 *Morning Post* review, Thomas saw Yeats as 'plung[ing] us, as few other poets writing in English can, into a world where all the values are changed and the parochialism of humanity

[46] Thomas may have drawn influence from 'Trench Life', a first-hand account 'by a Sub[altern]' in the same issue of *The English Review* as his 'England'. It describes 'dreadfulness in the utter isolation of this little earthy hell' under incoming artillery fire. *The English Review*, 20 (1915) p. 74.

[47] For Thomas redrafting 'A Private' (6, 7 January 1915) before its publication in his pseudonymous *Six Poems* (1916), see Longley, 'Notes', in *ACP*, 74–5.

[48] Thomas, *Maurice Maeterlinck* (2nd edn. London, 1911) p. 29.

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is forgotten'.[49] In 'Digging (What matter makes my spade)', he digs his English garden and sees a continuum of 'ancients' who had lived there before. In the next poem he wrote that Summer 1915, 'Two Houses', the awareness of past generations becomes an excess. He finds and hears the dead 'never/More than half hidden' in the dark beneath a 'velvet-hushed' sunlit house:

> But another house stood there long before:
> And as if above graves
> Still the turf heaves
> Above its stones
> [...]
> Dark echoes reply,
> And the hollow past
> Half yields the dead that never
> More than half hidden lie
> And out they creep and back again for ever (*ACP*, p. 100).

Here, assonance relays Thomas's relationship with the buried past. When he switches to describing the dark house underneath the sunlit one, the combination of short vowel sounds and long 'I' assonance in stanzas on the lit house are replaced by a repetition of long 'A', 'E', and 'O' vowel sounds. Thomas begins with the 'A' sound of 'graves' but then concentrates on the 'O': 'stones', 'Shadowing kennel and bones', 'moans', 'over', 'echoes', 'hollow'. Such pattern development is a style he had used in an earlier poem, 'The Owl', where he evokes a moment of realisation by introducing long 'A' sounds into his speech.[50] There, the pattern starts with his description of what has affected him, the owl's cry ('A most melancholy cry', 'Shaken', 'plain', 'escaped', 'lay', 'unable') (*ACP*, p. 65). In 'Two Houses', the pattern cycles to land on another long 'I': 'the dead that never/More than half hidden lie'. The earlier long 'I' sounds of the lit house that 'lies' above and 'smiles' are now implicated as an inheritance of the long vowels associated with the unhidden dead. Taken

[49] Longley, *Under the Same Moon*, 272–3.

[50] Thomas may have been inspired by 'March' in John Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), 'Far above, the solitary crane/ Wings lonely to unfrozen dykes again,/ Cranking a jarring, melancholy cry,/ Through the wild journey of the cheerless sky'. He would have read this passage extracted in Arthur Symons's 'Introduction' to Clare's *Poems* (London 1908), on p. 21 when he reviewed the book for the 19 December 1908 *Daily Chronicle*.

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alongside the ending stanza's repetition of the connector word 'and', it is like his speech has been led to reveal how it is enchained to the past below.

In 'Two Houses', Thomas alludes to the symbol's significance by indicating how he has given it voice. Some critics have discussed his interest in sound patterns as seeking a traditional Welsh style, suggesting he sought it during his long friendship with Gwili (John Jenkins) and meetings with Watcyn Wyn.[51] R. George Thomas described Thomas struggling with Welsh poetry with Gwili but being 'much more responsive to Welsh songs and music'.[52] Andrew Webb has proposed a deep union where Thomas sought to join a Welsh tradition by using variations on *cynghanedd*, a strictly metrical and 'intricate system of sound-chiming peculiar to Welsh verse', and *cywydd*, offset-length couplets. For Webb, 'Gwili and Watcyn Wyn were key to Thomas's own development'.[53] *Cynghanedd* is based on consonant matching organised within lines.[54] Its presence is exceeded by the frequently assonantal and stanza-based sound patterns in Thomas's poetry, which often suggest psychological changes in the speaker. However, the trace of a likeness reminds that Thomas admired the modern existence of bards and sought to interpret where they had come from. As his sharp newspaper reviews show, alongside his declarative 1914 essay 'Reviewing: An Unskilled Labour', he very rarely received tradition without interpreting it to speak for himself.[55] He wrote as much in 'Health', where travelling to Wales was not enough for his 'desire', 'I should have changed my mind before I could be in Wales' (*ACP*, p. 82).

[51] Watkin Hezekiah Williams (1844–1905), better known as Watcyn Wyn, was a Welsh poet, preacher, and schoolmaster, famous for competing successfully in eisteddfodau from the 1870s. John Jenkins (1872–1936), better known as Gwili, was Welsh poet and theologian, who won the Bardic Crown at the National Eisteddfod in 1901 and went on to be its Archdruid from 1932 until his death. Thomas's portrait of Gwili in *Horæ Solitariæ* suggests him reciting to Thomas in English, with 'the metaphors by which he lived' ((New York 1902), 154). For Thomas's friendship with Gwili, see Elis Jenkins, 'Edward Thomas: Some of His Welsh Friends', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 15 (1967) pp. 147–56.

[52] R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait* (Oxford 1987) p. 67. For Thomas collecting folk songs, see Martin Brooks, '"'Tis My Delight": Edward Thomas's Folk Songs and Inns', *Dymock Poets and Friends*, 22 (2023) pp. 71–80.

[53] Andrew Webb, *Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies: Wales, Anglocentrism and English Literature* (Cardiff 2013), 104 pp. 123–9.

[54] Michael Hammond, 'The Phonology of Welsh Cynghanedd,' *Lingua*, 122 (2012) pp. 386–90.

[55] 'Better the honest opinion of a smart, pitiless and un historically minded Cockney than all this rambling, hedging and ditching, half and half.' Edward Thomas, 'Reviewing: An Unskilled Labour', *Poetry and Drama*, 2 (1914) p. 40.

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In the end, Thomas had worked out how to be in Wales wherever he was. He dug up England until its ancientness became apparent. A little like Geoffrey and Iolo, he had even made his own origin story with a fictitious Welsh-seeming landscape. In *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*, the schoolmaster and author Mr Torrance stands in for Thomas's adult life and writing career. He was born in 'the valley of the river Uther', an invented local place of 'fifteen or twenty square miles [that] make the one real thing that I know and cannot forget, in spite of a hundred English scenes wantonly visited and forgotten'.[56] Thomas enjoyed 'the valley of the river Uther' legend so much that he reprinted it as the backstory of the middle-class English clerk in *The Country* (1913) who speaks up for freedom from a wearisome London existence.[57] It arrives in his poetry too. Mr Torrance's fond recollections of tumbledown yards and nettles evoke 'Tall Nettles', as Longley notes, with its antique farming equipment in the 'corner of the farmyard I like most' (*ACP*, p. 119).[58] Thomas's descriptions of the valley collect everything together, accidental and chosen. Recalling Thomas's outsider relationship to Welsh, the name suggests Wales but is spelled with the English 'Uther' over the Welsh 'Uthyr'. Its location is not said, but it is never lost or forgotten. It always offers an imaginary, formative Arthurian place. With the valley, he had created an evocation of Wales that could fit anywhere he travelled in England, always there to point at Ancient Britain as the birthplace of his mental life.

[56] Thomas, *Morgans*, 128.
[57] Thomas, *The Country* (London 1913) p. 7.
[58] Longley, 'Notes', in *ACP*, 290.

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