One's Autobiography, Their Native Place's Biography

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Abstract: *A good biography is both an encounter with oneself, which can involve the need to confront potent elements from one's past, and an encounter with one's native place, whose history has shaped one's life. Its value is directly proportional to the wholeheartedness with which its author attempts to answer the questions, 'Who am I?', and 'How did I become what I am?'. Its writing is as much for the author's own enlightenment as for the reader's instruction. Some of the best Welsh autobiographers are a case in point, their experiences of Wales – social, cultural, linguistic or historical – impinging significantly on the sense of self each has developed.*
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"**A**utobiography is both a form of literary striptease and an archaeology of the self," say John and Dorothy Colmer in their Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Australian Autobiography* [1987: 1]. During the Romantic period writers such as Rousseau, Wordsworth, and De Quincey created some of their best works in the form of self-portraits, autobiography proving to be the ideal form for exploring, on the one hand, the preoccupation with the self and the tensions between the individual and the society, and on the other hand, the preoccupation to achieve unity of being in an increasingly fragmented world. Later on, this Romantic search turned into an illusion, writers of various calibres showing that, in the best of cases, they could only provide multiple and often contradictory images of the self.

Although the "voice of the writer and the person described are experienced by the reader as a living unity," [Cockshut, 1984: 216] behind such a unity lies a dynamic and dialectical relationship somehow echoing Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle according to which scientific discovery can never be achieved, as the instruments of measurement, in the very process of measuring, change that which is to be measured. In autobiography one can find a double indeter-

minacy principle at work: firstly, the writer, who is a measurer of his past self, recreates the object; secondly, the transformation of the past self changes the nature of the writer, who is never the same at the end of the work as at the moment of writing the first page [Colmer, 1987: 2]. Thus, the process of recreating the past self transforms the present writing self.

Sometimes writers endeavour to discover themselves in relation to their native land and their idea of history, to present themselves as 'social animals' that chart rapid social changes and discover the truth about national identity, their works becoming "sociographies" rather than autobiographies. A case in point is that of several Welsh writers of the 20th century that provided powerful constructions of their native place, intense and emotionally convincing pictures of what it felt like, as individuals, to experience particular Welshness at particular moments in history.

A most difficult enterprise as 20th century Welsh writers were confronted with a crisis of identity that came to a head with the 'no' vote in the devolution referendum of 1979, a resounding defeat for separatist Welsh nationalism. However, the political split between those identifying with Wales and those identifying with Britain is not reflected at the level of individual national identity. The conservative pragmatism that a referendum seems to encourage masks the inclination of the majority of people living in Wales to consider themselves 'Welsh' rather than 'British.' Indeed, a sense of national identity in Wales is more commonly predicated on a reaction against Britishness and the political and cultural dominance that Britishness represents. For Welsh Nationalists, Britishness is simply another word for Englishness. In this view, incorporation into Britain supplies the means by which the essential attributes of Welshness – the Welsh language in particular – are swamped by an English cultural hegemony.

The resistance of effacement at the hands of a colonizing Englishness brings with it certain problems. It often involves the attempt to define stable boundaries in the construction of national identity, boundaries that may have been surpassed by historical, cultural, and geographical change. With Welsh writers, a turning inwards or (historically) backwards staves off the process of assimilation to Britain, "but only by cultivating a false, and so vulnerable, nationalism." [Head, 2002: 145] What has become increasingly necessary is a form of cultural explanation which embraces the fact of migration,

and heterogeneity, and which acknowledges the fact that the insistence on origins is counterproductive.

In *Print of a Hare's Foot* (1969), Rhys Davies (1901-1978) places his individual life within the nexus of the powerful historical forces which impinged upon him and his community. He vividly traces the social history of a part of the Rhondda Valley from pre-industrial to post-industrial times. The time-span covered in detail is from the turn of the 19th century to the middle of the Depression in the 1930s. Yet, as the actual vantage-point of writing is the late 1960s, the experiences of that decade contribute to the defeated mood of the final chapter. The 1960s had seen the closure of seventy-four pits in south Wales, including the Cambrian, in Clydach Vale, after an explosion there in 1965 which had killed thirty-one miners. Therefore, Davies (the son of a Clydach grocer) records his memories of his own mining community at a time when the focal point and *raison d'être* of his village had already ceased to be. The reader experiences, too, through particular characters represented in detail, the human reality of social movement in south Wales in the first half of the 20th century but, for the most part, "the mood is of record, not of commemoration." [Prys-Williams, 2004: 10] Despite the fact that the author never fully identifies himself with the workers, he "does outline their harsh context and sympathizes to some real degree with their struggles, though he always criticizes violent and disrespectful resistance." [Stephen Knight in Aron and Williams, 2005:165]

The mining valleys bulk large in the popular myth of Wales but accounts of what it was like to be a miner are rarer, the most important offerings coming from B.L. Coombes (1893-1974) and Ron Berry (1920-1997). Coombes' *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* (1939) was motivated by the author's desire to proclaim to the world the hardships and dangers of a miner's life. It evokes the misery and chill deprivation of the rural proletariat's feudal structure and paints a "bleak picture of unremitting toil for small return for those who did not own land." [Prys-Williams, 2004: 59-60] The writer perceives himself as a worker and documents exhaustively the callous indifference of profit-bent owners to all matters of human justice, producing in the reader a keen response to the experiences of miners and especially to the hazards of the coalmining industry. He gives a moving description of the major events of the period: lockout, victimization, the 1926 strike, battles over unionism, juxtaposing the miners' abnormal, dangerous life to

their need of human, intimate life, and beauty of all kinds. Often seen as an "important document in gaining widespread support for the nationalization of the mines" [Knight, 2004: 92], *These Poor Hands* in tone and title is calm, reasonable, as its title suggests, and ideal for rousing the readers' sympathy.

While Coombes' intention is to act as the mediator and explicator of the often maligned and misunderstood miner, Berry's *History Is What You Live* (1998) records, in all its intensity, his mining experience, and expresses his regret at the rapid decline and near-complete demise of the industry in the later part of the 20th century. The author wants the readers to understand and almost become part of the process of change and loss that he mourns, making them see the richness and the violence of the mining culture. He recreates the feel of the Rhondda Valley when it was a single industry thriving place and commemorates the suffering and endurance of the small but typical cross-section of the mining fraternity he worked with. The author sustains the vision of an oppressed yet hardy people largely through the muscular drive of his own language and imagination, his memories pointing to an "awareness of how little of what has been thought worth human struggle endures." [Prys-Williams, 2004: 92] The vigour and sense of authenticity of Berry's style, as well as his verbal power and ironic realism, give him clear leadership among a group of other writers who have written both nostalgically and elegiacally about the world of men and mining.

In *A Few Selected Exits* (1985), Gwyn Thomas (1913-1981) seems to identify his outlook with that of the workers and shows a "more profound understanding of Marxism and left-wing politics than most of those other Anglo-Welsh writers whose emotional involvement in the disasters of the coalfield is every bit as passionate as his." (Jones, 2001: 106) His standpoint is firmly and consistently socialist and working-class, untouched by bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideals and aspirations. The Rhondda Valley where Thomas grew up suffered extremes of hardship in terms of unemployment, poverty and hunger. Frequently, almost routinely, the author deals with such features humorously, which is most likely a distancing, the only means of controlling a painfully threatening and anarchic world.

His miners and iron-workers, his unemployed, are never shown as people browbeaten into sullen silence, inarticulate through fear and deprivation, and without hope. Their marvellous inventiveness of language is an expression of their boundless will to resist, their

unquenchable determination to assert in the face of the powerful and ruthless forces ranged against them, their human dignity and worth. However, Thomas appears to have little sympathy with the national aspirations and the indigenous culture of Wales. He sees the chapel, for example, not as one of the custodians of the language, or historically as the disseminator of culture and education. For him it is merely an object of derision, good for an easy laugh, and those who support it are seen as little better than amiable imbeciles. And yet Thomas' values are very largely Christian; he has invariably the good word for brotherhood, for simplicity as against cynicism, for tenderness as against cruelty. To some, "he is the supreme poet of the industrial valleys, the *cyfarwydd* (storyteller) of the working class, comic, compassionate, of inexhaustible invention." [Jones, 2005: 116]

In *Bad Blood* (2000), Lorna Sage (1943-2001) describes her unusual growing-up in the 1940s and 1950s rural Border backwater of Hanmer. A professor of English, Sage tells the story of her own life in the terms of a late 20th century academic and critic, with considerable use of postmodernist insights and techniques, supported by written documents and even photographs. Writing from a consciousness that there is no ultimate reality, she is particularly acute in her re-creation of codes or conventions that structured life in those times; she is playful, too, as she teases the reader by drawing attention to the constructed nature of her life story, and creates pastiches of styles.

Her earliest sense of identity was fashioned in part by the long-standing social pattern of the Border area. Hanmer, though undoubtedly in Wales, was an untypically Welsh village, because there was no chapel. Hierarchical social gradations were tangibly part of her early scheme of things. Life felt very feudal with so many families living in tied cottages.

The author's considerable skill as an autobiographer comprehends an ability to show distinctive ways of looking at people and events at different stages in her life – to communicate a sense of the experiencing self in the immediacy of childhood encounter and the reconsideration of particular experiences with the new vantage points provided by maturity, striking new information and the wisdom of hindsight. Surprisingly though, when Sage deals with the nature and position of women in the 1950s and 1960s she does not do it from her turn-of-the-century perspective: the interpreting mind of the reader is left to form its own stunned judgment at the construction of female reality that was the then norm.

Sage is also "adept at revealing the sometimes ludicrous yet malign nature of particular constructed worlds." [Prys-Williams, 2004: 158] Cross-houses, for example, the specialist maternity hospital to which she is sent because obstetric complications are expected, is deep in the countryside, having no public telephone, short visiting hours and no bus service, giving full scope for the exercise of repressive power. As a result, she sees conventions and systems of rules of the external world as harshly coercive and becomes more inner directed.

Those readers who lived through the period that Sage depicts may feel a sense of shock, then one of recognition, as the author shapes their awareness in a way that makes them take in the constructed nature of the norms of her childhood and adolescence. She writes, too, in an engagingly frank way of the experience of being female and how it affects what one feels about oneself.

In seeking out and publishing her harsher truth, Sage demonstrated an important facet of her self at the time of writing – her analytical, authorial power. She dared to expose what she believed herself to be and how she reckoned she came to be that way.

Each of the writers considered here communicates a vivid sense of what it was like to live in their own part of Wales. The views of Wales are lively and memorable but distinctly idiosyncratic. Consistency of outlook is hardly to be expected between authors: depictions of the industrial Rhondda Valley, for example, range from lost Eldorado to Valley of the Bones. Moreover, writers such as Rhys Davies and B. L. Coombes, who are often labelled 'objective,' are shown to have slanted their material for personal reasons, while overtly subjective autobiographers, such as Lorna Sage, Ron Berry and Gwyn Thomas, provide intense and emotionally convincing pictures of what it felt like to experience particular Welsh cultures at particular moments in history.

The fact that autobiography is one of the most popular forms of reading today suggests that the often proclaimed 'death of the author' is something of a myth. Autobiography satisfies a basic curiosity in the mysteries of the human personality and the processes of growth and fulfilment. It also illuminates the extent to which human beings are moulded by domestic and social pressures. Above all, it presents fallible creatures more like the ordinary reader and, because the authors place themselves in the centre of the world they recreate, the reader lives in and through their experience with peculiar immediacy.

Through tracing the meaning that others have discerned in their lives, readers are offered the hope of ultimately making sense of their own.

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