

The Haunts of the Bards

The Land of My Fathers

The rocks and the crags o'er the valley guard,
The mountains still shelter the haunts of the bard;
Thy rills and the brooks sing their way to the sea
In music so moving to me

The haunts of the bards; that's where storytellers Eirwen Malin and Phil Thomas took us with their stories and songs of Wales at the National Storytelling Festival last year. They immersed the listeners in Welsh landscape and lore, painting pictures of mountains and lakes, valleys and the sea, telling tales of mystery, myth and magic, another time and place and people, that left me entranced and intrigued. The Welsh Tourism Board would do well to send them out as Welsh ambassadors, an enticement to visit Wales.

Of all the Celtic peoples my knowledge of the Welsh people is the most limited but their stories called me to investigate. Before I saw their storytelling show I only had a few vague reference points to Wales. I know that Captain James Cook claimed the east coast of Australia for Great Britain on April 28, 1770 and named it New South 'Wales' after a country he had never visited and which Australia apparently bears very little resemblance to.

I can recite the first few lines of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milkwood*. I know singer, Tom Jones is Welsh and I know that JB Humffray, was a Welsh Man that came to the goldfields of Ballarat in the 1850s. He was known for his Liberal education and was a chartist and founder of the Ballarat Reform League.

And as I now know, Gareth Davis, the gardener of the glorious gardens at Dromkeen is a Welshman and has an informative small collection of Welsh literature that I borrowed as a resource for this article.

They say that 'today the Welsh language and culture survives in part because of the love of storytelling among the Welsh people. Their stories and music, and their traditions maintain the identity of a people who came into being long long ago.'

Eirwen Malin and Phil Thomas belong to this race of people and were guests of Australia's National Storytelling Festival in October 2003. The weather was warm and the Catholic girls school that played host looked like 'Howarts School of Magic' amongst a lush tropical garden set high on a hill overlooking Brisbane. We even had our very own Hagrid, (husband of Gael Robinson) wandering about.

It seemed surreal and to add to the mystique of the setting, to get to the school at the top of the hill you wound your way up past an expansive graveyard that rolls away into the distance. Lots of untold stories here.

Phil and Eirwen's show *From The Other Side And From Both Sides* was fantastic. Inside a darkened lecture theatre in cool air-conditioned comfort I settled down for the journey.

They started us at the gateway of a graveyard in a little village on the harsh south Welsh coast, where the wind whipped the seas and ships crashed against the cliffs. They told us stories and sang of the stories behind the tombstones and the people of the village as they walked us around the graveyard.

Here a tale of the wind-sellers who 'blew' eggs and painted them with incantations so that they could capture the wind. For a price you could buy the egg and smash it and hope for plentiful bounty from wrecked vessels the wind blew in to shore.

Young Catherine discovered the terrible truth behind her family's wind-selling business when drowned sailors were washed ashore. Once when a black man was found on the beach young Catherine paid a penny like the rest of the village to look upon him laid out in the back of the pub. No one in the village had seen a black man before and the collected funds were used to bury the stranger.

The working man. His love for his wife. The brother. A family. All the stories unfolding to give us an insight into Welsh life and folklore. I remember images and the sense of mystery and wonder they created and later in the night an old legend of Llyn Fan Fach or as it is sometimes known Meddygon Myddfai 'The Medics of Myddfai', who were the sons of the lady of the lake. The beautiful mountain lake their mother returned to is reputed to be 'one of the most magical places in Wales'.

Then like a child questioning the storyteller and the amazed asking the magician, I couldn't help but ask; *Is it true? Is it a real place?*

By dipping into my borrowed Welsh literature collection I enhanced my understanding of the Welsh landscape and the lore of its people.

Via the email Eirwen explained and I was able to see the mechanics of how they built their show.

The show is about the graveyard of St Mary's church in Monknash, a tiny village in the Vale of Glamorgan. "I lived there for about twelve years in the house next door to the church.' Eirwen wrote

It started with two songs, the first (*Love Such As Theirs*) I had written years ago inspired by Esdras Lougher, one of the people of the village and his devoted attention to the grave of his wife Dilys.'

*The years have gone by
since I set down that story
My path once more led
to that same old church yard
I read once again the words
on the headstone
That wind and the weather
and time had not marr
Beneath them in letters
so neat and so plain
Edras Philip Lougher -
that old man's name
And below that confirming
the story I've told
'Together in love'
was carved there in gold.*

Copyright Eirwen Malin 1999

The second song, *Job Done* was written after I had taken Phil to the *Plough & Harrow*, the best pub in the Vale of Glamorgan, if not the whole world. We then strolled up the road to the graveyard so that I could show him the gravestone mentioned in my song. He was much taken with the epitaph on the stone next door, that of Cyril, Esdras' brother.'

The epitaph read *Job Done* which was to become the title of Phil's song. The song tells of a hard life of the Loughers a local family of Monknash; some were farmers and some were stone masons. They came to the village in late 1790s and are still there— pretty much.

The house that Eirwen lived in was built by Esdras' grandfather and Esdras lived there for a while with his grandparents as a teenager. *The Land of My Fathers*

And the chorus refrains:
*They called me Green Fingers
a man of the soil
I spent all my life
in hard labour and toil
All day from dawn
to the set of the sun
And now I am laid to my rest—
Job Done*
Copyright Phil Thomas 2002

So they had two gravestones, two songs which were stories in their own right and a number of stories that Eirwen already knew about the area and its coastline. That was the start, a themed show where 'they would walk round the graveyard starting with Esdras and ending with Cyril'. And so they set about finding out more particularly about the Lougher family.

'We put posters up in the church, the pub and the village shop asking for stories and had some responses, one of which was Cyril's son Alan who told us a few more family stories and gave us some scant details of a shipwreck and the part that an ancestor had played in the rescue and the intriguing fact that he had afterwards gone mad.'

The next bit of inspiration was the weather. We went along to the site of the shipwreck and the storyteller in me had already set it in dense fog with the sea still rolling in after recent storms and the bell of the buoy that marks the deep water channel clanging eerily.'

'We did a lot of research to pull the stories together. Phil did most of the research with some help from the Glamorgan Family History Society. The records we used to re-construct the story included weather reports, newspaper archives, births, deaths, census data, agricultural society records and the records from the asylum that Rhys went to. This story became the climax of the show.'

Inevitably there are lots of shipwreck stories in what is a very dangerous part of the coast and wherever there are shipwrecks because of danger there are also wreckers that assist the process. The story of Catherine and the light she used to carry, the black man that was laid out in the pub for people to pay sixpence to see are local stories.'

'Information about wind-selling came from Internet research and the practice comes from a few miles down the coast on the Gower Peninsula— interestingly enough close to a village and a river called Lougher!'

'The path round the graveyard varied a little as the show developed and there were stories we could have put in and didn't. It took quite a few months of revisiting ideas to get it into its final shape.'

Master illusionists and storytellers Eirwen and Phil offered a seamless show that felt like it had been created eons ago and handed down through the generations. They captured village life and a time where magic and superstitions abounded and people had a strong sense of their cultural inheritance.

I didn't know that Eisteddfod was a Welsh tradition but as a storyteller I am impressed with a country's whose national celebration is a contest between bards and poets.

Seeing Eirwen and Phil's show was inspirational and offered guidelines for my own Australian stories of place. As the Welsh would say, it was ' Diwrnod i'r Bren (A day for the King) or less eloquently in English— a memorable day when Welsh storytelling ambassadors Eirwen Malin and Phil Thomas performed at an Australian storytelling conference and gave us the gift of Wales and Welsh life.