

‘Blighted be the valleys’

Welsh Industrial Literature and the Environment

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Seth Armstrong-Twigg

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Supervised by

Professor Katie Gramich (Cardiff University)

Dr Samantha Walton (Bath Spa University)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers the first ecocritical reading of Welsh industrial literature in its examination of environmental degradation within four texts published in the 1930s that depict the nation's coal industry. To date, these texts have largely been examined from a socio-political perspective and, as a result, reflect historical concerns. This thesis shifts the focus of criticism from the interpersonal to the ways in which human beings interact with the environment; it is thus symptomatic of contemporary concerns, and echoes a change in the perception of culture, where environmental issues are irremovable from works of art.

Although the main chapters focus on texts from the 1930s, the prologue of this thesis returns to the nineteenth century and examines four travel accounts that record the town of Merthyr Tydfil and its infamous ironworks. This section is positioned as an introduction to the 1930s and as a means of explaining how the fire and fury of Merthyr's ironworks prompted an artistic shift in which environmental degradation was brought to the foreground.

The first chapter remains in Merthyr with Jack Jones's *Black Parade* (1935) and examines the depiction of river pollution. In the first part, I argue that an emphasis on toxicity reveals the innovation of Jones's writing, before reimagining the novel as a work of environmental protest. Chapter Two, on deforestation in Idris Davies's *Gwalia Deserta* (1938), first explores the place of trees in Welsh literary history, in order to locate a foundation for the poem's pairing of woodland and people. The second half of the chapter considers the identity of treeless places and explores how compromised environmental exteriors create polluted interior states. Chapter Three's emphasis on air pollution in B. L. Coombes's documentary account, *These Poor Hands* (1939), begins underground by revealing the true human and non-human cost of mining, whilst the second part returns aboveground in order to trace the impact of polluted air on humanised environments. The final chapter on Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* (1939) investigates the mismanagement of land through spoil tips, whilst also connecting the novel's fascism with its depiction of the environment. The first part examines the corruptive encroachment of the spoil tip on pastoral land, and how its cumulative growth threatens the narrator's beloved mountain. The second part considers the metaphorical meaning of pastoral corruption, and how the description of Welsh land in sacred terms renders the presence of the serpentine spoil tip an act of demonic desecration.

The thematic structure of this thesis is informed by the Classical elements, adapted to include wood. This holistic approach mirrors the ecocritical methodology that seeks to emphasise the interconnectedness of the human and non-human world. Throughout the following chapters, I connect literary texts to historical and contemporary environmental issues, and in doing so, argue for the value of literature, and academic research, in educating people about the urgency of the current climate crisis.

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As I outline in the following Preface, my own connections to the coal industry inspired me to undertake this project. I would like to thank my mum and dad for always teaching me about my family history.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife, Priya, and my two children.

Thank you. Diolch. Kiitos. धन्यवाद.

PREFACE

I. My Family and Coal Mining

This thesis was inspired by my family members who gave their lives to the coal industry. On my father's side, my great-great-great-grandfather, Seth Twigg, fell to his death during a shift at Black Park Colliery, near Chirk (north-east Wales), on New Year's Eve 1863, and my great-great-grandfather, Edward Pierce, died following a roof fall at Brynkinalt colliery, near Chirk, in September 1892.¹ My great-grandfather, Stanley Roberts, suffered lifelong physical injuries following another roof fall at the same colliery in July 1928. My grandfather, Seth Twigg, worked at many collieries in the Denbighshire coalfield of north-east Wales, including Brynkinalt, Black Park, Bersham and Ifton.² The final pit, Ifton, was situated over the border in Shropshire and each day, my grandfather would walk underground from one country to the other in order to complete his shift.³ Although the coal industry of the United Kingdom is typically divided on national grounds, the collieries of the Welsh Marches were unique in that miners who lived in England and Wales worked together as one labour force. This had an impact on the identity of the area and as a product of that, I can attest to feeling both Welsh and English, but also a third identity that does not feel completely akin to either nationality.

On my mother's side, my great-grandfather, Angus Armstrong, worked as a coal miner at Whittle Colliery, in Northumberland, north-east England. During the Second World War, Angus volunteered to serve in a medical capacity with the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, transferring the first aid skills he had acquired from the colliery to the context of war. Angus died of malaria in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in July 1943 and is buried in Myanmar.

"No child of mine will work down the pit" – the words of my grandfather, Seth Twigg, have stayed with me throughout the writing of this thesis. Over the course of his life, Seth worked underground with the knowledge that many of his family members had died down the pit, and the thought of his own children suffering the same fate was not an option.

This thesis acknowledges the pride we have for those who worked as coal miners, but also recognises that the industry was immensely destructive from both a human and environmental perspective.

¹ In a cruel twist of fate, on the same day that Seth Twigg fell to his death, my great-great-great-grandmother, Harriet, gave birth to their fourth and final child. He was named Seth after his late father, and it is because of him that I am here to write this thesis.

² According to C. Neville Hurdsmann, the area of Brynkinalt near Chirk was one of the ancient townships of Chirklands and has seen a variety of spellings, some of which – such as Bryncunallt – reflect the word's origins in the Welsh language in a clearer manner. For more information on the history of Chirk and its mining heritage, see: C. Neville Hurdsmann, *A History of the Parish of Chirk* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1996).

³ I am grateful to my uncle, Christopher Twigg, for sharing his meticulous ancestral research with me.

II. Teaching Ecocriticism in Schools

At the beginning of my doctoral research, I became increasingly conscious of a tension within environmental criticism, that scholarship – if it is to be of use – should extend beyond the university. Often, scholars involved with literary ecocriticism become environmental activists themselves, and indeed view their own research as a form of activism. In a much-quoted letter to the literary journal, *PMLA*, Michael P. Cohen argues that ‘by definition, ecological literary criticism must be engaged. It wants to know but also wants to do’.⁴ With this in mind, in the second year of my doctoral research, I decided to explore the practical applications of ecological literary criticism.

In partnership with The Brilliant Club, I designed a seven-week course based on my research, to deliver in secondary schools. The Brilliant Club is a nationwide university-access charity that ‘exists to increase the number of pupils from under-represented backgrounds progressing to highly selective universities’.⁵ One of the ways in which this aim is achieved is through providing PhD candidates with the opportunity to share their research with small groups of pupils in local secondary schools. Throughout my time working with the charity, I undertook a variety of placements around Cardiff, with the majority of schools located in the south Wales valleys. My course, entitled: ‘Can Literature Save the Planet?’, introduced students to the concept of ecocriticism, and its relationship to wider ecological concerns.

The structure of the course mirrored the chapters of this thesis. Tutorial one was entitled: ‘The Spoil Tip in Richard Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley*’; two examined ‘River Pollution in Jack Jones’s *Black Parade*’; three focused on ‘Deforestation in Idris Davies’s *Gwalia Deserta*’ and the fourth centred on ‘Air Pollution in B. L. Coombes’s *These Poor Hands*’. Each tutorial began with a brief biography of the author, followed by a discussion of the environmental issue in question. The remainder of the session required students to undertake close readings of a set passage, in light of what they had learned about each ecological focus. The concept of ecocriticism was then introduced in the fifth tutorial, and at that point, students were able to approach texts with a new, environmental awareness. The remainder of the course then prepared the group for a concluding 2,000-word essay, in which they focused on one of the texts, whilst answering the question, ‘can literature save the planet?’ This question encouraged the students to understand the multifaceted approach to solving global issues, and that the humanities, and literature, has a role to play in shaping public opinion.

The issues discussed through the close reading of Welsh industrial writing were especially relevant to some of the students, given that they lived in former industrial areas, and had family with connections to coal mining and other industries. Working on this project was an invaluable experience, and I was very thankful to receive positive feedback from the Brilliant Club, the students themselves, and the parents. In terms of my research, designing the course was a particularly useful exercise as I faced the challenge of condensing my work into

⁴ Michael P. Cohen, “Letter,” *PMLA* 114 (October 1999): pp. 1092–3.

⁵ ‘What is the Brilliant Club?’, The Brilliant Club, available online: <<https://thebrilliantclub.org/about-the-brilliant-club/what-is-tbc/>> [Accessed 1st February 2020].

a smaller, simpler format. Furthermore, it was very beneficial to hear the students' perspectives on my research, as well as the many fascinating stories shared by their families.

Through my work with the Brilliant Club, I have understood the importance of disseminating research in a public forum. I have also found that Welsh industrial writing remains relevant to young people nearly one hundred years after its publication. Overall, undertaking this project strengthened my belief that more of these texts should be included in contemporary school syllabi⁶.

⁶ This would align with the new curriculum for Wales, which states that students 'should be encouraged to experience and respond to a variety of literature that gives them insight into the culture, people and history of Wales as well as the wider world.' Available online: <<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/languages-literacy-and-communication/statements-of-what-matters/>> [Accessed 1st February 2020].

INTRODUCTION | LITERATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND LEGACY

Despite the evidence supporting the legitimacy of climate change, there are still many people who refute its existence.⁷ With the United Nations reporting that the first twenty years of the twenty-first century have seen a ‘staggering rise in climate emergencies’, it is astonishing and deeply troubling to consider that scepticism is still affecting the progress of climate change mitigation policies around the world.⁸ In this, the third decade of the twenty-first century, it might even be too late to find a solution to the disaster, and the miracle of the industrial revolution might be viewed as western civilisation’s greatest mistake.⁹

I write this thesis, then, in a peculiar era. When, originally, I proposed this three-year project to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Greta Thunberg was another Swedish high school student, Extinction Rebellion were yet to bring their disruptive form of environmental protest to cities across the world, and Donald Trump was just a reality TV star. Although much progress has been made in publicising the urgency of decelerating the climate

⁷ In 2013, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a report that stated: ‘warming in the climate system is unequivocal’, and ‘the science now shows that with 95 percent certainty that human activity is the dominant cause of observed warming since the mid-20th century’, *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis*, ed. by Thomas F. Stocker et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. v. Among the many climate change sceptics, the former president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, is perhaps the most well-known. In 2018, Trump responded to the findings of a report by his own government on the impact of climate change on the US economy with the words: “I don’t believe it”. See: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-46351940>> [Accessed 2nd February 2021].

⁸ “‘Staggering’ rise in climate emergencies in last 20 years, new disaster research shows”, UN News, 12th October 2020, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075142>> [Accessed 21st January 2021].

⁹ This point raises the question of when one should date the starting point to the events we now understand as climate change. This is a contentious topic and environmental scientists and scholars have suggested various moments. Paul Crutzen popularised the term, ‘Anthropocene’ as a geological epoch that began with James Watt’s invention of the steam engine in 1784; see Paul Crutzen, ‘Geology of mankind’, *Nature* 415, 23 (2002). The ‘Plantationocene’ has been used to argue that colonialism, amongst others, can be understood as the origin of human-caused environmental change; see Donna Haraway, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin’, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, (2015), pp. 159–65. In this thesis, I purposely avoid the minefield of terminology, whilst broadly locating the British industrial revolution as the starting period. Finally, my emphasis is on ‘western civilisation’ because there are many Indigenous communities around the world that occupy their lands in non-destructive ways. It can be unnecessarily fatalistic, as well as historically inaccurate, to suggest that there are no beneficent interactions between humanity and ecology. See Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MI: Milkweed Editions, 2015).

crisis, the regressive policies of populist leaders have underscored the necessity for transnational cooperation.

It might seem futile – perhaps even hubristic – to imagine that academia has any sort of influence on the monumental debates that shape global politics. It might even appear ludicrous that the Humanities – specifically, the study of literature – have any relevance in the ongoing battle to assuage the worldwide environmental emergency. However, over the course of the next four chapters, this thesis will attempt to argue the contrary. Through focusing on a selection of texts written during an era in which humanity dramatically increased its impact on the non-human environment, I argue for the value of literature in educating people about ecological debates.

Consequently, this thesis is both a work of academic scholarship, and of environmental awareness. In order to offer the first ecocritical study of Welsh industrial literature, I will connect contemporary ecological issues – both from a local and global perspective – with historical, literary depictions, in an attempt to understand how our relationship with the environment has been constructed. My principal argument thus rests on this premise: if the way we perceive the environment has been formed by cultural representation, then it is through the close analysis of these cultural representations that we can begin to challenge established thought and behavioural patterns, and crucially, change our fractured relationship – before it is too late.



Figure 1. The final shift at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun.¹⁰

In 2015, the last deep coal mine in the United Kingdom ground to a terminal halt. With the ubiquity of low-priced coal imported from countries like Russia and the United States, the pit wheel at Kellingley colliery in North Yorkshire would – in the words of Idris Davies – ‘turn no more’.¹¹ Deep coal mining in Wales came to an end in 2008, with the closure of the famous Tower Colliery in Hirwaun.¹² Yet, despite the long absence of deep coal extraction within the

¹⁰ Photograph © Janice Lane.

¹¹ According to UK Government statistics, ‘[i]n 2017 Russia was the UK’s largest supplier of coal imports with a share of 46 per cent. The other main suppliers were the USA with a 28 per cent share and Australia and Colombia both with a 9 per cent share’, *Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 2018*, published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (p. 37), available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/736148/DUKES_2018.pdf [Accessed 12th November 2020]; Idris Davies, *Gwalia Deserta* in *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. by Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994 [1938]), p. 20.

¹² ‘Coal mine closes with celebration’, *BBC News*, available online [archived]: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7200432.stm> [Accessed 4th November 2020].

country, the industry's devastating legacy still continues to afflict Wales, and the cavernous wounds remain unhealed.

In this thesis, I will examine the formation of this legacy through a radical re-reading of Welsh industrial literature, in the light of contemporary ecocriticism. Naturally, this begs the question of what constitutes an ecocritical reading and, happily, the healthy nature of debate within the field offers a richness of possibilities. Cheryll Glotfelty – one of ecocriticism's early advocates – offers a relatively straightforward definition of the approach, as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'.¹³ Expanding on her explanation, Glotfelty further defines ecocriticism alongside other modes of literary inquiry, clarifying that 'just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism taken an earth-centred approach to literary studies'.¹⁴ However, what form would an earth-centred approach take to the reading of a literary text? In *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Timothy Morton bases his argument on the premise that all living and non-living things on earth are interconnected within a vast network, which he terms, 'the mesh'.¹⁵ Drawing on both Glotfelty and Morton's assertions, my ecocritical reading will assume an earth-centred approach by focusing on episodes that emphasise the complex connections between all living and non-living things depicted in the text.

As a mode of critical enquiry, ecocriticism can be divided into first and second waves. First-wave ecocriticism – generally considered as work that appeared towards the end of the twentieth century – was successful in establishing the field and focused on depictions of the relationship between humans and the environment in North American nature writing and

¹³ Cheryll Glotfelty, 'Introduction', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. xviii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 15.

English Romanticism.¹⁶ However, as the field expanded, scholars began to question earlier nature-culture distinctions. Subsequently, second-wave ecocriticism – the majority of which emerged in the early twenty-first century – interrogated concepts such as ‘nature’, ‘the non-human’ and ‘the environment’, whilst also widening the field to include texts that did not resemble Romanticism or earlier writing about the natural world.¹⁷ This thesis sits firmly in the category of second-wave ecocriticism, as I examine Welsh industrial literature – a body of work neglected by literary ecocritics – from a revisionist perspective that seeks to underline that which has been previously overlooked. As Robert Kern argues, ‘ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful [...] when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere’.¹⁸ In the case of this thesis, extant critical material has assumed a definite socio-political stance with regards to locating the intellectual core of Welsh industrial literature.¹⁹ It is my aim to shift that focus and argue that as well as being valued works of social and political interest, these texts are able to contribute to contemporary discussions concerning the environment.

Welsh industrial literature is an academically constructed umbrella term for a wide range of writing about industry in Wales. From the slate mining communities of the north to the declining steel factories of the south, Welsh literature – from the nineteenth century onwards – has been shaped by extraction, manufacture and production. This thesis will

¹⁶ With the umbrella term ‘nature writing’, I am referring to a variety of different texts such as memoirs, essays and journals that explore humanity’s relationship with the non-human world. Texts such as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), as well as the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir would be examples of this.

¹⁷ Second wave ecocriticism sought to widen the field by examining texts that were not explicitly about ‘nature’, but still had much to contribute towards discussions concerning the environment. This is, of course, a simplification of the second wave, which is too diverse to define in a brief overview.

¹⁸ Robert Kern, ‘Ecocriticism – What is it good for?’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 7 (2000), pp. 9–32 (p. 11).

¹⁹ For example, David Bell’s *Ardent Propaganda: Miners’ Novels and Class Conflict: 1929–1939* (1995), examines some works of Welsh mining literature through a distinctly political lens. This is an entirely appropriate approach to texts of this nature. However, this thesis argues that Welsh mining literature has much more to contribute to contemporary intellectual debate, which is certainly not distinct from previous political discussions.

predominantly focus on the Welsh coal industry, the industry that constructed the identity of modern Wales, and transformed the previously agricultural economy to a global centre of export. Consequently, the term ‘Welsh industrial literature’ is arguably an accurate descriptor for a significant percentage of texts written in Wales after the industrial revolution. As a body of writing, its importance cannot be overstated.

This thesis will demonstrate that Welsh industrial literature – which by definition depicts an industry intimately engaged with the environment – can be viewed as a significant, creative response to a period in history that changed the earth forever. It will treat the extant literature as a vital starting point from which further conversations about the mining industry in Wales can be initiated. One of these future discussions must be about the way images of the industry are constructed. By using the extant literature to stimulate a new form of dialogue, this thesis questions the romanticisation of the Welsh coal industry, whilst also acknowledging the great debt owed to those who gave their lives to the industry.

THE LITERATURES OF WALES: SHIFTING THE FOCUS

In the chapters of this thesis, each of the selected authors will be examined individually but, in this introduction, I will survey the existing scholarship surrounding Welsh writing in a broader sense. The literary history of Wales is currently viewed as two separate traditions. As a consequence, two distinct academic fields have emerged to facilitate the study of texts written both in Welsh and in English. However, relatively few works of criticism have aimed to examine Welsh literature written in both languages. In this thesis, the four texts that define each chapter were written in English but, throughout, I refer to a range of material written in the Welsh language. Over the course of my research, I have undertaken intensive study of the Welsh language, and hope that this – albeit still limited – knowledge informs my critical analysis. This thesis, then, draws inspiration from works such as Dafydd Johnston’s concise, but illuminating, *The Literature of Wales* (1994), M. Wynn Thomas’s edited collection,

DiFfinio Dwy Lenyddiaeth Cymru (1995), and Katie Gramich's pioneering study, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (2007) – and in doing so, intends to make a further case for the combined scholarship of both literary traditions in Wales.²⁰

As I examine literature written in the two languages of Wales, this thesis builds on Welsh-language scholarship, as well as academic work focusing on Welsh writing in English. As a result, a brief introduction to both of these fields is necessary. In comparison to criticism of Welsh-language literature, research on Welsh writing in English is relatively new. Accordingly, much of the early scholarly work, by Gwyn Jones (1957), Glyn Jones (1968), Raymond Garlick (1970), and Roland Mathias (1987), adopts a broad, surveying form, building firm foundations for the critical field.²¹ Subsequent studies have been more focused, with texts by Kirsti Bohata (2004), Harri Garrod Roberts (2009), and an edited essay collection by Katie Gramich (2010), all accentuating the value of revisionist methodologies, such as post-colonialism and psychoanalysis.²² Recent publications have further expanded the field, with Damian Walford Davies's interdisciplinary study, *Cartographies of Culture: New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (2012), examining the ways in which tools borrowed from other academic disciplines can illuminate readings of Welsh writing in English.²³ These

²⁰ Dafydd Johnston, *The Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1994). Later translated into Welsh as: Dafydd Johnston, *Llenyddiaeth Cymru* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1998); M. Wynn Thomas (ed.), *DiFfinio Dwy Lenyddiaeth Cymru* [Defining, and De-Bordering, the Two Literatures of Wales] (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1995). Wynn Thomas deserves significant praise for his remarkable scholarly effort in uniting the two literatures of Wales. See also: M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999); Katie Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007).

²¹ Gwyn Jones, *The First Forty Years: Some Notes on Anglo-Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1957); Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writing and Writers* (London: Dent, 1968); Raymond Garlick, *An Introduction to Anglo-Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970); Roland Mathias, *Anglo-Welsh Literature: An Illustrated History* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1987).

²² Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004); Harri Garrod Roberts, *Embodying Identity: Representations of the Body in Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009); Katie Gramich, (ed.), *Mapping the Territory: Critical Approaches to Welsh Fiction in English* (Cardigan: Parthian Books, 2010).

²³ Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture: New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

innovative approaches have taken the field in new and intellectually stimulating directions. This thesis can strengthen the scholarly work further by reading the literatures of Wales from a timely, environmentally inflected perspective.

Despite having a longer pedigree, criticism of Welsh-language literature has only recently begun to turn its attention to modern literature. The late John Rowlands was instrumental in this shift. In addition to the many pioneering books and articles he produced, his legacy is perhaps best appreciated in the founding of the ‘Y Meddwl a’r Dychymyg Cymreig’ series on Welsh culture, in partnership with Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru.²⁴ The first text to be published under Rowlands’s general editorship was M. Wynn Thomas’s aforementioned *DiFfinio Dwy Lenyddiaeth Cymru* (1995), which features a collection of essays on the relationship between the two literatures of Wales. Later publications include Gerwyn Williams’s study of Welsh literature and the two world wars, *Tir Neb: Rhyddiaith Gymraeg a’r Rhyfel Byd Cyntaf* (1996), and *Tir Newydd: Agweddau ar Lenyddiaeth Gymraeg a’r Ail Ryfel Byd* (2005). More recently, Owen Thomas’s edited collection, *Llenyddiaeth Mewn Theori* (2006), has further extended the boundaries of Welsh-language literary scholarship, and subsequently became a scholarly journal in its own right.²⁵ Although written in English, my research complements existing Welsh-language criticism by undertaking new ecocritical readings of Welsh-language texts, alongside those written in English. As a result, my chosen methodology further expands the field of Welsh-language criticism, whilst uniting the bilingual canon of industrial writing from Wales in one study.

There have been some noteworthy studies of Welsh industrial literature, in both languages. Raymond Williams’s foundational text, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (1979), has

²⁴ English: ‘The Welsh Mind and Imagination’. English: University of Wales Press.

²⁵ Gerwyn Williams, *Tir Neb: Rhyddiaith Gymraeg a’r Rhyfel Byd Cyntaf* [No Man’s Land: Welsh Prose of the First World War] (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1996). Gerwyn Williams, *Tir Newydd: Agweddau ar Lenyddiaeth Gymraeg a’r Ail Ryfel Byd* [New Territory: Aspects of Welsh literature and the Second World War] (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2005). Owen Thomas (ed.), *Llenyddiaeth Mewn Theori* [Literature in Theory] (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2006).

been a major influence on this thesis, as it provides a thought-provoking overview of the genre and examines some of the most significant textual themes.²⁶ Based on a lecture delivered at what was then University College Cardiff, Williams argues that the Welsh industrial novel describes ‘what it is like to live in hell, and slowly, as the disorder becomes an habitual order, what it is like to get used to it, to grow up in it, to see it as home’.²⁷ Building on Williams’s text, this thesis attempts to understand the factors involved in constructing that hell, and the role environmental degradation plays in disrupting notions of place. Since *The Welsh Industrial Novel* is only twenty pages in length, it is lamentably too short, and so an extended critical study of Welsh industrial literature – in both languages – is long overdue. Hywel Teifi Edwards’s *Arwr Glew Erwau’r Glo: Delwedd y Glöwr yn Llenyddiaeth y Gymraeg, 1850–1950* (1994), offers a more comprehensive study of the Welsh-language tradition of industrial writing, and reminds the reader that the first mining narratives were not written in English. Moreover, David Bell’s *Ardent Propaganda: Miners’ Novels and Class Conflict, 1929–1939* (1995), compares some of Wales’s most iconic industrial texts with similar mining novels from England, whilst the second part of Stephen Knight’s *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (2004) further examines some of the principal motifs within Welsh industrial fiction, focusing on writers such as Rhys Davies, Jack Jones, B. L. Coombes and Gwyn Thomas.²⁸ Bell’s study is valuable in its focused exploration of social issues in relation to working-class literature, and Knight’s text is useful in its wide-ranging overview of the literary canon. However, the urgent need for an extended study of Welsh industrial literature in both languages, coupled with a necessity to examine the depiction of environmental degradation within the canonical texts, presents an opportunity for a thesis of this nature to explore further and deeper. Consequently, my study

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, [1978] 1979).

²⁷ Williams, 1979, p. 4.

²⁸ Hywel Teifi Edwards, *Arwr Glew Erwau’r Glo: Delwedd y Glöwr yn Llenyddiaeth y Gymraeg, 1850–1950* [Brave Hero of the Coal Fields: The Image of the Miner in Welsh Literature, 1850–1950] (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994). David Bell, *Ardent Propaganda: Miners’ Novels and Class Conflict, 1929–1939* (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 1995). Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004).

will aim to complement but ultimately challenge previous readings of the extant body of literature by taking a revisionist approach to the field.

There is a shortage of ecocritical work available within the academic fields of Welsh writing in English and Welsh-language literary scholarship, and the nature of the existing criticism leaves fertile ground to be explored. Linden Peach's 'The Environment in Twentieth-Century Welsh Writing in English' (1998), is a rare example, and provides a useful introduction to the ways in which writers from Wales depict the non-human world.²⁹ Peach highlights that 'some of the concepts and perspectives that have had the most profound effect on the depiction of nature in Welsh writing in English have their origins in the industrial rather than the rural writing of the period'.³⁰ Through making this important distinction, the essay lays significant groundwork for my study. However, as Peach himself admits in the article, '[a]n as of yet undeveloped, although potentially exciting, area of scholarship is the interconnection between Welsh writing in English on the environment and Welsh-language work', which this thesis intends to develop further.³¹ Moreover, Peach finishes by suggesting further unexplored areas in the field, such as 'the concepts of nature that have emerged between the conventional urban/rural and technology/nature dichotomies', and these are both oppositions that I will examine in more depth in the following chapters.³² In the Welsh language, Dylan Foster Evans's 'Cyngor y Bиден': Ecoleg a Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg' (2006), explores some ecocritical implications for Welsh literature, focusing on poetry by the fourteenth-century bard, Dafydd ap Gwilym, and thus allowing space for further, more contemporary analyses, such as this thesis.³³ Matthew Jarvis's ground-breaking text, *Welsh Environments in Contemporary*

²⁹ Linden Peach, 'The Environment in Twentieth-Century Welsh Writing in English', in *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*, ed. Patrick D. Murphy, Terry Gifford and Katsunori Yamazato (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp. 191–9.

³⁰ Peach, 1998, p. 191.

³¹ Ibid, p. 196.

³² Ibid, p. 197.

³³ Dylan Foster Evans, 'Cyngor y Bиден': Ecoleg a Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg' ['The Magpie's Counsel': Ecology and Welsh Literature], *Llenyddiaeth Mewn Theori* [Literature in Theory], 1 (2006), pp. 41–79.

Poetry (2008), merits an extended comment due to its status as the first book-length, environmentally focused appraisal of the treatment of landscape by a selection of contemporary Welsh poets.³⁴ In the study, Jarvis reads the poetry of Welsh writers such as Gillian Clarke, Ruth Bidgood, Robert Minhinnick, Mike Jenkins, Christine Evans, and Ian Davidson in the light of past and contemporary theoretical interventions pertaining to both the environmental humanities, and literary geography. Extending his critical attention beyond typical ‘nature poetry’ – and engaging with the terminology of noted ecocritic, Lawrence Buell – Jarvis considers the ‘various sense of environment as “natural” and environment as “human-built” but also of environment which blurs this distinction’.³⁵ My project builds on this approach, by examining specifically the intersection between ‘natural’ and ‘human-built’ spaces, as a result of industrialisation. Overall, Jarvis is both innovative in his literary criticism and meticulous in his research, and the resultant book has provided much inspiration for this thesis, and my academic research in general. My thesis complements this timely study of contemporary Welsh poetry by examining past works of literature – including novels and autobiography – that have served as inspiration to many of the writers discussed in Jarvis’s book.

In addition to Jarvis’s text, two recent studies merit attention. Firstly, in the Welsh language, Heather Williams’s journal article, ‘Ecofeirniadaeth i’r Celtiaid’ (2008), re-examines Celtic literature in the light of ecocritical trends, providing the opportunity for additional work on modern Welsh literature.³⁶ Secondly, Sarah Morse’s PhD thesis, ‘The Black Pastures: The significance of landscape in the work of Gwyn Thomas and Ron Berry’ (2010), is an exploration of landscape in the work of two industrial writers, a noteworthy example of literary geography.³⁷ Whilst assuming a similar approach, my thesis aims to occupy a space

³⁴ Matthew Jarvis, *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

³⁵ Jarvis, 2008, p. 14.

³⁶ Heather Williams, ‘Ecofeirniadaeth i’r Celtiaid’ [Ecocriticism for the Celts], *Llenyddiaeth Mewn Theori* [Literature in Theory], 3 (2008), pp. 1–28.

³⁷ Sarah Morse, ‘The Black Pastures: The significance of landscape in the work of Gwyn Thomas and Ron Berry’, PhD Thesis, Swansea University, 2010.

between Williams and Morse's studies, with the tumultuous decade of the 1930s being the point of focus, and the nature of my work sitting between survey and writer-study.

Beyond Wales, there have been notable ecocritical examinations of literature from other Celtic nations.³⁸ Louisa Gairn's *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (2008) emphasises the importance of ecological thought in the work of a selection of Scottish literary figures. Examining both canonical and less recognised writers, Gairn presents a fresh re-examination of the nation's literary heritage in light of the environmental turn.³⁹ Similarly, Eóin Flannery's *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice* (2015) brings together a broad selection of recent ecocritical trends – such as environmental degradation and environmental justice – to construct a mode of analysis that offers vital new readings of Irish literature.⁴⁰ Drawing on Gairn's attempt to move beyond the established national literary canon, and Flannery's incorporation of distinct ecocritical trends, this thesis aims to do for modern Welsh literature what both scholars have done for Scottish and Irish; situating Wales firmly within the field of contemporary ecocritical debate.

Aside from academic scholarship, it would appear that recent artistic responses to mining – and Welsh industry in general – illustrate that there is a creative need, and public appetite, to explore the nation's past and present. *Energy+Notion* (2016), a project by the Welsh photographer Richard Jones, documents the shadows of the coal industry in the south Wales valleys, whilst also looking to future energy resources such as wind farms and solar energy. *Coal* (2016), by the English choreographer, Gary Clarke, viscerally explores the physicality of mining through interpretive dance, casting members of the local community for each regionally based performance. *Every Valley* (2017) by the London-based art rock band,

³⁸ Although I use the term 'Celtic' to refer to nations in which Celtic languages are spoken, it is worth noting that these studies focus on English-language literature.

³⁹ Louisa Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2008).

⁴⁰ Eóin Flannery, *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice* (London: Routledge, 2015).

Public Service Broadcasting, aims to tell the story of coal mining in Wales through music, drawing on poetry by Idris Davies and vocal performances from James Dean Bradfield of the Manic Street Preachers. *Holli* ([Splitting], 2017) by the Welsh-language playwright, Manon Wyn Williams, examines how the arrival of a nuclear power plant on Ynys Môn profoundly affects the surrounding community, through the use of interviews with members of the local villages. *We're Still Here* (2017), a play by the Welsh writer Rachel Trezise, documents the struggle of the community surrounding Port Talbot's TATA Steel plant, during threats of closure. Derrek Price's photojournalistic exploration of post-industrial regions, *Coal Cultures: Picturing Mining Landscapes and Communities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), contains a strong focus on Wales, and deftly coins a new term (Coal Cultures) with which to analyse the cultural production of former mining communities. Most recently, Pontypridd poet Steven Hitchens has explored south Wales's industrial heritage through tracing the path of abandoned canals in 'The Canalchemy Project', and its textual accompaniment, *The Lager Kilns* (2019). Walking stretches of the Glamorganshire Canal – once the vast supply channel for coal to Cardiff docks – Hitchens and other artists responded to the decaying images of Wales's industrial past, and highlighted the vast potential for creative interpretations of post-industrial places.⁴¹

This small selection of recent creative productions indicates that although coal mining occupies a place in Wales's past, the presence of industry continues to dominate a significant portion of the nation's present. Perhaps given the passing of time and the turbulence of the present, now is the right moment to look back. As a result, this thesis seeks to engage with these conversations and artistic reimaginings in order to contribute new arguments to an already energetic debate.

⁴¹ See Steven Hitchens's Literary Pocket Blog, <<https://literarypocketblog.wordpress.com/books/>>, with further information at the Glasfryn Project: <<https://glasfrynproject.org.uk/w/5573/canalchemy-the-lager-kilns/>>, and Datableed Zine: <<https://www.datableedzine.com/steven-hitchins>> [Accessed 1st April 2020].

MOVING BEYOND WALES: A FURTHER DEPARTURE

This thesis is not the first study of coal mining and literature. William B. Thesing's *Caverns of Night: Coal Mines in Art, Literature, and Film* (2000) provides a collection of essays on European and American representations of the industry in various art forms, but Wales is noticeably absent.⁴² Katy Shaw's *Mining the Meaning: Cultural Representations of the 1984–5 UK Miners' Strike* (2012), surveys a wide selection of artistic reactions to a defining historical moment, although, again, more attention is given to England.⁴³ King's College London has a centre for the study of mining and literature, with academics including Adelene Buckland and Janet Floyd undertaking research on the subject. Specifically, Floyd's recent study, *Claims and Speculations: Mining and Writing in the Gilded Age* (2012), examines the representations of the industry in literary texts from England, Canada, South Africa and Australia, in an attempt to trace the emergence of global literature with one industry in common.⁴⁴

In addition to work centred on literary representations of extractive industries, wider scholarship on working-class writing has included many texts that represent the communities in which mining plays a defining role. In that regard, H. Gustav Klaus's Marxist work – including significant publications such as: *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition* (1982); *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (1985); *The Rise of Socialist Fiction 1880-1914* (1987), and *British Industrial Fiction* (2000), jointly edited with Stephen Knight – contains much analysis of texts depicting colliery communities, although this is largely from a political perspective.⁴⁵ Perhaps more

⁴² William B. Thesing, (ed.), *Caverns of Night: Coal Mines in Art, Literature, and Film* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2000).

⁴³ Katy Shaw, *Mining the Meaning: Cultural Representations of the 1984–5 UK Miners' Strike* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2012).

⁴⁴ Janet Floyd, *Claims and Speculations: Mining and Writing in the Gilded Age* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012). This is not to say that there exists a blanket similarity between global mining industries. On the contrary, this thesis argues that Wales's experience is largely unique in the way that coal mining dominated the nation.

⁴⁵ H. Gustav Klaus, *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition* (Brighton: Harvester Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton: Harvester Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), H. Gustav Klaus, *The*

directly relevant is Gustav Klaus's more recent publication, *Ecology and the Literature of the British Left: The Red and the Green* (2012), co-edited with John Rignall and Valentine Cunningham.⁴⁶ The text provides an overdue assessment of the intersection between ecocriticism and socialist writing although, notwithstanding some references to the work of Raymond Williams, Welsh writing is absent. Despite Gustav Klaus's valuable work in the field, it is unfortunately too often the case that the literatures of Wales are marginalised or excluded from anthologies of 'British' writing. Considering the fact that coal mining played such a key role in the industrialisation of Wales – and is such a recurrent theme in Welsh writing – it is unfortunate to find that the nation and its literature remains largely absent in many studies that aspire to reflect the culture of 'Britain'.

This thesis aims to continue the valuable scholarly work on the connection between industry and society, whilst also leading the field towards new locations, approaches and literary texts. Through concentrating solely on the neglected literatures of Wales and undertaking a unique – and focused – ecocritical reading of 1930s literature, this project departs from previous work by moving beyond a process of documentation, and towards a form of interrogation. In this regard, I am less concerned with using the texts to retell the historical narrative, and more concerned with viewing the texts as a means by which this historical narrative can be challenged and, ultimately, disrupted.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: AN ELEMENTAL APPROACH

Rise of Socialist Fiction 1880-1914 (Brighton: Harvester Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight, eds., *British Industrial Fictions* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000). H. Gustav Klaus has a new book, *Voices of Anger and Hope: Studies in the Literature of Labour and Socialism* (Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers Co. Ltd. 2019), which examines the relationship between literature and left-wing politics, and focuses on a range of writers from Britain, including Idris Davies.

⁴⁶ John Rignall and H. Gustav Klaus, in association with Valentine Cunningham, *Ecology and the Literature of the British Left: The Red and the Green* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Building on Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism's 'earth-centred' approach to literary analysis, the structure of this thesis has been shaped by the Classical elements.⁴⁷ As Lukas Thommen reminds us in *An Environmental History of Ancient Greece and Rome*, '[...] the Greeks [...] developed natural science and philosophy, which sought rational explanations for natural phenomena. They developed the doctrine of the four elements: earth, air, fire and water, of which, they believed, the entire earth consisted.'⁴⁸ However, other cultures have taken a slightly different view, such as in Chinese thought, where the five phases (Wuxing) – often equated to the Western notion of elements – consist of: water, fire, wood, metal and earth.⁴⁹ It is also worth noting that the Anglo-Welsh poet – and nature writer – Edward Thomas, considered wood as the fifth element.⁵⁰ This might have been because wood is the means by which the four Classical elements can be joined. Wood can be destroyed by fire, and fire can be sustained using wood. Wood grows from the earth, and then can return to earth after its life cycle through decomposition. As trees, wood produces oxygen and requires oxygen to grow, whilst also absorbing carbon dioxide from the air. Finally, as trees, wood absorbs water through roots, and can be extinguished with water when on fire. For the purpose of this thesis, I will combine both Eastern and Western doctrines – with an additional nod to Edward Thomas – to form a holistic structure that encompasses fire, water, wood, air and earth.

This elemental approach will provide a focus for the specific environmental issues that act as overarching themes for a brief prologue section, followed by four chapters. Each chapter will be centred on one text, published in the 1930s and concerning Welsh coal mining and the industrialisation of Wales. I will examine both Welsh writers and writers who have adopted Wales as their home, as well as writers with a more tenuous connection to the nation. The thesis

⁴⁷ Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii.

⁴⁸ Lukas Thommen, *An Environmental History of Ancient Greece and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 56.

⁴⁹ Helaine Selin (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2008), p. 332.

⁵⁰ Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. ix.

will move in a linear trajectory, with the preliminary section considering some of the first accounts of industrial Wales, and the following four chapters dealing with texts in order of publication. This will be an attempt to offer a chronological assessment of the industrialisation of Wales, as depicted in the pages of well-known literary texts. As well as analysing my chosen texts from the 1930s, in each chapter I will also draw on works prior to and preceding this tumultuous decade, examining literature in both Welsh and English. Although every chapter takes one text as its foundation, each section is firmly supported by the struts of other works, which together provide a sense of structure to the overall thesis.

Following this introduction, the prologue section of this thesis will begin with smoke and fire as symbols for the initial chaos with which Wales became an industrialised nation. Over the course of the following pages, I will examine a selection of nineteenth-century travel writing, which documents the impact of the industrial revolution in the south of the country. These accounts – written mostly by tourists – are principally focused on Merthyr Tydfil, the starting point of industrialisation in Wales. Although the majority of my thesis will focus on literary representations of coal mining, this introduction examines texts that depict the iron industry. Consequently, I hope to show how any complete consideration of the former requires an appreciation of the latter. The iron industry gave birth to coal mining, before collieries replaced ironworks as the largest employers in the country, shaping the story of Wales forever. Through examining some of the earliest representations of the changing nation, I will consider how literature portrayed the ways in which industrialisation wrought wholesale changes on the Welsh landscape.

In the first chapter, my analysis remains in Merthyr Tydfil, beginning in the mid-point of the 1930s with Jack Jones's novel, *Black Parade* (1935). Here, I shift the focus from fire to water, and examine the way river pollution is represented in the text. The contaminated Morlais Brook runs throughout Jones's novel, haunting characters and creating a general atmosphere

of industrial decline. In the first part of the chapter, I use Lawrence Buell's notion of 'Toxic Discourse' to reimagine – and emphasise – the significance of waterborne contamination, as a result of overpopulation within industrial settlements.⁵¹ Often, the overwhelming prevalence of toxicity in literature can render depictions of pollution imperceptible. However, through a shift of focus that seeks to highlight these peculiar instances of contamination, industrial writing – such as Jones's novel – can be reclaimed as works of what Buell describes as 'Toxic Discourse'. In the second part, I take a cue from the novelist's well-documented political career and argue that Jones's depiction of ecological decline – in which river pollution plays a leading role – can be understood from an eco-political perspective. Drawing parallels with socialist writers from the United States of America, such as John Steinbeck, I aim to situate *Black Parade* in the tradition of an environmental justice narrative.

In the second chapter, I move away from fiction, and examine Idris Davies's extended poem, *Gwalia Deserta* (1938). I begin by undertaking an extensive survey of the place of trees within the literatures of Wales. Tracing the symbol from early texts in the Welsh language to contemporary literary depictions, I aim to understand the place of trees in the literary history of Wales and determine whether the literatures inspired by the industrialisation of Wales mark a change in the way the natural world was presented. Like the previous chapters, this bipartite essay is structured in terms of before and after, specifically with regards to the process of deforestation. The first section argues that – in line with the literary history of Wales – Davies's association of the human with the tree draws parallels with the destruction of the Welsh people as a result of industrialisation. Using the concept of anthropomorphism, highlighted as a theoretical approach to literature by critics such as Timothy Clark, this first section aims to challenge the traditional assertions of humanity's dominance over nature, by reimagining

⁵¹ Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U. S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 31.

Gwalia Deserta as a work in which the suffering of the non-human is central.⁵² Following on from this, the second section of the chapter asks what a nation becomes when it loses its trees. This approach builds on work by Gabrielle McIntire, who reads T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from an environmental perspective.⁵³ Focusing on this potent image of a wasted – treeless – land, I examine the parallels between deforestation and industrialisation, imagining dereliction both from a physical and metaphorical perspective.

In Chapter Three, I turn to B. L. Coombes's text, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* (1939). By focusing on the dust-polluted air of the industrial 1930s, I make parallels with contemporary notions of air pollution in Wales. Structurally, this chapter is divided into two sections, with the first focusing on respiratory diseases and the miner's body. Accompanying coal miners underground, I demonstrate that Coombes's visceral depiction of the process of coal mining can be read alongside what Stacy Alaimo terms the 'transcorporeal' nature of mineral extraction, with its mutual damage to human and earth. In the second part, I return aboveground, focusing on the way localised dust pollution is depicted within the mining community.⁵⁴ In this section, I use John Parham's notion of 'Human Ecocriticism', among others, to emphasise the ways in which humanity is both the perpetrator and victim of environmental degradation.⁵⁵

In the fourth and final chapter, I examine perhaps the most widely read account of the Welsh industrial experience, Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* (1939). Despite the sinister elements of this text, no other literary depiction of a colliery community in Wales has been as influential in shaping the cultural perception of the nation. Building on work by

⁵² Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 192.

⁵³ Gabrielle McIntire, 'The Waste Land as Ecocritique', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*, ed. by Gabrielle McIntire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 178–93 (p. 178).

⁵⁴ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 2.

⁵⁵ John Parham, 'For you, Pollution'. *The Victorian Novel and Human Ecology: Benjamin Disraeli's Sibyl and Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton*, *Green Letters*, 14:1 (2011), pp. 23–38, (p. 26).

critics such as Derrick Price (1986), John Harris (1989), and Stephen Knight (2004), who have highlighted the environmental significance of the text, I argue that Llewellyn's depiction of the spoil tip can be viewed in terms of a corruptive influence on the land, both in literal and metaphorical terms.⁵⁶ In the first part, I consider how Llewellyn establishes a dichotomy between the industrial settlement and the pastoral idyll. This contrast is then illustrated by the tension between the mountain and the spoil tip, with the latter eventually usurping the former as the ubiquitous topography of the Welsh industrial heartlands. In the second part of the chapter, I shift the focus from the literal to the metaphorical, and begin by establishing how Llewellyn, in addition to responding to romantic narratives in his construction of Welsh landscape, also continues an established cultural notion that sought to render Wales as a sacrosanct land. For Llewellyn, the desecration of sacred space – exemplified by the spoil tip – is a clear abuse of the natural order and throughout the novel described in terms of sin and depravity. This is then developed through the use of serpentine imagery to represent the corrupting spread of the spoil tip, which towards the end of the text, assumes a more demonic threat. This chapter ultimately aims to connect the proto-environmentalism of the text with the unapologetic fascism that has been identified in extant scholarship.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I connect historical and contemporary representations of environmental decline by considering the future of the climate crisis in Wales, and beyond. Here, I reflect on the ways in which my chosen texts have shaped cultural representations of the environment, whilst also pointing out their continued validity for those who wish to engage with contemporary environmental issues. I furthermore consider how my teaching of these

⁵⁶ Derrick Price, 'How Green Was My Valley: A Romance of Wales', in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. by Jean Radford (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 73–94 (p. 86); John Harris, 'Not Only a Place in Wales: John Harris on *How Green Was My Valley* as Bestseller', *Planet*, 73 (1989), pp. 10–15 (p. 2); Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 114.

texts in secondary schools in south Wales has contributed to my own understanding of the value of ecocriticism, and the contemporary value of literature itself.

A PROLOGUE TO WELSH INDUSTRIAL WRITING

‘At night they glow red with fire’: Tracing the environmental impact of industrialisation in travel accounts of Merthyr Tydfil, 1848–1881⁵⁷

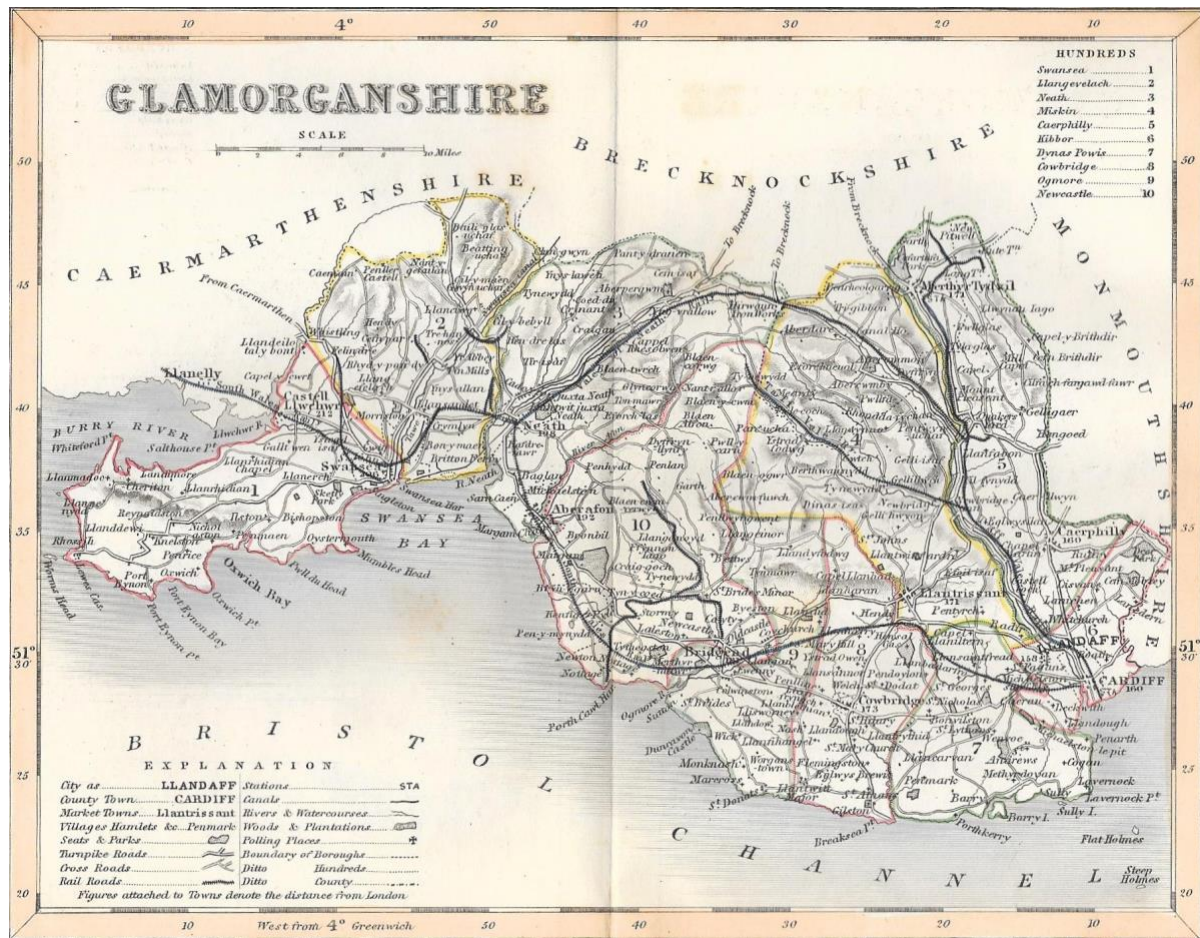


Figure 2. A map of Glamorganshire, c. 1845.⁵⁸

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Merthyr Tydfil commenced its transformation from a small, rural community of sheep farmers to a burgeoning centre of iron production. Although iron smelting had occurred earlier in the century, it was – as Philip Jenkins explains – ‘between 1759 and 1765’, when ‘a number of famous names appeared in the iron industry (Dowlais, Plymouth, Tredegar, Cyfarthfa)’, that Merthyr’s industrialisation truly began.⁵⁹ However, the

⁵⁷ Wirt Sikes, *Rambles and Studies in Old South Wales* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1881), p. 58.

⁵⁸ Image courtesy of Reginald Beer, Frontispiece Ltd. Merthyr Tydfil is visible in the top-right corner, and the port city of Cardiff sits at the bottom right. This map of Glamorganshire (Welsh: *Sir Forgannwg*) also details the growing canal and rail networks of nineteenth-century south Wales.

⁵⁹ Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales: 1536–1990* (London: Longman, 1991), p. 217.

early nineteenth century is the period in which the town underwent what can only be described as a revolution. As Jenkins again explains:

Between 1750 and 1796, the number of iron furnaces in south Wales rose from nine to 26. By 1830, there were 113 furnaces; by 1848, there were almost 200 furnaces producing 631,000 tons. The figure of a million tons was approached in the 1850s.⁶⁰

At first, Merthyr's ironworks attracted a workforce from across Wales. Consequently, rural communities in the north and west of the country were depopulated as labour relocated to frontiers of opportunity. However, as both Merthyr and Wales's industrial project expanded, the domestic populace failed to satisfy demand, and migrant workers from England and Ireland arrived to drive production onward. By 1851, Merthyr Tydfil was 'the largest urban settlement in Wales, with a total of 46,738 inhabitants'.⁶¹ However, by the 1860s, 'there had been troubling changes in the industry', and Merthyr's iron production began to decrease, creating additional difficulties for the ever-increasing population.⁶²

The upsurge in industrial activity demanded a new transport infrastructure to aid production. Roads, canals and railways were built to convey raw materials from upland communities such as Merthyr Tydfil down to the ports of Cardiff and Barry, and onwards to centres of production and consumption across the Atlantic Archipelago.⁶³ As a result of this increase in connectivity, a new tourist industry flourished, and the nation's attractive landscape became another commodity to exploit. As tourism grew, a surge in demand for guidebooks and instructive pamphlets on Wales created a new arm of the publishing industry. Many of the

⁶⁰ Jenkins, 1991, p. 220.

⁶¹ Chris Williams, "The Modern Age, c. 1850–1945." In *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, edited by Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 355–64 (p. 357).

⁶² Jenkins, 1991, p. 222

⁶³ I use John Pocock's alternative term for the British Isles here as an acknowledgement of the negative associations present with the territory's name. See: John Pocock, 'A plea for a new subject,' *The Journal of Modern History*, 47 (4) (1975): 601–21. For a comprehensive discussion of the term "archipelago" in relation to Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England, see John Kerrigan's seminal text, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603-1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For more contemporary contributions to the topic, see John Brannigan's introduction to his *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890–1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 1–20, and also Marie-Louise Coolahan's article, 'Wither the archipelago? Stops, starts, and hurdles on the four nations front', *Literature Compass*, (2018), 15: 1–12.

writers were English tourists but, as Mary-Ann Constantine and Nigel Leask explain, the Welsh writer, Thomas Pennant ‘inspired hundreds of subsequent travellers’ with his ‘pioneering and widely read *Tours in Scotland and Wales*’ in the late eighteenth century.⁶⁴ Initially, travel accounts documented Wales in all its rural splendour, but as Merthyr’s iron production increased in the early nineteenth century, writers turned their attention to the nation’s industrial communities, and the plethora of accounts published on these areas suggests that the material was very popular. This prologue focuses on a selection of writings about Merthyr Tydfil published in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, much of which can be found in Cardiff University’s Special Collections and Archives.

As Elizabeth Edwards remarks in her article on Romantic-period travel writing in Wales, although the form found a substantial readership in the nineteenth century, the ‘popularity in the period is now little recognized’.⁶⁵ Edwards’s article focuses specifically on travel writing that draws attention to Wales’s unique geology, examining scientific writers such as Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday. Building on Edwards’s research, this prologue approaches nineteenth-century travel writing from an ecocritical perspective. This way of reading allows for additional insights, in which the ecological disaster of Welsh industrialisation can be incorporated within a wider narrative of environmental transformation. Concentrating specifically on depictions of Merthyr Tydfil by T. E. Clarke (1848), Edwin F. Roberts (1853), George Borrow (1862), and Wirt Sikes (1881), I aim to shed further light on an overlooked form of nineteenth-century literature, in which the town’s iron industry prompted a shift in literary production and writers began to turn their attention towards a new form of landscape, altered by humanity. In order to offer a wide-ranging account of the industry, I have selected some texts that depict Merthyr’s iron industry at its peak – and in the

⁶⁴ Mary-Ann Constantine and Nigel Leask, *Enlightenment Travel and British Identities: Thomas Pennant’s *Tours in Scotland and Wales** (London: Anthem Press, 2017), p. 2.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Edwards, ‘A Kind of Geological Novel’: Wales and Travel Writing, 1783–1819’, *Romanticism*, Volume 24, Issue 2, 2018, pp. 134–47 (p. 135).

case of post-1860 texts – some that witness the beginning of its decline.

Kirsti Bohata and Alexandra Jones have identified tropes in Welsh women's industrial fiction from 1880 to 1910 – such as 'industrial accident, injury, death and disability [...] that would become central to later industrial fiction'.⁶⁶ Although working with a different period, this prologue argues that a trope-based analysis is a constructive way of examining depictions of industry in nineteenth-century travel writing. Throughout the texts surveyed, fire and smoke are two features of Merthyr's ironworks, which through frequency of use become tropes for the chaos of the industry itself. Tracing the emphasis on these tropes throughout a range of extracts, I will examine the abovementioned shift in literary production from three perspectives: the natural, the emotional, and the cultural. First, writers are conscious of the extent to which the natural – specifically non-human – world has been compromised by industry, creating a new topography that exhibits the mark of humanity in manifold ways. Second, there is an acknowledgement of how this perceptual shift triggers an emotional response in the writer, and their ensuing disorientation by the chaos of industry is evident. Third, the writer attempts to make sense of this new reality and returns to familiar cultural imagery from Classical and Biblical sources, in order to render the unreal in recognisable terms. However, I begin with the town of Merthyr itself, and how it became such an important part of Wales's industrial identity.

⁶⁶ Kirsti Bohata and Alexandra Jones, "Welsh Women's Industrial Fiction from 1880 to 1910." *Women's Writing*, 24, 4 (2017), 499–516 (p. 499).

‘THE GREATEST IRON AND COAL MINING TOWN IN ALL BRITAIN’:
THE PULL OF MERTHYR⁶⁷

In addition to widespread pollution, industrialisation brought transport infrastructure to large parts of south Wales. Initially, canal networks were built to transport raw materials down from the isolated valleys to the larger port cities, situated on the Severn Estuary and Bristol Channel. However, as demand for iron and coal increased, rail became the preferred mode of logistics. The movement of commodities simultaneously provided an opportunity for people to travel further, and as W. E. Minchinton explains, Wales soon became linked with England:

Brunel built the South Wales Railway from Chepstow to Swansea in 1850 and, two years later, by the construction of Chepstow bridge, linked it with the Great Western Railway and thus provided direct rail communication between south Wales, the Midlands and London.⁶⁸

In 1853, the line was extended upwards to Merthyr, and so the industrial heartlands of south Wales became part of a larger transport network that brought the nation closer to England, and its literary tourists. Although accounts of Merthyr differ slightly, the majority of travel writing in Wales was written by English visitors, and took a specific form.

As Elizabeth Edwards notes: ‘comparatively few visitors to Wales left accounts that cover the whole of the country: trips to either the north or south, or along the Wye Valley are more common’.⁶⁹ Of those that chose to visit the south, many accounts exist of the industrial towns and villages of Glamorganshire, and within these, Merthyr Tydfil features repeatedly. However, with the beauty of the Wye Valley and the Brecon Beacons nearby, what was it that attracted Victorian tourists to the fire and frenzy of Merthyr?

Perched within dramatic surroundings at the top of the Taff valley, and home to a community that attracted workers from a range of countries, Merthyr was a striking, vibrant spectacle to any visitor. The town had already gained recognition due to its four ironworks,

⁶⁷ Sikes, 1881, p. 45.

⁶⁸ W. E. Minchinton, *Industrial South Wales 1750-1914: Essays in Welsh Economic History* (London: Routledge, 2006 [1969]), p. xix.

⁶⁹ Edwards, 2018, p. 143.

with much of the new infrastructure projects throughout the British Empire being built using Merthyr's iron. Indeed, testimonies of the town's importance bolster the introductions of many nineteenth-century travel accounts. In 1848, T. E. Clarke published a travel companion to Merthyr, with the following descriptive title: *A Guide to Merthyr-Tydfil: And the Traveller's Companion, in Visiting the Iron Works, and the Various Interesting Localities of the Surrounding Neighbourhood, Containing a Concise History of the Rise and Progress of Merthyr-Tydfil, with Brief Notices of Glamorgan and Antiquities*. I quote this title in full to highlight how – in the absence of glossy images and critical endorsements – nineteenth-century travel writers had to sell the merits of their books in the title. As is evident, the famous ironworks appear early in this extended sales pitch, and the trajectory of the presentation is one of progress, which was crucial to the ideology of industrialisation. As one of the earlier accounts of the industrial boomtown, Clarke's text might be viewed as a catalyst for subsequent literary documentation of Merthyr. In the introduction to his book, the author provides a brief summary of the town, highlighting its importance and distinctiveness both from a national and international perspective:

About 90 years ago, Merthyr was a small village inhabited by shepherds and farmers. Mr Evans, speaking of this spot, says "it was naturally retired, and calculated to aid reflection; but to silence and quiet have succeeded the rude bustle of manufactories, the noise and tumult of business." But "perseverance," which is the motto of one of the great iron-masters, has enlarged this once small village to a place of vast and increasing importance. The celebrated geologist, De la Beche, cites the growth of Merthyr-Tydfil as "more rapid than that of any town in the United States".⁷⁰

This final point is worth emphasising, in order to understand the unique nature of Merthyr and its appeal for tourists. In the 1840s, there were many industrial towns and cities throughout the Atlantic Archipelago. However, there were few that had experienced the speed of growth to which Merthyr had been subjected. As a result, the town clearly radiated a distinctive sense of

⁷⁰ T. E. Clarke, *A Guide to Merthyr-Tydfil: And the Traveller's Companion, in Visiting the Iron Works, and the Various Interesting Localities of the Surrounding Neighbourhood, Containing a Concise History of the Rise and Progress of Merthyr-Tydfil, with Brief Notices of Glamorgan and Antiquities* (Merthyr Tydfil: H. W. White, 1848), p. 15.

chaos that would have disturbed locals, but excited tourists. Perhaps it was T. E. Clarke's guide to the town that encouraged the famous English writer George Borrow to visit Merthyr during his pedestrian tour of Wales in 1854. Borrow's Welsh walk would later be published as *Wild Wales* (1862), a text which shaped perceptions of the country for generations. As Borrow arrives at Merthyr, he provides a brief topographical introduction to the town, before declaring its reputation in no uncertain terms:

Merthyr Tydvil [sic] is situated in a broad valley through which roll the waters of the Taf. It was till late an inconsiderable village, but is at present the greatest mining place in Britain, and may be called with much propriety the capital of the iron and coal.⁷¹

The rapidity with which Merthyr has been transformed is clear in Borrow's writing, and the town's status as an industrial hub highlights its importance within a larger context. Wirt Sikes, an American journalist, writer, and US Consul in a rapidly globalising Cardiff, wrote extensively of his pedestrian excursions throughout Glamorganshire. In his account of south Wales published in 1881, he dedicates a large section to Merthyr, in which he echoes Borrow's sentiments:

The greatest iron and coal mining town in all Britain is a wondrous quaint and interesting spot, in itself, besides being the *raison-d'être* of Cardiff. Were it not for Merthyr Tydfil, dusty and begrimed as it is, small use would there have been for building Cardiff docks.⁷²

Note that Sikes acknowledges the scale of Merthyr's pollution as a slight detriment to the town's greatness. However, despite its filth and furnaces, the American is fascinated by the place, as well as the close connection between Merthyr and Cardiff, which would not become the capital of Wales until 1955.

The lure of Merthyr Tydfil was difficult to resist. Although it was dirty, dangerous and in many places deprived, the town awoke something in its visitors and provided a sensory experience that lived long in the memory. Wales in the mid-to-late nineteenth century provided

⁷¹ George Borrow, *Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery* (Ellesmere, Shropshire: Gallery Books, 1988 [1862]), p. 688.

⁷² Sikes, 1881, p. 45.

the Romantic tourist with an opportunity to sample all aspects of the Sublime. Natural beauty could be found within the lush valleys along the river Wye, and terrible ecstasy was in plentiful supply among the fiery ironworks of Merthyr. However, these flames extended beyond the ironworks, and came to characterise the town and its surrounding topography.

‘AN IMMENSE GLOWING MASS’:
SMOKE AND FIRE AS TROPES OF INDUSTRIAL MERTHYR⁷³



Figure 3. *Dowlais Ironworks* by George Childs (1840).⁷⁴

In Fiona Stafford’s article on J. M. W. Turner’s ‘Solway Moss’ (1816), the critic highlights a potential allegorical interpretation of the painting as depicting ‘the traditional rural economy, in retreat from the dark clouds of industrialization’.⁷⁵ However, this description might be more

⁷³ Borrow, 1862, pp. 689–70.

⁷⁴ Image courtesy of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales.

⁷⁵ Fiona Stafford, ‘The Roar of the Solway’ in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, edited by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp. 41–60 (p. 47).

suitable for George Childs's famous depiction of Dowlais, with the murky clouds above the ironworks declaring the displacement of an earlier rural economy by the iron industry. In Childs's piece, environmental degradation is the focal point in a new form of landscape painting. From the top of the image, the colossal chimney stacks bring a darkness to the sky, obscuring the sun and disturbing diurnal rhythms. Daniel Finch-Race has produced valuable work on the depiction of smokestacks in French Impressionist paintings, including Camille Pissaro's *Bords de l'Oise à Pontoise* (1867), Claude Monet's *Le Ruisseau de Robec, à Rouen* (1872), and George Seurat's *Une baignade, Asnieres* (1884).⁷⁶ Finch-Race's work foregrounds the subtle presence of industry in familiar works of art, highlighting the extent to which contemporary viewers are desensitised to pollution. Childs's rendering of Dowlais stands as a significant precursor to these Impressionist works, and emphasises how the scale of Merthyr's industrial expansion ensured that pollution remained central in artistic depictions.

In the middle section of Childs's painting, the horizon is concealed by more flaming funnels, obscuring the surrounding hills and severing the connection between people and rural space. In the foreground, Childs anticipates Wales's industrial future in his depiction of a coal wagon set on rails. Black spoil tips and other colliery waste litter the middle and right of the picture, where three labourers work. Significantly, a woman is part of the group, which reminds the viewer that unlike the male-dominated workforce of twentieth-century Welsh collieries, women played an equal role in nineteenth-century Merthyr. This point is further expanded by Anne Kelly Knowles in her analysis of the painting:

Two men in the foreground, probably furnace fillers, strain to lift chunks of ore or coal that they will load in a tram car and dump down a chute at the top of a furnace stack. The woman standing with them could have been a filler as well, for the 1851 manuscript census recorded a few women in that occupation.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Daniel Finch-Race's conference paper, entitled 'Sensing the nature of northern French smokestacks from the 1860s to the 1880s', is available online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMB6TqZyiX4>> [Accessed 31st March 2021].

⁷⁷ Anne Kelly Knowles, *Mastering Iron: The Struggle to Modernize an American Industry, 1800-1868* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 74.

Like the texts examined in this prologue, Childs's painting can be included as part of a shift in cultural interpretations of Wales. In addition to depictions of rural scenery, writers and artists began to represent the new landscape of industry, in which environmental transformation is a dominant feature. In the case of Merthyr's iron industry, smoke and fire were obvious markers on which artists and writers could focus their attention. In the remainder of this prologue, I will examine how these two features of the town's industrial identity are represented in the extant writing.

I. THE NATURAL

'Studded with beautiful flames': The burning hills of industrial Merthyr⁷⁸

In nineteenth-century descriptions of Merthyr Tydfil, travellers frequently comment on the town's distinctive topography amid sizeable hills. However, as iron production increased, Merthyr's landscape was modified by the necessity to store industrial waste. At the beginning of Clarke's account, the mountains that surround Merthyr are juxtaposed with a new type of elevation:

Merthyr-Tydfil is situated in the uppermost part of Glamorgan, and lies between rough bleak mountains, beside heaps of cinders which rise to an immense height. These heaps have been formed by the accumulation of refuse matter thrown out from the mines and furnaces. Railway embankments, compared with these tips or heaps, are mere pigmies; the great heat of the cinders causes them to smoulder for many years. In the evening they may be seen studded with beautiful flames of various hues, caused by the burning of the sulphur which is emitted from the minerals.⁷⁹

This description of Merthyr highlights the degree to which the industrial process is beginning to create new forms of terrain, as waste from the town's ironworks rises to meet the surrounding mountains. This juxtaposition of natural and industrial space suggests that, if capitalist

⁷⁸ Clarke, 1848, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

expansion continues, the former could be consumed by the latter. Significantly, Clarke's account stands in contrast to later, twentieth-century depictions of industrial Wales, which present the nearby rural topography in stark contrast to the dirty, industrial town. Instead, in this earlier account, Clarke sees bleakness in both, as if the pollution of extractive development has dulled the appeal of the surrounding hills. However, when darkness falls, Merthyr's refuse heaps come to life, as the chemical modification of industry creates an internal glow. Compared to the dull hills that surround the town, these mutant mounds exist in a space between the natural and the industrial.

Writing some years later, Borrow also comments on the startling appearance of Merthyr's glowing heaps that define the town's appearance. As the traveller approaches Merthyr from the vale of Neath, Borrow describes the chaotic scene, in which one aspect attracts his attention:

Turning round a corner at the top of a hill I saw blazes here and there, and what appeared to be a glowing mountain in the south-east. I went towards it down a descent which continued for a long, long way; so great was the light cast by the blazes and that wonderful glowing object, that I could distinctly see the little stones upon the road. After walking about half-an-hour, always going downwards, I saw a house on my left hand and heard a noise of water opposite to it. It was a pistyll. I went to it, drank greedily, and then hurried on. More and more blazes, and the glowing object looking more terrible than ever. It was now above me at some distance to the left, and I could see that it was an immense quantity of heated matter like lava, occupying the upper and middle parts of a hill, and descending here and there almost to the bottom in a zigzag and tortuous manner. Between me and the hill of the burning object lay a deep ravine. After a time I came to a house, against the door of which a man was leaning. "What is all that burning stuff above, my friend?"

"Dross from the iron forges, sir!"⁸⁰

In this passage, Borrow further obscures the line between the industrial and the natural, as terrain that has been forged by human activity is contrasted with space that has been formed by non-human forces. His choice of words such as 'mountain', 'lava' and 'hill' display an attempt to define the fiery scene with existing terms, but alternative language is required to

⁸⁰ Borrow, 1862, p. 687.

differentiate the industrial from the natural. This is provided by the local man, and ‘dross’ captures the essence of the industrial process. The burning hills that surround Merthyr are waste products of the town’s iron industry, and a stark reminder that industrial productivity often creates unproductive new environments. Following Borrow’s brief exchange with the local man, he descends into Merthyr itself, and his choice of vocabulary suggests a deliberate parallel with Classical descriptions of hell:

I now perceived a valley below me full of lights, and descending reached houses and a tramway. I had blazes now all around me. I went through a filthy slough, over a bridge, and up a street, from which dirty lanes branched off on either side, passed throngs of savage-looking people talking clamorously, shrank from addressing any of them, and finally, undirected, found myself before the Castle Inn at Merthyr Tydvil.⁸¹

Borrow’s descent into the hell of Merthyr is intensified by the burning hills that surround the town. As is apparent to the writer, the pandemonium appears to have had an effect on the town’s inhabitants, and Borrow’s use of dehumanising language fails to highlight the distress of the impoverished community. The writer’s selfish tone of discomfort suggests that he has never seen a place like Merthyr. This notion is especially surprising given that Borrow was a well-travelled man who, at this point, had already visited some of the world’s greatest cities, such as Edinburgh, London, St. Petersburg, Madrid and Istanbul. The rapid industrialisation of south Wales was clearly a shock to the system.

The next day, Borrow revisits the burning mounds of waste, which during daylight hours, lack the fiery menace evident at night:

The mountain of dross which had startled me on the preceding night with its terrific glare, and which stands to the north-west of the town, looked now nothing more than an immense dark heap of cinders. It is only when the shades of night have settled down that the fire within manifests itself, making the hill appear an immense glowing mass. All the hills around the town, some of which are very high, have a scorched and blackened look.⁸²

In this passage, Borrow’s vivid description of the industrial waste brings the mounds to life.

⁸¹ Borrow, 1862, p. 687.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 689–70.

They ‘startle[...]’ the author and ‘glare’, possessing a curious ‘fire within’, which evokes images of the supernatural. Once again, there is a sense that the tourist is struggling to identify the difference between the natural and the industrial, as words like ‘mountain’ and ‘hill’ are used to describe the waste from the ironworks. As a result, in the final line, the reader is unsure whether Borrow is referring to the naturally occurring hills that surround Merthyr, or the industrial waste that has created a new boundary around the town.

In Sikes’s account of Merthyr – which is clearly influenced by Borrow’s text, almost to the point of plagiarism – the American writer provides more information regarding the new prominences that characterise Wales’s first industrial town. At the beginning of the description, Sikes presents a bucolic image of the place:

Long I ramble about the innumerable hills and valleys over which this great stragglng town spreads itself. Some miles of ground are covered by its long rows of stone cottages, its little shops, its multitude of inns, its many churches, and its half-dozen great iron mills, employing close upon a hundred blast furnaces.⁸³

However, in the next extract, Sikes reveals that the presence of industry has already taken root, and the delineation of the border between natural and industrial space is being reimagined:

Many of the hills, and these not always the lowest, are composed wholly of dross from the iron forges. Some of these huge dumping heaps are almost worthy the title of mountains, so high and steep are they. By day they are black, but at night they glow red with fire, and are very picturesque to see, in conjunction with the chimneys which belch smoke and flame all round the sky. There is a general scorched and blasted look to the natural scenery about Merthyr [...].⁸⁴

In the final line, Sikes does make a distinction between the natural and the industrial, but explains that in observing the former, it is becoming difficult to ignore the impact of the latter. Furthermore, it is striking that Sikes should view these glowing hills as ‘picturesque’, given the cultural significance of the term. The notion of the picturesque originates in William Gilpin’s ‘An Essay Upon Prints’, in which the writer-cum-priest describes the term as: ‘that

⁸³ Sikes, 1881, p. 58.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'.⁸⁵ In accordance with Gilpin's terminology, Merthyr's fiery hills are so peculiar to Sikes that he is forced to acknowledge their painterly quality. When met with a scene that disturbs orthodox formations of space and landscape, the writer refers back to familiar imagery in order to make sense of this new chaos. This practice of observing the environmental impact of industry through art will be developed in the third part of this prologue.

Edwin F. Roberts was another writer who published a record of a visit to industrial Merthyr. *A Visit to the Iron Works and Environs of Merthyr-Tydfil in 1852* (1853) – the title suggests the extent to which industry dominated the tourist's motivations for visiting – is an apologetically unliterary account of the town. Like the other visitors, Roberts comments on the burning heaps that populate the town. However, in this account, the writer emphasises another significant aspect of industrial waste. Towards the beginning of the text, Roberts notices how Merthyr's air is 'impregnated with a sulphuretted gas, arising from the refrigerating cinder-heaps principally'.⁸⁶ As Roberts continues his tour of the town, he visits the Dowlais ironworks, and the same noxious presence returns with increased vigour:

We now walked up towards Dowlais, where the acrid pungency of the atmosphere which I had experienced before became disagreeably aggravated, and the roads being dusty and very steep, perspiration and triturated atoms from the cinder heaps or "tips," aided by a hot dry day, began to give my face its incipient coating of grime [...]⁸⁷

Other visitors to industrial Merthyr highlight the proliferation of excess from the town's ironworks in stark visual terms, but Roberts's account is noteworthy in its emphasis on the airborne presence of industrial waste. The sheer invasiveness of industry is difficult to ignore in this passage, and if it was problematic for those visiting Merthyr, life for the town's

⁸⁵ William Gilpin, *An Essay Upon Prints, Containing Remarks on the Principles of Picturesque Beauty* (London: J. Robson, 1768), p. 2.

⁸⁶ Edwin F. Roberts, *A Visit to the Iron Works and Environs of Merthyr-Tydfil in 1852* (London: William Edward Painter, 1853), p. 19.

⁸⁷ Roberts, 1853, p. 31.

inhabitants must have been a punishing existence.

These Victorian accounts of Merthyr are arresting in their stark presentation of a landscape transformed by industry. Previous distinctions between natural and industrial space are challenged, as fiery heaps created by waste from the town's iron production begin to define Merthyr's new topography. In these accounts, there is a clear lack of sentimentalism in the description of this industrial disfiguration, as if the writers describe an environment that is not worth saving. The rapid industrialisation of Merthyr has unsettled expectations of what landscape should represent. What impact does this transformation have on the writers themselves?

II. THE EMOTIONAL

‘What shall I say?’: The disorientating impact of industrialisation⁸⁸

In 1819, the English scientist, Michael Faraday, embarked on a pedestrian tour across Wales. Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to his interest in engineering, and what might now be defined as environmental science, Faraday stopped at Merthyr Tydfil. After visiting the famous Dowlais ironworks, Faraday later took note of what he had witnessed:

Men black as gnomes [...] flame upon flame [...] scorch[es] the air [...] the heat, the vibration, the hum of men, the hiss of engines, the clatter of shears, the fall of masses, I was so puzzled, I could not comprehend them except very imperfectly.⁸⁹

Here, the identification of the men as ‘gnomes’ consigns Welsh people to the realm of folklore and is a particularly significant comparison given the context of industry. ‘Gnome’ is defined as ‘[o]ne of a race of diminutive spirits fabled to inhabit the interior of the earth and to be the guardians of its treasures’, and the dictionary entry lists Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*

⁸⁸ Borrow, 1862, p. 689

⁸⁹ Michael Faraday, in Dafydd Tomos (ed.), *Michael Faraday in Wales, including Faraday's Journal of his Tour through Wales in 1819* (Denbigh: Gwasg Gee, 1972), p. 24.

(1714), as one of the earliest usages.⁹⁰ However, in a letter written to Mrs Arabella Fermor that introduces the poem in a modern edition of the text, Pope explains that the folkloric elements were inspired by *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670), by Nicolas-Pierre-Henri de Montfaucon de Villars (Abbé de Villars).⁹¹ In an early English translation of the text, the significance of the gnome is outlined:

The Earth is filled almost to the Center with Gnomes, a People of a low Stature, the Guardians of Treasures, Mines and precious Stones. They are Ingenious, Friends to Man and easie to be commanded. They supply the Children of the Sages with what Money they need, and desire no other Wages for their Service but the Glory of being commanded.⁹²

Given this description, Faraday's likening of the men's appearance to subterranean gnomes creates the image of a people intimately connected to the raw materials that they are instructed to exploit, which has significance both to the production of iron and the mining of coal. There is also the sense that the obedient community are subjugated by external forces, whose wealth depends on the continued labour of the workforce. As Shaun Richards reminds us, the use of folkloric imagery to describe Welsh people is a tendency that has continued, with English critics such as the late A. A. Gill pejoratively describing the population as 'an assortment of ugly trolls'.⁹³ There is also a sense of the gothic in Faraday's passage, which was – as Jane Aaron highlights – influenced by the visual characteristics of Welsh industrialisation itself: '[t]he flare of the furnaces, the blackened landscapes [...] became part of the image of Wales and lent themselves very readily to Gothicization'.⁹⁴ However, Faraday's frantic description

⁹⁰ 'Gnome, n.2', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online:

<<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79510?rskey=qzCkoZ>> [Accessed 1st August, 2021].

⁹¹ Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock and Other Major Writings* (London: Penguin, 2011 [1714]), p. 38.

⁹² Villars, Abbé de (Nicolas-Pierre-Henri de Montfaucon), *The Count of Gabalis, or Conferences about Secret Sciences, rendered out of French into English with an advice to the reader by A. L. A. M.* (London: Robert Harford: 1680 [1670]), pp. 19–20. In the quotation, I have retained the spelling and capitalisation of the source text.

⁹³ Shaun Richards, "'Cool enough for Lou Reed': The plays of Ed Thomas and the cultural politics of South Wales," in *Across the margins: Cultural identity and change in the Atlantic archipelago*, edited by Glenda Norquay and Gerry Smyth (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 137–53 (p. 139).

⁹⁴ Jane Aaron, *Welsh Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 6.

also highlights a sense of disorientation on the author's part, with the restless narrative becoming distracted by folkloric imagery. Furthermore, in terms of language, the staccato listing of images reflects the mechanisation of industry, and the frantic nature of this description further supports the notion that the speaker is experiencing some degree of agitation of the nervous system. In Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail's edited collection, *Neurology and Modernity: A Cultural History of Nervous Systems, 1800–1950*, a number of essays converge to examine the connections between the modernisation of society, and the perceptible impact this has on the human body's nervous system.⁹⁵ Like other travel accounts of this time, Faraday appears to exhibit a certain nervous response to the flame and fury of the ironworks, as the human body struggles to keep pace with the speed of industry. For many nineteenth-century tourists like Faraday, walking was the preferred form of movement during extended tours. The decision to be a pedestrian was an aesthetic choice; it allowed for contemplation, note-taking and spontaneous meetings. However, at Dowlais, Faraday's pedestrian sensibilities have been shaken, and the onomatopoeic nature of the writer's language highlights the extent to which his senses are battered by the chaos of industry. At the conclusion of his frantic cataloguing of images, Faraday declares a final attitude of puzzlement, followed by a failure to truly comprehend what it was that he was witnessing.

This disorientating power of industry is a recurrent theme throughout other accounts of Merthyr in the mid-nineteenth century. At the beginning of Roberts's account, the author offers a prolonged explanation of why he has chosen to write about his visit to the town: 'The impression made upon me was so vivid and striking the interest awakened so novel, so strange, and hitherto so utterly distinct from anything I had ever before felt'.⁹⁶ Clearly, Roberts himself acknowledges the impact that Merthyr has had on his character, and the resultant account is

⁹⁵ Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail, eds. *Neurology and Modernity: A Cultural History of Nervous Systems, 1800–1950* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁹⁶ Roberts, 1853, p. 3.

equally a form of – what would be described today as – self-therapy, as it is a work of travel writing.⁹⁷ As in Faraday’s account, Roberts’s visit to Merthyr triggers a response in his nervous system, and ultimately, the chaos of industry is a stimulant for the artist. This sentiment is echoed ten years later by Charles Baudelaire, who remarks that ‘inspiration has some connection with congestion’.⁹⁸

In an attempt to recreate the bewildering rhythm of Merthyr, Roberts proceeds to describe his initial walk through the town:

[...] with a half-stupefied sense of the mighty energies of men and fire combined, such as we might feel in the neighbourhood of some occult monster, with horrent form and myriad antennae – my ears and pulses throbbing with the rush of ceaseless and sounding machinery.⁹⁹

The chaos of industry has a hallucinatory effect on Roberts, as well as a bodily reaction, which further highlights both the physical and psychological effects of industry. Moreover, there is an obvious sense of the gothic in this passage, as the trope of fire comes to represent a supernatural embodiment of Merthyr’s frenzied ironworks.

Visiting Merthyr one year after Roberts, Borrow experiences a similar form of disorientation, this time during an appointment at one of the town’s other major ironworks:

What shall I say about the Cyfartha Fawr? I had best say but very little. I saw enormous furnaces. I saw streams of molten metal. I saw a long ductile piece of red-hot iron being operated upon. I saw millions of sparks flying about. I saw an immense wheel impelled round with frightful velocity by a steam engine of two hundred and forty horse power. I heard all kinds of dreadful sounds.¹⁰⁰

The writer appears to pause at the beginning of this passage as he attempts to accurately describe what he has witnessed. Then, in a similar style to Faraday, Borrow frantically lists his

⁹⁷ The term, ‘self-therapy’ would not have made sense to a nineteenth-century reader. The closest equivalent, Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help* (1859) had quite different values and meaning. They might have understood Humesian empiricism, or even a Romantic framework for exploring feeling. For example, the idea that impressions were of value in arriving at true knowledge of phenomena, and that it was of aesthetic and philosophical value to reflect on experience.

⁹⁸ Charles, Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art & Artists*, trans. by P. E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981 [1863], pp. 390–436 (p. 398).

⁹⁹ Roberts, 1853, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Borrow, 1862, p. 689.

still-vivid memories, in which images of fire dominate. Using language that evokes the Book of Revelation, the repetition of ‘I saw’, and then ‘I heard’ indicates a state of agitation, triggered by sensory overload.¹⁰¹ In this anxious description, Borrow is clearly critical of the industry that has transformed Merthyr from a rural backwater to a blistering ironopolis. In comparison to the many pastoral episodes in *Wild Wales*, Borrow’s arrival in Merthyr represents a moment of crisis, after which the previously innocent simplicities of rural Wales are somehow tainted by the flaming pandemonium of this new industrial nation.

III. THE CULTURAL

‘As if Acheron was belching forth fire and flame’: The language of industry¹⁰²

As industrialisation challenged habitual perceptions of place, writers were tasked with finding a suitable language to describe the associated notions of change and disorder in comprehensible terms. Cultural understandings of chaos and destruction had been defined for centuries by various traditions, from Classical and Biblical sources to Renaissance and Romantic movements. Industrialisation vividly brought to life imagery that until the nineteenth century had been rarely witnessed beyond art and literature. It is unsurprising, then, that travel accounts of Merthyr Tydfil in the mid-to-late nineteenth century returned to established conventions in an attempt to successfully capture the reality of industry.

When Roberts visits Merthyr’s Penydarren ironworks, the writer explains the ensuing bedlam with references to Classical imagery:

[...] ten or fifteen minutes’ walk brings you in front of ‘Penydarren’ iron-works, and you stand outside the wall gazing on a scene that seems like a vision [of] Hades in its milder form. Just now it does not seem as if Acheron was belching forth fire and flame; and that the horrible noises described by the poets as appertaining to the infernal

¹⁰¹ See: Revelation 6:1-17. *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰² Roberts, 1853, pp. 19–20.

regions, were, for some reason or other, subdued.¹⁰³

Although the ironworks is a ‘milder’ version of the Greek underworld, it still exhibits enough disorder to invite a comparison. In *The Odyssey*, Homer describes ‘Acheron’ as a larger river, into which ‘Cocytus runs, and Pyriphlegethon’, the latter of which is described as a river of fire.¹⁰⁴ Roberts’s naming of the river anticipates a later reference to the Italian poet, Dante:

Terrible as is the aspect of the blast-furnaces, I doubt not if the puddling furnace does not realize a more perfect and Dantean “hell of fire” than even they do. One looks into the troubled molten sea with something very like awe.¹⁰⁵

As the river Acheron provides an entry point to Dante’s vision of Hell, the threshold of Penyardren’s puddling furnace designates access to a new inferno, forged by industry. Here, there are echoes of Milton’s depiction of hell in *Paradise Lost* as, once more, amid the fiery chaos, Roberts interprets the scene using familiar imagery. However, in the final quotation, the ironworks remind the writer of more recent representations of fire and fury:

Sounds of blast and steam, and metallic reverberations all mingling together with the cries of men in a sky where the very winds are dead as if with fear, give to the lurid hue of this grand and impressive picture touches that are superior to art. It is as if, in Turner’s paintings of tempests, you heard the furious roar of the storm, the hoarse booming of the sea, and the boiling hiss of the surges, with drowning men crying for help, and with thunders rolling in the concave that belts all in. Fire-flashing volcanoes by the dozen do all those furnaces become.¹⁰⁶

In a form of ekphrastic writing, Roberts’s senses are bombarded with the frenzy of the blast furnace, and he appears oddly detached from the experience; reality becomes art. In this quotation, there is a great deal owed to the aforementioned notion of the chaotic Sublime and the Romantic imagining of catastrophe, and in addition to directly referencing Turner, Roberts’s description evokes works of art such as Joseph Wright’s *Vesuvius in Eruption* (c. 1776–1780), and John Martin’s *Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822). Moreover,

¹⁰³ Roberts, 1853, pp. 19–20.

¹⁰⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by George Chapman (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2002), p. 203, ll. 631–32.

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, 1853, p. 28.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 31.

there is a clear sense that Roberts – in lines like: ‘the cries of men in a sky where the very winds are dead as if with fear’ – perceives the chaos of the industrial landscape in distinctly gothic terms.

Writing after Roberts, Borrow recalls similar imagery in an attempt to describe the industrialisation of south Wales. In a particularly memorable moment in his text – quoted at the beginning of Raymond Williams’s noteworthy essay, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* – the English traveller describes the chaos of industry alongside the ruins of Neath Abbey, as viewed from the small village of Llan, situated between Swansea and Neath:

I had surmounted a hill and had nearly descended that side of it which looked towards the east, having on my left, that is to the north, a wooded height, when an extraordinary scene presented itself to my eyes. Somewhat to the south rose immense stacks of chimneys surrounded by grimy diabolical-looking buildings, in the neighbourhood of which were huge heaps of cinders and black rubbish. From the chimneys, notwithstanding it was Sunday, smoke was proceeding in volumes, choking the atmosphere all around. From this pandemonium, at the distance of about a quarter of a mile to the southwest, upon a green meadow, stood, looking darkly grey, a ruin of vast size with window holes, towers, spires, and arches. Between it and the accursed pandemonium, lay a horrid filthy place, part of which was swamp and part pool: the pool black as soot, and the swamp of a disgusting leaden colour. Across this place of filth stretched a tramway leading seemingly from the abominable mansions to the ruin. So strange a scene I had never beheld in nature. Had it been on canvas, with the addition of a number of diabolical figures, proceeding along the tramway, it might have stood for Sabbath in Hell—devils proceeding to afternoon worship, and would have formed a picture worthy of the powerful but insane painter Jerome Bos.¹⁰⁷

Taken as a whole, this passage offers a complete perspective of environmental degradation caused by industry, with images like ‘huge heaps of cinders and black rubbish’, smoke ‘choking the atmosphere all around’ and a ‘pool black as soot’, converging to present an ecologically dead space. Like Roberts, when Borrow witnesses the industrialisation of Wales, his mind involuntarily interprets the scene through the hellish paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. As earlier, Sikes acknowledges the ‘picturesque’ quality of Merthyr’s fiery hills, Borrow interprets the strangeness of environmental degradation through familiar works of art.

¹⁰⁷ Borrow, 1862, p. 682.

When Borrow arrives in Merthyr, the writer returns to the same imagery as he uncovers a peculiar industrial structure wafting smoke and flames into the night sky:

Then there is an edifice at the foot of a mountain, half way up the side of which is a blasted forest and on top an enormous crag. A truly wonderful edifice it is, such as Bos would have imagined had he wanted to paint the palace of Satan. There it stands: a house of reddish brick with a slate roof—four horrid black towers behind, two of them belching forth smoke and flame from their tops—holes like pigeon holes here and there—two immense white chimneys standing by themselves. What edifice can be of such strange mad details? I ought to have put that to question to some one in Tydvil, but did not, though I stood staring at the diabolical structure with my mouth open.¹⁰⁸

The writer's failure to determine the identity of the mysterious building is perhaps a deliberate oversight, as the anonymity only compounds the sense of terror. Echoing Roberts's earlier description of Penydarren, the enigmatic structure is 'belching forth smoke and flame' from its threatening towers, and here, Borrow's use of industrial tropes bestows a monstrous character on the inanimate object. However, it is the reference to Bosch that reminds the reader that the sheer scale of Merthyr's industrial expansion places limitations on the writer's ability to convey the scene. As a result, Borrow recounts the memory with a description that blurs the line between reality and art.

CONCLUSION

In nineteenth-century Wales, the ecological disaster of industrialisation prompted a dramatic shift in many aspects of artistic production, from fine art to literature. Reading these largely neglected accounts of Merthyr Tydfil from an environmental perspective, Wales's key role as an early centre of iron production is brought to the foreground of a long description of climate change that began with the industrial revolution. Throughout the early nineteenth century, the expansion of Merthyr's iron industry resulted in infrastructural developments across Wales, connecting the previously underdeveloped nation with its close neighbours, allowing raw

¹⁰⁸ Borrow, 1862, p. 690.

materials to be exported, and a domestic tourist industry to flourish. In terms of cultural production, tourist narratives became a popular means of describing this new, altered nation. As industrialisation expanded, travel writers widened their point of focus, and began to look towards centres of manufacture in south Wales. In the town of Merthyr Tydfil – which pulled in swathes of people from across the Atlantic Archipelago – this shift in representation is noticed most fervently. The recurring images of smoke and fire are useful tropes with which to examine this shift, and can be characterised in three ways. Firstly, the extant travel writing begins to foreground sites of industrial development, where more emphasis is placed on human-altered landscapes. In a particularly potent example of recurring imagery, industrial waste results in burning mounds of fire that continue to glow once the sun has set. This marks a shift in representations of Wales, as the industrial transformation of the environment becomes a focal point for artists and writers. Following this alteration of space, there is a perceptible shift in the emotional tone of the narrative, as writers express a consistent sense of disorientation at the flaming chaos of the iron industry. In terms of cultural history, this results in a forced modification of the language used to describe this new reality, as writers struggle to find established imagery with which to render the unreal spectacle in recognisable terms.

CHAPTER ONE | BLACK RIVERS

‘The most stinking brook in Britain’: River pollution in Jack Jones’s *Black Parade*¹



Figure 4. Splott Beach, Cardiff.²

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: INDUSTRIAL RIVERS, THEN AND NOW

One would be forgiven for overlooking the fact that Cardiff is a city with a waterfront. Large-scale civil engineering projects such as the Cardiff Bay Barrage have obscured the Welsh capital’s relationship with its nearby expanse of open water. However, venture beyond the factories and industrial estates situated to the east of the palatial Wales Millennium Centre, and the keen-eyed visitor will notice a small lay-by on Rover Way, suitable for only two or three

¹ Jack Jones, *Black Parade* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2005 [1935]), p. 15.

² My own photograph.

cars. At the edge of this untidy space, a small K Barrier signals a semi-designated entry point, and after a short walk down a litter-strewn path, Splott Beach offers picture-postcard views of the Severn Estuary, and beyond. Naturally, this obscured shoreline would never find itself displayed on the postcards proudly on sale at the cultural venues of Cardiff Bay. Stained for well over a century by the inky effluence of the coal mines, Splott Beach is an appropriate natural monument to the nation's industrial legacy. Of course, it was the numerous arterial rivers of the south Wales valleys that transported countless tonnes of black grime from the upland mining towns and villages, where local water sources were used both as a depository for colliery waste, and as a facility to wash coal. Consequently, rivers such as the Taff, Rhymney and many others all bore the waste of a heavily polluting industry southwards and were, for generations, dead rivers.

Today, the rivers of south east Wales no longer exhibit the oily, black hue that once characterised the local waterways throughout the era of King Coal. Indeed, since the decline of coal mining, many species of fish and other natural life have been allowed to flourish in the region's rivers and, in 2011, a report by the Environment Agency even highlighted the Taff as one of the United Kingdom's most improved waterways.³ However, although there have been improvements following deindustrialisation, the health of Welsh rivers still remains a work in progress. More recently, the 'Restore Our Rivers' report, published by Cardiff City Council in 2017, recorded that 'areas of the Ely, Taff and Rhymney are experiencing declining fish stock, poor water quality and contamination'.⁴ This, according to the report, is due to a range of local polluting factors, including: 'sewer abuse and waste from poorly connected white goods', as well as 'littering, farm waste and the incorrect disposal of cooking fat, grease and oil'.⁵

³ '“Most-improved” rivers revealed by Environment Agency', *BBC News*, 30th August 2011, available online: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14710478>> [Accessed 24th May 2018].

⁴ 'Cardiff rivers: 'Pollution' in Ely, Taff and Rhymney', *BBC News*, 21st September 2017, available online: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-41338881>> [Accessed 24th May 2018].

⁵ If white goods – such as toilets, showers, washing machines or dishwashers – are connected to the surface drain instead of the foul drain, then dirty water flows directly into nearby streams, rivers and eventually, the sea;

Fundamentally, the report suggests that even though some progress has been made in terms of returning waterways to a healthier state since the coal mining era, there is still work to be done. In addition to this, recently published research has highlighted a disparity in the health of urban and rural rivers in Wales. The Cardiff University-led Llyn Brianne observatory project in east Powys – which has been in progress for a staggering forty years – has found that in local rivers, ‘the number of specialist invertebrates are dwindling’.⁶ According to a recent press release on the findings, this decline could be influenced by global factors:

Researchers monitored fourteen streams at the Llyn Brianne Observatory, collecting data from the headwaters of the River Tywi in Wales since 1981. The data revealed that specialist organisms, like predatory flatworms, certain stoneflies or caddis larvae, are in sharp decline, as their precise needs make them vulnerable to changes in climate.⁷

One of the project’s founders, Professor Steve Ormerod – from Cardiff University’s School of Biosciences – acknowledges that this research may not have the same headline-grabbing impact when compared to other environmental studies, due to the fact that most of the changes occur below the surface. He explains:

Freshwater ecologists are seriously concerned at the plight of the world’s rivers, lakes and wetlands, and at the rate at which they’re losing plants and animals of many types. Yet, many people are unaware of this ongoing tragedy hidden beneath the water surface. Our results show that the build-up to species extinction can start in a subtle way, for example, where climate change causes numbers to decline before sudden disappearance.⁸

Evidently, rivers in Wales face ongoing threats both from pollutants at a local level and fluctuations in climate at a global level. Studies that aim to raise greater awareness of these issues are therefore required from all academic fields. Through exploring literary representations of historic river pollution, this chapter intends to highlight the current health of

‘Cardiff rivers: ‘Pollution’ in Ely, Taff and Rhymney’, *BBC News*, 21st September 2017, available online: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-41338881>> [Accessed 24th May 2018].

⁶ ‘30 year river study finds overlooked extinctions effect’, Cardiff University website, 30th April 2018, available online: <<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/1168341-30-year-river-study-finds-overlooked-extinction-crisis>> [Accessed 24th May 2018].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Welsh waterways. In that regard, it is a work of literary analysis, but also environmental awareness.

LITERARY BIOGRAPHY: THE MERTHYR OF HIS MEMORIES



Figure 5. The River Taff at Merthyr Tydfil.⁹

The source of the River Taff can be found high up on the grassy slopes of the Brecon Beacons. However, before it flows out into the Severn Estuary at Cardiff, the river meanders its way down through the many former coal mining communities that constitute The Taff Valley [Cwm Taf]. The largest town in this loosely defined peri-urban region is Merthyr Tydfil, and it was here that on 24th November 1884, Jack Jones was born at Tai-Harri-Blawd – one of the town’s

⁹ My own photograph.

many dilapidated dwellings – to David and Sarah Ann Jones. As discussed above, in the late 1800s, Merthyr was in the midst of an industrial boom that had transformed the town from a small, rural community of sheep farmers to one of the largest settlements in Wales. As Joe England explains in his epic history of the town, Merthyr's population rose from a modest 7,705 inhabitants in 1801, to a staggering figure of 80,990, just over one hundred years later in 1911.¹⁰

The vast influx of labour into Merthyr, at first from rural Wales and then, later on, from England and Ireland, had a significant impact on the town's already inadequate housing and infrastructure, and soon living conditions became intolerable.¹¹ The insufficient preparation for the arrival of a new workforce had terrible consequences from a public health perspective, exacerbated by the lack of uncontaminated water:

The result was extreme squalor, filth, disease, and appalling rates of mortality, all compounded by the delay of the ironmasters in making clean drinking water generally available. The situation deteriorated further as the population grew. In 1852 the average age at death in Merthyr was 17.5 years. More than half of all children died before reaching the age of five and more than a quarter died before reaching one.¹²

Numerous outbreaks of water-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid were reported due to lack of sanitation, clearly intensified by the increase in population, as well as the polluting industries that used the already scarce water sources as a depository for their waste.¹³ As a young boy, Jack Jones would have been all too aware of the town's water pollution crisis, as across the street from his house ran the heavily contaminated Morlais Brook – or Nant Morlais – which, despite being largely concealed today, still joins the Taff through a culvert on the east bank of the river, near the site of the Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council offices. The extent of the pollution problem affecting the Morlais Brook was heavily documented by both the local

¹⁰ Joe England, *Merthyr: The Crucible of Modern Wales* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2017), p. 25.

¹¹ England, 2017, pp. 25–26.

¹² Ibid, p. 27.

¹³ 'Typhoid Fever at Merthyr', *Evening Express*, 20th September 1900. 'Cholera', *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 15th September 1832.

and national press. One Merthyr-based newspaper report, published when Jones was thirty years old, recorded a damning verdict of the site, noting that ‘carcasses of dead sheep and other animals are frequently thrown into the brook, and offensive smells arise’, and furthermore, that ‘a vast amount of stuff is deposited in the brook near the Iron Bridge, and it is washed down the valley’.¹⁴ River pollution was a constant presence during Jones’s formative years, so it is not surprising to find it dominating the narratives of his later novels.

Jones’s journey to becoming a published author was nothing short of astonishing. Keri Edwards, in his ‘Writers of Wales’ monograph on Jones offers a full account of this remarkable rise to literary success. Aspects of this biography such as the representation of working-class writers and the history of publishing networks in Wales are relevant to this chapter, and I will provide a brief summary here.¹⁵ At the age of twelve, Jones left school to work as a coal miner, but at seventeen, enlisted in the British army.¹⁶ However, military life did not suit him, and after deserting in South Africa he was released from military service and returned to Merthyr, where he resumed his profession as a coal miner.¹⁷ In 1914, still an army reservist, Jones was ‘rushed to France in time to take part in the hurried disorder of the retreat from Mons’.¹⁸ Here, ‘he experienced the terror of a patrol into no-man’s land’, and in addition to this, ‘was given the nauseating task of burying putrefying bodies’.¹⁹ After suffering further horrors, he was eventually sent home as an invalid, being appointed as army recruiting officer for Merthyr.²⁰ When the war ended, Jones was thirty-five and, disillusioned by traditional politics, he joined the communist party.²¹ During this time, Jones set himself on a path of self-education, where he discovered how literature could provide a voice for marginalised communities, such as the

¹⁴ ‘Condition of Morlais Brook’, *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 6th June 1914.

¹⁵ Keri Edwards, *Writers of Wales: Jack Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974), pp. 1–12.

¹⁶ Edwards, 1974, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

one in which he was raised.²² However, by 1930, he was unemployed and living in Rhiwbina [Rhiwbeina], a northern suburb of Cardiff with strong literary associations.²³ Despite his dire financial situation, Jones steadfastly set himself the task of writing the Merthyr of his memories, astonishingly producing a ‘work of a quarter-of-a-million words’, entitled *Saran* – whose principal character was based on his mother, Sarah Ann. This colossal manuscript would provide the basis for Jones’s second, and arguably most successful novel, *Black Parade* (1935).



Figure 6. The suburb of Rhiwbina, Cardiff.²⁴

²² Edwards, 1974, p. 8.

²³ Ibid, p. 11.

²⁴ My own photograph.

Published when Jones was over fifty years old, *Black Parade* has enjoyed a well-deserved re-appreciation in recent years.²⁵ In the novel, Jones returns to the Victorian Merthyr of his parents' age, recounting the story of the female protagonist, Saran, and her passage through life in one of Wales's largest industrial boomtowns. Jones is unflinching in his detailed portrayal of the multifaceted impact of industrialisation on one family, and the town that swells around it. From an environmental perspective, the novel offers much material for analysis, as the heavily polluted Morlais Brook features as a recurrent motif throughout the text. This chapter, therefore, provides a detailed examination of the ways in which river pollution is represented in Jones's novel, and a selection of other related texts. There is considerable scholarship on Jones and *Black Parade*, but none of this material addresses the ways in which the author's political career influenced his literary depictions of environmental degradation.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP: 'A FRESHNESS, A GUSTO, A SPONTANEITY [...]'²⁶

Early criticism of Jones focuses more on characterisation and literary verve than politics and environment. In *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing* (1968), Glyn Jones describes *Black Parade* – alongside some of Jones's other novels, such as *Rhondda Roundabout* (1934) and *Bidden to the Feast* (1938) – as containing 'a freshness, a gusto, a spontaneity which Jack never fully recaptured in his later work'.²⁷ He especially praises the characterisation of the protagonist, Saran, and finds much 'humanity', 'pathos', and 'fun' in the novel as a whole.²⁸ Similarly, in 'The Mythology of the Mining Valleys' (1973), Glyn Tegai Hughes praises *Black Parade* for 'the vitality of its characters', but then

²⁵ This is perhaps due to its inclusion in the *Library of Wales* series, published by Parthian books

²⁶ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001 [1968]), p. 96.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jones, 2001, p. 96.

acknowledges that there is an absence of ‘complexity or subtlety in their presentation’.²⁹ The aforementioned Keri Edwards, in his ‘Writers of Wales’ monograph on Jones (1974), describes *Black Parade* as a ‘fine novel’, possessing ‘the greatest element of sociology’.³⁰ Contrary to Tegai Hughes, Edwards praises Jones’s character construction as ‘remarkable for its simplicity and terseness’.³¹ However, Raymond Williams, in *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (1978), criticises *Black Parade* on the grounds that it contains ‘many internal problems of form’, before ultimately concluding that the novel ‘is strong because, in its earliest periods at least, it includes the many-sided turbulence, the incoherence and contradictions, which the more available stereotypes of the history exclude’ (perhaps here Williams is referring to Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley*).³²

Four years later, Williams expands on these ideas in ‘Working-class, Proletarian, Socialist: Problems in Some Welsh Novels’ (1982). Writing from a socio-political perspective, Williams applauds the way *Black Parade* represents ‘the making, the struggles’ and ‘the defeats of a class’.³³ Similarly, Dai Smith (1986) labels *Black Parade* ‘a richly textured panorama of South Wales from the 1880s to mid 1930s’ and, pouring scorn on other Welsh industrial texts, compliments Jones for creating ‘heroes [who] do not waste time on the mountains above the Valleys’.³⁴ Conversely, James A. Davies, writing in *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (1987), takes a different view from Smith, and is somewhat critical of Jones, arguing that he ‘belongs more with the Llewellyns and with the Cordells than with his fellow Joneses’.³⁵

²⁹ Glyn Tegai Hughes, ‘The Mythology of the Mining Valleys’, in *Triskel Two: Essays on Welsh and Anglo-Welsh Literature*, ed. by Sam Adams and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Llandybie: Christopher Davies, 1973), pp. 42–61 (p. 53).

³⁰ Edwards, 1974, pp. 18–19.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Raymond Williams, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1978), p. 17.

³³ Raymond Williams, ‘Working-class, Proletarian, Socialist: Problems in Some Welsh Novels’, in *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition*, ed. by H. Gustav Klaus (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 110–21, (p. 117).

³⁴ Dai Smith, ‘A Novel History’, in *Wales: The Imagined Nation: Essays in Cultural & National Identity* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), pp. 129–58 (pp. 142–44).

³⁵ James A. Davies, ‘Kinds of Relating: Gwyn Thomas (Jack Jones, Lewis Jones, Gwyn Jones) and the Welsh Industrial Experience’, *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 86, 1987, 72–86, (p. 72).

Davies continues, arguing that in *Black Parade*, ‘characters are sanitized clichés of the melodrama and the sentimental tale, invariably manipulated into happiness’, before finally concluding – in a rather provocative manner – that Jones is ‘not a novelist who relates very directly to the Welsh industrial experience’.³⁶ Finally, Stephen Knight, in *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (2004), deems *Black Parade* successful as a ‘historical account’ of industrial Merthyr, highlighting elements of the narrative such as ‘typhoid and the need for sanitation’, which provides a convenient transition to the introduction of my own critical approach.³⁷

As is evident from the preceding critical summary, the extant scholarship has focused on analysing *Black Parade* from a social and historical perspective, often praising Jones for his construction of characters, but critiquing the author for a perceived inauthenticity and problems of form. This is typical of scholarship on Welsh industrial writing more broadly, which appears excessively concerned with realism – both in terms of individual characters and community – and formal critique. Often, this obsession distracts the critic from other textual considerations, and certainly ecocritical ones. As mentioned above, Knight comes closest in pinpointing some incidences of environmental injustice, but unfortunately, this is only a passing comment, and thus the necessity for further research is patent. My reading – although acknowledging the value of the above research – seeks to consider *Black Parade* from a different perspective. In that regard, this chapter will aim to shift the focus from an explicitly political or interpersonal perspective – although my analysis will have clear ramifications in these areas – towards an assessment of the ways in which one of the novel’s most significant, but largely unacknowledged ‘characters’ is represented: the river. Previously, human-focused character criticism has obscured the true ‘character’ of the river, which is continually defiled by the expanding presence of industry. Through Jones’s extended emphasis on the pollution of both

³⁶ Davies, 1987, p. 72.

³⁷ Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 76–79.

the Morlais Brook and the nearby River Taff, I argue that *Black Parade* is a novel that documents the environmental impact of industry in vivid detail.

PART I: TOXIC RIVERS

Theoretical Beginnings: Lawrence Buell's 'Toxic Discourse'

Wales is a nation of rivers, with many of its cities, towns and villages defined by the names of the nearby brooks, streams and tributaries that form the country's arterial waters. From Abertawe, Aberystwyth and Abersoch to Caernarfon, Dyffryn Ceiriog and Rhydaman, rivers are written into the nation's identity, both topographically and cartographically. The valleys of south Wales were formed by the rivers that give each one its name; Amman [Aman], Tawe, Neath [Nedd], Afan, Garw, Rhondda Fach, Rhondda Fawr, Cynon, Taff [Taf], Rhymney [Rhymni], Sirhowy [Sirhywi], Ebbw, Llwyd. Unsurprisingly, the rivers of south Wales played an important role in the industrialisation of the region. Countless colliery towns and villages were established on the banks of the many rivers that flowed down through the valleys towards the ports of Newport, Cardiff, Barry and Swansea. At the beginning of Wales's industrialisation in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, rivers provided a valuable source of water for the 'big four' ironworks of Merthyr Tydfil. As coal mining began to increase, rivers were used to wash coal, and train lines were built alongside the waterways, so that the valuable commodity could reach the coastal ports in the quickest possible time. Throughout industrialisation in Wales, rivers were viewed as a resource to be exploited, and concern for the health of local waterways was non-existent.

In an essay on the ecopoetics of water pollution, Charlotte Melin argues that her selection of twentieth and twenty-first-century German-language poems 'register[s] a conceptual turn away from aesthetic appreciation of water in terms of its culturally rich,

purifying properties and toward scientific understanding that emphasizes the social and legal dimensions of water pollution'.³⁸ Although dealing with a very different literary tradition, Melin's insight provides a valuable starting point, from which my analysis of Jones's text can develop. In that regard, *Black Parade* certainly departs from the notion of representing water in terms of a cleansing source of natural beauty and, through placing emphasis on the social impact of inadequate sanitation, Jones raises political, and legal, questions with regards to environmental justice.

Jones's representation of river pollution can be understood through Lawrence Buell's notion of 'toxic discourse'. Buell defines the term as 'expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency'.³⁹ In its wider context, Buell's toxic discourse is heavily influenced by foundational environmental texts such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). With regards to Carson's *Silent Spring*, Buell notes that this text provided toxic discourse with 'its effective beginning', highlighting 'the shock of awakened perception' following the realisation that human-led chemical modifications are irrevocably altering – and potentially threatening – all aspects of life on earth.⁴⁰ In the case of *The Machine in the Garden*, Buell focuses on Marx's differentiation between simple – or sentimental – pastoral, and complex pastoral. He explains that for Marx, simple pastoral is 'the predominant mentality' shared by most members of the public when considering the distinction between urban and rural, whereas – somewhat teasingly – Buell notes that complex pastoral is 'the contrarian version of awakened intellectuals'.⁴¹ Bringing both Carson and Marx together, Buell notes that: 'it comes as no surprise, therefore, to find contemporary toxic discourse retelling narratives of rude

³⁸ Charlotte Melin, 'Kaschnitz, Enzensberger, and Sandig: The Ecopoetics of Water Pollution', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, Vol. 40, 1, 2016, published online: <<http://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol40/iss1/2/>> [Accessed 24th May 2018].

³⁹ Buell, 2001, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 35.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 37.

awakening from simple pastoral to complex'.⁴² This notion of 'rude awakening' is central to Buell's concept, as writers of toxic discourse are suddenly faced with the prospect of a poisoned, hazardous world, to which they themselves have contributed. For Buell, toxic discourse is a product of modern society, as the critic explains that: 'never before the late twentieth century has it been so vocal, so intense, so pandemic, and so evidentially grounded'.⁴³

Toxic discourse has proven an influential ecocritical framework that subsequent literary critics have used to engage with a range of texts. Beginning with late-twentieth-century Welsh poetry, Matthew Jarvis (2008) has drawn on Buell's theoretical work in his examination of Mike Jenkins's poem, 'The Common Land' (1981). Focusing on an extract from the poem's second section, Jarvis highlights how Jenkins's evocation of "'a child with his skin turned to rags by the blades | of the dark'", and "'a woman coughing up phlegm | like lumps that her lungs had cut'" recalls memories of the industry that built Merthyr Tydfil and the surrounding area.⁴⁴ Jarvis argues that these 'two ghosts from the area's industrial past [...] function as striking human casualties of the area's "drift-mines", both of whom display serious physical consequences as a result of their environmental context'.⁴⁵ For Jarvis, 'they raise the suggestion of what Lawrence Buell calls a "poisoned community" – a location and its people devastated by industry'.⁴⁶ Jarvis's connection between the toxicity of industry and its physical effects on the local community is an area that will be developed in this chapter.

In an analysis of Rita Wong's poetry, Matthew Zantigh (2013) problematises toxic discourse, which – as the critic argues – 'seeks to locate and expel the toxic substances'.⁴⁷

⁴² Buell, 2001, p. 37.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Mike Jenkins, 'The Common Land', in Mike Jenkins, *The Common Land* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1981), p. 21. Quoted in: Jarvis, 2008, p. 91.

⁴⁵ Jarvis, 2008, p. 91.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Matthew Zantigh, 'When Things Act Up: Thing Theory, Actor-Network Theory, and Toxic Discourse in Rita Wong's Poetry', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20, 3, (2013), 622–46 (p. 638).

Instead, Zantingh contends that Wong's poetry, 'calls for renewed attention to the things that make up our everyday', such as computers and the related industry that results in 'the bodily cost of other beings located across the globe'.⁴⁸ As a result of this renewed attention, Zantingh suggests that Wong's poetry advocates for 'a new relationship to things [...] in which bodies, especially those far from us, are no longer forced to bear the consequences of toxic objects'.⁴⁹ Although this chapter focuses on the localised impact of toxic river pollution, Zantingh's emphasis on toxicity in terms of its relationship with the everyday is an area that I will explore further in relation to Jones's text. Through a close reading of *Black Parade*, I aim to explore how the routine presence of toxicity disrupts domestic and community life.

In Alana Fletcher's (2014) reading of Irene Baird's novel, *Waste Heritage* (1939), the critic presents a compelling case for Depression-era texts from North America as precursors to contemporary toxic discourse. Developing research on works such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), Fletcher draws parallels with Baird's novel, and identifies a shared preoccupation with 'the disproportionate subjection of the working class and the unemployed to exploitative work conditions, pollution, and urban decay'.⁵⁰ In Jones's *Black Parade*, I intend to contribute another Depression-era text to this discussion and as a result, locate connections between writing from North America and south Wales. In an analysis of Ruth Ozeki's debut novel *My Year of Meats* (1998), Summer Harrison (2017) reveals how Buell's framework can assist with understanding the text's condemnation of animal cruelty. As Harrison argues, the protagonist's 'own documentary film employs a form of what Lawrence Buell calls "toxic discourse," which highlights the emotionally powerful imagery of toxic

⁴⁸ Zantingh, 2013, p. 638.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Alana Fletcher, 'Toxic Discourse: *Waste Heritage* as Ghetto Pastoral', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 39, 2, (2014), 5–21 (p. 8).

bodies, to represent the hidden story of violence underlying the meat industry'.⁵¹ As well as providing a thematic connection to Sinclair's abovementioned novel, Harrison's article emphasises how the impact of toxicity on both human and non-human bodies is a significant aspect of toxic discourse, which is another issue that I will explore further in this chapter.

In addition to direct engagements with Buell's theoretical work, the field of toxicity can be approached from other perspectives. In the preface to Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), the American political theorist challenges the 'habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)'.⁵² Bennett uses the example of waste disposal and reminds the reader that 'trash is not "away" in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak'.⁵³ Throughout *Vibrant Matter*, the theory of 'vital materialism' is developed as a means of reassessing the anthropocentric classification of matter.⁵⁴ Bennett argues that the quality of being 'vital' – or 'vibrant, [...] energetic, lively' – should extend beyond human beings, whilst the notion of 'materiality' is a point of connection between people and other 'material configuration[s]', such as 'pigeons in the park, [...] viruses, parasites, [...] neurochemicals, hurricane winds, E. coli, and the dust on the floor'.⁵⁵ 'Materiality', Bennett continues,

[I]s a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Summer Harrison, 'Environmental Justice Storytelling: Sentiment, Knowledge, and the Body in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 24, 3 (2017), pp. 457–76 (p. 466).

⁵² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. vii–xx (p. vii).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Building on Bennett's work, this chapter acknowledges the vitality of toxic pollution beyond its point of human interaction, whilst emphasising moments of connection between diverse material configurations.

Finally, before turning to Jones's text, I want to retrace my steps back to the beginning of this chapter, and Splott Beach. Walking amongst the discarded waste materials on Cardiff's concealed coast, I look out at the Severn Estuary where in 2018, 300,000 tonnes of mud from the Hinkley Point C Nuclear Power Station were deposited into the water.⁵⁷ From this vantage point, I turn and notice the plume of smoke from the city's nearby waste incinerator billowing into the sky. In this moment, Bennett's emphasis on the inseparability of humans and toxicity gains a new meaning. In the introduction to a special issue of *Environmental Humanities* on the theme of 'toxic embodiment', Olga Cielemecka and Cecilia Åsberg (2019) argue that '[t]he cumulative exposure to endocrine disruptors, neurotoxins, asthmagens, carcinogens, and mutagens [that] comes with everyday life today [has made] us all toxic bodies'.⁵⁸ Exploring the idea further, Cielemecka and Åsberg explain that this is not unique to the bodies of people, and that 'human-altered chemistries spread across vast regions of the planet, even in the deepest depths of the sea'.⁵⁹ The far-reaching consequences of toxic pollution – as well as its potential to return to human and non-human bodies through airborne particles, food consumption and contaminated water – further accentuates Bennett's earlier point regarding the vibrant potential

⁵⁷ Steffan Messenger, 'Nuclear station mud dumping plans off Cardiff Bay revealed', *BBC News*, 5th February 2020, available online: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-51375497>> [Accessed 1st August 2021].

⁵⁸ Olga Cielemecka and Cecilia Åsberg, 'Introduction: Toxic Embodiment and Feminist Environmental Humanities', *Environmental Humanities*, 11, 1 (2019), pp.101–7 (p. 101). Discussion of this issue should always remain inclusive. Giovanna Di Chiro (2010) has critiqued the 'dominant anti-toxics discourse deployed in mainstream environmentalism' and argued that '[t]his contemporary environmental anxiety appeals to cultural fears of exposure to chemical and endocrine-disrupting toxins as troubling and destabilizing the normal/natural gendered body of humans and other animal species [...]' Giovanna Di Chiro, 'Polluted Panics: Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity', *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 199–230 (p. 201).

⁵⁹ Cielemecka and Åsberg, 2019, p. 102.

of matter beyond its disposal by people, as well as the intricate entanglement between all material configurations on earth.

Although this chapter will approach Jones's text using Buell's theoretical framework of 'toxic discourse', the analysis will also develop ideas presented in the extant critical material above, such as: toxicity and industry; domestic toxicity; toxic bodies; the afterlife of toxic substances, and historical depictions of toxicity. Related to this final point, as Buell argues, late-twentieth-century writers are perhaps more conscious of responding to the chemical modification of the planet, this chapter contends that Welsh industrial writing, alongside other Depression-era texts, is a significant precursor. As well as expanding Buell's work, this analysis aims to highlight the innovation of Welsh writing, which should receive more attention from the international community of environmental critics. There must be more acknowledgement of the relationship between poisoned environments and cultural production, as in Jones's novel, the perceived threat of the heavily polluted Morlais Brook – a water source chemically modified by human agency – creates a sense of anxious tension throughout the narrative.

‘THE STINKING BROOK’:
ANTI-ROMANCE AND THE UBIQUITY OF TOXIC RIVERS⁶⁰

In his autobiographical novel, *Unfinished Journey* (1937), Jones unequivocally declares: ‘Merthyr’s a dead town’.⁶¹ Although referring to the state of the community in the 1930s, at a time when it was in the midst of the Depression, Jones's assertion raises questions regarding the cause of Merthyr's demise. Despite being published in 1935, *Black Parade* is set many years earlier, during a time in which Merthyr was anything but dead. However, Jones's novel does describe an era of unrestricted expansion, after which a period of lengthy decline was

⁶⁰ Jones, 2005, p. 88.

⁶¹ Jack Jones, *Unfinished Journey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 248.

inevitable. In that regard, the novel can be seen as exhibiting warning signals for the town's looming death. One of the admonitions raised in the novel is the prevalence of river pollution. Early on in *Black Parade*, the heavily polluted Morlais Brook is memorably introduced. Glyn – who at this point in the text is the suitor of the protagonist, Saran – is waiting to meet his girlfriend. After what seems to be an agonising delay, Glyn spots her 'coming across the little bridge underneath which oozed along – it only ran or rushed after heavy rain – the most stinking brook in Britain'.⁶² Here, the word 'oozed' signifies the sluggish nature of the water, burdened with the discarded materials of a town unfit for human habitation. The fermenting odours of the stream bequeath the river with the unfortunate title of 'most stinking brook in Britain', which Jones repeats with tragicomic regularity. As well as being the introduction of the Morlais Brook, this is also the first time Jones places Glyn and Saran together in the narrative. How unfortunate it is – but clearly deliberate – that the young couple are first presented in such a putrid setting. The presence of the polluted brook perfectly mirrors the often-toxic relationship of Glyn and Saran. Furthermore, this is Jones undoubtedly departing from any notion of the standard tropes of Welsh industrial romance, evident in the work of writers such as Allen Raine, Richard Llewellyn and Alexander Cordell.

Jones's unwillingness to utilise the romantic form, especially in terms of contrasting the derelict Merthyr of his memories with the rural landscape of its past, distinguishes the writer from many of his above-mentioned literary forebears and contemporaries. For example, the pioneering and hugely successful Cardiganshire author Allen Raine includes a passage on river pollution in her early rendering of the Welsh industrial heartlands, *A Welsh Witch* (1902). In her detailed description of Glaish-y-Dail – the fictional Glamorganshire town that has been ravaged by the rapid spread of industrialisation – the impact on local rivers is highlighted. As is typical of industrial Romance, Raine begins with a pastorally inflected sketch of a river

⁶² Jones, 2005, p. 15.

running through rural landscape, before creating a stark contrast with the present, where large polluting industries stand threateningly on the riverbanks:

The river Gele wound its silver length through the valley which, twenty years before, had been one of complete rural seclusion. Now, alas! Its waters were polluted and utilised by the “works” of copper and iron which stood on its banks’.⁶³

Raine contrasts the clean, silvery quality of the river in a rural setting with its heavily polluted appearance near the works in the town. Once more, the past is idealised, as just two decades before the river was able to flow in complete isolation. However, in the present, the river is being used to aid the industrial process and, in return, its waters have been despoiled by the copper and iron producers that have situated their works on its banks. As explored later in this thesis, the heir of Raine’s romantic depiction of the Welsh industrial experience, Richard Llewellyn, represents river pollution in a similar way. However, in *How Green Was My Valley*, the author juxtaposes industrial river pollution with a rural present which, he affirms, is still extant in certain corners of the colliery towns and villages:

Below us, the river ran sweet as ever, happy in the sun, but as soon as it met the darkness between the sloping walls of slag it seemed to take fright and go spiritless, smooth, black, without movement. And on the other side it came forth grey, and began to hurry again, as though anxious to get away. But its banks were stained, and the reeds and grasses that dressed it were hanging, and black, and sickly, ashamed of their dirtiness, ready to die for shame, they seemed, and of sorrow for their dear friend, the river.⁶⁴

The heightened emotional tone of this passage is typical of Llewellyn’s style, and his novels in general. Nature is often personified as the author consistently presents instances of environmental degradation as a defilement of the innocent, green and explicitly ruralised landscape by the malevolent, coal-stained hand of industrialisation.

A third writer who can be placed alongside Raine and Llewellyn to form a trio of industrial Romance writers is Alexander Cordell. In his later romantic reworking of early industrialisation, *Rape of the Fair Country* (1959), Cordell uses Raine’s technique of looking

⁶³ Allen Raine, *A Welsh Witch: A Romance of Rough Places* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2013 [1902]), p. 221.

⁶⁴ Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1939]), p. 99.

to the rural past in his presentation of the industrial present. Describing the dereliction of the northern mining towns of Blaenau Gwent, the author repeatedly focuses on the pollution of local rivers:

I thought of my river, the Afon-Lwydd, that my father had fished in youth, with rod and line for the leaping salmon under the drooping alders. The alders, he said, that fringed the banks ten deep, planted by the wind of the mountains. But no salmon leap in the river now, for it is black with furnace washings and slag, and the great silver fish have been beaten back to the sea or gasped out their lives on sands of coal.⁶⁵

At other points in *Rape of the Fair Country*, Cordell uses Llewellyn's technique of describing river pollution in terms of the encroachment of industry on what remains of the rural present:

A new summer swept over the mountains bright and hot. Dandelions and meadowsweet grew in clusters along the banks of the Afon-Lwydd, where the last speckled trout fought a passage through the pollution of the industries, and the fields were yellow with celandine and buttercups.⁶⁶

These three examples stand in stark contrast to the way Jones represents river pollution in *Black Parade*. Unlike the quoted examples of Welsh industrial romance, Jones's novel refuses to be drawn into a lament of rural loss. Instead, *Black Parade* constructs a more realistic version of the Welsh industrial experience through vivid, and often uncomfortable, depictions of river pollution. In this regard, James A. Davies's assertion that Jones shares more similarities with rural romance writers is incorrect. Knight argues that 'through his material Jones is deliberately moving towards a social document', which again, would suggest that his work exists as a contrast to that of Raine, Llewellyn and Cordell.⁶⁷

Throughout *Black Parade*, Jones pairs the worryingly polluted Morlais Brook with his dearly loved protagonist, Saran, whom Tegai Hughes equates with Modron, the maternal figure of Welsh mythology.⁶⁸ Miranda Aldhouse-Green explains that the name Modron 'means

⁶⁵ This is presumably an error on Cordell's part, as the Afon Lwyd, or sometimes Llwyd, runs through the town of Blaenavon. Alexander Cordell, *Rape of the Fair Country* (Abergavenny: Bloreng Books, 1998 [1959]), p. 192.

⁶⁶ Cordell, 1998, p. 50.

⁶⁷ Knight, 2004, p. 77.

⁶⁸ Tegai Hughes, 1973, p. 54.

simply ‘mother’ or ‘divine mother’’, and furthermore, ‘the word Modron is cognate with Matrona, the word for mother-goddess inscribed on many Romano-Celtic altars to the Mothers in Gaul and the Rhineland during the early first millennium AD’, and ‘the name of the River Marne is also derived from Matrona’.⁶⁹ That there is a river connection at the end of this trail is indeed coincidental, but it does provide a context for the pairing of mother figures with waterways, which Jones revives in *Black Parade*. In the following passage, where – following a typical drinking session in the local pub – Glyn decides to visit his girlfriend, the polluted river is ever present:

He started off to fetch her out. As he crossed the little bridge over the stinking brook, which was almost dry and stinking worse than ever, he saw her with the old woman her mother sitting on the low wall in front of the house.⁷⁰

As Aldhouse-Green again explains, the Insular Celtic ‘link between goddesses, sexual activity and water may be all part of the same tradition in which divine females were frequently associated with springs, wells and rivers’.⁷¹ Rivers, Aldhouse-Green continues, were a ‘life-force’. If the same logic is applied to the earlier quotation in *Black Parade*, then the heavily contaminated state of the Morlais Brook does not offer a hopeful omen for the future of Saran and Glyn’s marital life.

Unsurprisingly, the rancid odour of the nearby river is present in other works of Welsh industrial literature. For example, in Lewis Jones’s *Cwmardy* (1937), the characters become desensitised to the rotten aroma of the nearby polluted river. As the men and women of the community gather for a political meeting, Jones writes how ‘they became accustomed to the putrid stench of decaying matter that rose from the nearby river, and it ceased to sting their nostrils’.⁷² Like the Morlais Brook in Jack Jones’s text, Lewis Jones’s pungent description of

⁶⁹ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), p. 65.

⁷⁰ Jones, 2005, p. 88.

⁷¹ Green, 1995, p. 80.

⁷² Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978 [1937]), p. 154.

the unnamed river – presumably based on Nant Clydach, a tributary that flowed through the author’s native Cwm Clydach [Clydach Vale] on its way to meet the larger River Rhondda – is equally unsettling. Both Jack Jones and Lewis Jones’s emphasis on environmental degradation renders an overall sense of toxicity to the shared discourse.

One of the very few cultural venues within *Black Parade* is significantly located in close proximity to Merthyr’s polluted waterway. The narrator describes how the theatre – comically referred to throughout as ‘the threatre’ by the protagonist, Saran – is ‘erected on the banks of the stinking and rat-infested Morlais Brook’.⁷³ Based on the town’s still extant, but tragically dilapidated, Theatre Royal, Jones’s emphasis on the closeness between the venue and the contaminated brook, highlights the extent to which pollution pervaded every aspect of life during the era.



Figure 7. Theatre Royal, Merthyr Tydfil.⁷⁴

⁷³ Jones, 2005, p. 47.

⁷⁴ My own photograph.

The location of the theatre in *Black Parade* invites parallels with other similarly placed cultural sites in the United Kingdom. Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre, for example, is located close to the River Irwell, whilst Glasgow's Citizens Theatre is situated nearby the River Clyde. These rivers were heavily polluted during the industrial revolution, and in the case of Glasgow's Citizen Theatre, this highlights the historical link between poverty, degraded environments and the reception of art.⁷⁵ In the case of *Black Parade*, Merthyr's inhabitants cannot escape the toxicity of their town, and are harshly reminded of it, even in their attempt to enjoy moments of cultural transcendence. Later, when Saran attends a play – one of her most cherished pastimes – the spectre of the severely polluted Morlais Brook returns her to reality with a vile stench:

[...] Saran had forgotten most of what she had that night seen and heard in the theatre before she and the children were halfway up the hill road which she had to climb to get from where the theatre was situated on the right bank of the stinking brook to the house in which she now lived with her family.⁷⁶

For Saran, the occasional trip to the theatre is an attempt to escape from her everyday existence. However, this is soon forgotten as she exits the theatre doors and is faced by the pungent smell of the nearby river, as well as a steep hill walk to negotiate with a band of young children. Interestingly, Jones had a great love for the theatre, which he fostered during his time as a miner's secretary-representative in Blaengarw. As Edwards explains:

In the evenings at Blaengarw he withdrew from industrial problems to foster opera and drama at the Workmen's Hall by arranging festivals and engaging professional singers and actors for the purpose: with three of his children he took part in the drama-productions of two amateur groups in the valley. During this period, when he was in his early forties, he wrote a short play, *Dad's Double*, especially for a local cast, and after they rejected it, in 1926 he entered the piece in a one-act-play competition at Manchester where it brought him a prize of three guineas, together with a little royalty money for one week's performances.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Another testament to the extent river pollution affected London was during the cholera outbreak in 1858. The hottest summer on record exacerbated an outbreak of the disease, brought on by the appalling pollution of the river Thames. Parliament was forced into recess, but before doing so, rushed through a new bill to cleanse the river. See Rosemary Ashton, *One Hot Summer: Dickens, Darwin, Disraeli, and the Great Stink of 1858* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁷⁶ Jones, 2005, p. 211.

⁷⁷ Edwards, 1974, p. 8.

It is thus not surprising to see the extent to which the theatre becomes a focus within the narrative of *Black Parade*. However, the proximity of the Morlais Brook to the novel's playhouse certainly suggests that in Victorian Merthyr, artistic expression always had to contend with the reality of environmental degradation.

‘UP FROM THE BROOK’:
AUDACIOUS VERMIN AND THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF TOXIC RIVERS⁷⁸

As previously discussed, ‘Toxic Discourse’ is described by Buell as an ‘expressed anxiety arising from a perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency’. This sense of anxiety is clearly expressed in the narrative with Jones’s repeated mention of river rats, which in great numbers populate the polluted Morlais Brook. Early on, Saran’s mother communicates a sense of disquiet regarding the threat of rats towards domestic animals, and then by extension, to her son, Harry, who has collapsed after a night of heavy drinking:

Saran was almost asleep when her mother awoke and asked: “Saran, is the dog – is Gyp in?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am.”

“That’s all right then; for if the dog happened to be left out them rats would be up from the brook same as before and him dead drunk p’raps it’s him an’ not boots they’d start on this time.”⁷⁹

Saran’s mother is understandably preoccupied by the threat of rats, and as the narrative continues, her anxiety increases. She is evidently dissatisfied with her daughter’s assurances that the dog is safely inside, as the narrator notes that ‘the old woman got out of bed and went downstairs to make sure’.⁸⁰ Saran’s mother’s obsession with the rats stresses the uneasiness caused by living in toxically compromised conditions. This tension continues throughout the

⁷⁸ Jones, 2005, p. 51.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

novel and, later on, when Saran waits for Glyn to return from the pub one evening, her mother's discomfort is expressed in familiar terms: '[...] mind you don't leave his working clothes or boots about the floor in case the rats come up from the brook same as they did that time they ate the tops of Harry's boots'.⁸¹ Toxic river pollution not only affects the local surroundings, but threatens to infiltrate the domestic and emotional threshold of the community. The population growth caused by the rapidity of Merthyr's industrialisation enforces a calamitous human-animal cohabitation. Rats stalk the personal lives of the local populace who, as the narrator explains, respond by hunting the pests in numbers:

Even on Sundays there was plenty to see. The large-scale rat-hunts along the left bank. Men with sticks who arrived with terriers at their heels and ferrets in their pockets. Rats were slaughtered by the score. Great sport, and the chaps enjoyed it until the "saved" came marching by on their way to or from chapel, and then the sporting and damned lowered their voices, and many of them slunk away with their terriers at their heels and the ferrets in their pockets.⁸²

It would seem that the mere presence of the chapelgoers is enough to disperse those who engage in the idle pursuit. However, in this passage, the localised pollution appears to bestow a sense of moral contamination on the community, as those who ignore its presence are 'saved', whilst those who engage with it are 'damned'.

Later in the novel, Jones dedicates a large portion of the narrative to describing the river rats in intricate detail, indicating a further authorial anxiety about the toxic nature of river pollution:

Oh, the rats, as big as they were brazen. In broad daylight, hundreds of 'em, playing about and sometimes feeding off the high – very – and dry bodies of the drowned cats and dogs which during dry seasons stood high out of the little water dribbling along towards the River Taff and the sea.⁸³

This grotesque description certainly makes for uncomfortable reading, and significantly, in Jones's aforementioned autobiography, *Unfinished Journey*, the writer uses these exact words

⁸¹ Jones, 2005, p. 137.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 185–6.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 181.

to describe the tragic exploitation, and subsequent abandonment, of Merthyr's people. Following on from the previously quoted line that describes Merthyr as a 'dead town', Jones continues, lamenting that his hometown has been 'left high and dry there on the uplands, with about fifteen thousand on the dole'.⁸⁴ It is clear to see that Jones felt a strong sense of anger with regards to the treatment of the people of Merthyr. Furthermore, in the earlier quoted passage from *Black Parade*, Jones is perhaps inviting the reader to draw parallels between the rats and the wealthy ironmasters, mine-owners and absent authorities, who feed on the bodies of the local populace, before leaving them high and dry.

The identification of oppressors with rats has a precedent in Welsh writing in English. Caradoc Evans's (1878–1945) controversial collection of short stories, *My People: Stories of the Peasantry of West Wales* (1915), undoubtedly would have been familiar to Jones due to the uproar it caused in Wales on publication. In 'Be This Her Memorial' – a shocking tale about an elderly, poverty-stricken woman, who is duped into purchasing an expensive Bible by a travelling fraudster – rats symbolise figures of authority in the village. 'Mice and rats', Evans begins, 'frequent neither churches nor poor men's homes'.⁸⁵ However, and here the controversial writer pauses, 'the story I have to tell you contradicts that theory'.⁸⁶ Throughout the short narrative, Nanni deteriorates as she endures horrific personal sacrifices in order to save money for the purchase of an expensive Bible, a gift for the charismatic minister, 'the Respected Josiah Bryn-Bevan'. At the conclusion of the tale, when the minister – set to leave the parish – visits Nanni to thank her for the generous gift, he makes a horrendous discovery:

There was no movement from Nanni. Mishtir Bryn-Bevan went on his knees and peered at her. Her hands were clasped tightly together, as though guarding some great treasure. The minister raised himself and prised them apart with ferrule of his walking-stick. A roasted rat revealed itself. Mishtir Bryn-Bevan stood for several moments spellbound and silent; and in the stillness the rats crept boldly out of their hiding places and

⁸⁴ Jones, 1937, p. 248.

⁸⁵ Caradoc Evans, 'Be This Her Memorial', in *My People* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 2003 [1915]), pp. 108–12, (p. 108).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

resumed their attack on Nanni's face. The minister, startled and horrified, fled from the house of sacrifice.⁸⁷

Given Evans's opening sentence, in which, 'rats frequent neither churches nor poor men's homes', the author is clearly drawing parallels between the rodents and the religious figures of the village. The ministers profess to serve their congregation but in reality, they are parasites on the pious community, who ultimately sacrifice everything to win their favour.

Merthyr's rat infestation was caused by the expansion of industry, and the subsequent rise in population. Widespread overcrowding meant that proper waste disposal measures were non-existent. Waste of all forms was often deposited in the river, which provided the perfect environment for rats to flourish. In another passage, Jones describes how 'butchers and fishmongers' would often throw scraps of food over their back walls into the brook below, which would then bring out the rats and provide the local children with an entertaining sight to behold.⁸⁸ Further accentuating the theme of toxicity, the narrator describes how the children 'also used to stand and wonder at the way the chemicals from the works changed the colour of the water of the brook'.⁸⁹ This quotation corresponds with Buell's notion of 'Toxic Discourse', which defines 'chemical modification by human agency' as a feature of textual representation. The narrator continues, highlighting how the pollution of the local industries modified the physical appearance of the rats:

One day the rats after they had swam (sic) from their sleeping apartments in the right wall to the playing grounds on the left bank, would come out of the water brick red, and maybe the next day a shiny green – all the colours of the rainbow in turn.⁹⁰

The pervasiveness of toxic water pollution is made disturbingly evident in this passage, as the animals that inhabit the river display signs of bodily alteration as a result of industrial waste. The glossy, artificial colours that coat the bodies of the rats create an unsettling image, as the

⁸⁷ Evans, 2003, p. 112.

⁸⁸ Jones, 2005, p. 182.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

categories of natural and unnatural are chemically distorted. In another passage, the presence of industrial pollution is intimated further, but this time in the nearby Taff. Saran's brother is described as staring into the 'oily, dirty water of the River Taff on which the high-riding moon conferred a sheen'.⁹¹ Once more, the choice of words suggests industrial interference in the water, which renders the surrounding landscape in artificial terms, where even the animals are becoming chemically modified.

Jones's novel is not alone in representing the industrial alteration of rivers and, in particular, the theme of oiliness. In Lewis Jones's *Cwmardy*, for instance, the nearby waterway is referred to as: 'shining with oily outpourings from the pit'.⁹² As touched upon above, Lewis Jones was from Clydach Vale in the Rhondda valley, and would have had first-hand experience of the polluted Nant Clydach, before the river made its journey east to feed the Rhondda at Tonypany, which would then flow south east to meet the Taff at Pontypridd. This serves as a reminder that writers of Welsh industry all shared a literary and literal geography. In *These Poor Hands* (1939), B. L. Coombes explicitly demonstrates that the oily effluence comes directly from the coal mine. Coombes – an Englishman who spent most of his life in the small village of Resolven, through which the River Neath flows – recalls entering the pit at the start of a shift, and noticing 'black, oily water [...] flowing continually along the roadway and out to the tip'.⁹³ In heavy rainfall, this polluted water would have easily made its way to the brooks and rivers of the surrounding landscape. Similarly, this by-product of industrialisation can be found in Gwyn Thomas's *The Dark Philosophers* (1946). At the beginning of the third novella, 'Simeon', Thomas juxtaposes the blackness of a coal-polluted river with the fresh-running waters of the rural uplands, in which Simeon lives:

[...] The house of Simeon stood nearer the mountain top than any other in the valley. It was surrounded by some two acres of cultivated land. It was rich land and bore for

⁹¹ Jones, 2005, p. 123.

⁹² Jones, 1978, p. 12.

⁹³ B. L. Coombes, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002 [1939]), p. 19.

Simeon many flowers and vegetables. Skirting the house was a narrow plantation of oaks through which a stream ran to feed the river in the valley.

We all thought it must be nice to have trees as near to the house as Simeon had them, and a stream that had white water and not black water like the one we had to spend most of our time staring at down in the valley.⁹⁴

As the unspoiled environment is still attainable in Thomas's depiction of the mining community, the reality of industrial pollution down in the valley becomes even starker. Once more, the distinction is class-based, as Simeon – in his roomy, upland dwelling – avoids the daily contamination experienced by the working-class populace in the colliery village. Another example is found in Glyn Jones's poem, 'Merthyr' (1954), where the Taff is described as 'the chromium river', and then later, the speaker observes 'the liquid coal of rivers' from the mountaintop outpost.⁹⁵ Clearly, these lines highlight the prevalence of coal in the local rivers, and the extent to which the surrounding environment has been altered by the coal industry.

Spanning poetry and fiction, these sources all express the same anxiety as Jack Jones's text, and Toxic Discourse – which places an emphasis on this notion of unease – provides a means with which to read other works of Welsh industrial literature. However, could these examples be considered simply as passive descriptions of the status quo, or as active protestations?

PART II: LITERARY ECO-PROTEST

Theoretical Beginnings: Environmental Justice

In her essay on water pollution in German literature, Melin argues that poets turn away from 'aesthetic appreciation of water in terms of its culturally rich, purifying properties and toward

⁹⁴ Gwyn Thomas, 'Simeon', in *The Dark Philosophers* (Cardigan: Parthian Books, 2006 [1946]), pp. 243–95 (p. 243).

⁹⁵ Glyn Jones, 'Merthyr', in *The Collected Poems of Glyn Jones*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 41–44, (p. 41).

scientific understanding that emphasizes the social and legal dimensions of water pollution’.⁹⁶

In a similar way, this second part will consider the social, legal – and by extension, political – implications of Jones’s representation of river pollution. In this regard, it is worth remembering that although Jones’s ambition was predominantly to tell the story of his beloved mother in *Black Parade* – he also wanted to provide a literary chronicle of Merthyr itself, and the rampant inequalities that dominated his hometown throughout his childhood. Despite setting *Black Parade* in the past, the author intended to draw parallels with the dire situation once again faced by the population in the 1930s, when the novel was published. This raises broader questions about the historical mode of nineteenth-century realism inherited by Jones. Social chronicles like George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) were often set thirty to forty years prior to the time of publication, and before the coming of technologies like railways and heavy industrialisation. Texts often looked back nostalgically to a time just past – or just in living memory – in which people were without ‘modern’ worries, or just on the cusp of experiencing them. However, for Jones, this same process of looking back simply reveals the appalling reality of life in working-class communities. The nostalgic mode of Eliot and Gaskell is unavailable within his lifetime, and Jones must look elsewhere. As Edwards explains, Jones found influences across the Atlantic:

Since the turn of the century American novelists [...] with first-hand experience of the way of life they were describing began to regard their books as vehicles for propaganda, advocating improved working conditions and equality of opportunity in education for people from all social strata [...] from 1934 to the outbreak of war in 1939, patterns of style and structural techniques in Jack Jones’s novels make it clear that he was impressed by the ‘hardboiled’ mode of such writers as James Cain, Dos Passos and James T. Farrell.⁹⁷

Following this passage, Edwards goes on to conduct a deeper analysis of Dos Passos’s influence on Jones. Indeed, Jones was clearly influenced by social realist American literature

⁹⁶ Melin, 2016.

⁹⁷ Edwards, 1974, pp. 13–14.

of the 1930s and earlier, but Dos Passos, in particular – who was a socialist at the beginning of his career – is perhaps most widely known for his experimentation with modernism, which would create a distance between him and the author of *Black Parade*. A more accurate comparison with Jones would be the Californian writer, John Steinbeck (1902–1968), especially given the fact that both authors share a concern for the political implications of environmental inequalities.⁹⁸ In *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* (2017), Yanoula Athanassakis argues that Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) has 'deep ecological implications', and furthermore, Grisel Y. Acosta contends that the characters of Steinbeck's novels repeatedly 'face hazards in rural environments'.⁹⁹ However, there is much more to be said about Steinbeck's writing and its relationship with the environment. The Californian author's landscapes are teeming with life and, more than other novelists of the era, Steinbeck set human action in the context of complex and vast ecological systems and changes, as in *East of Eden* (1952) and the long cycles of farming and cultivation. Moreover, Steinbeck's novels emphasised the ultimate interdependence of humanity and ecology, especially in the context of the Dust Bowl, which ravaged the ecology and agriculture of North American prairies in the 1930s. In addition to Steinbeck's immense popularity in the 1930s – which is the principal reason why Jones would have been aware of his work – the American author also had connections with Wales. Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold: A Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History* (1929), loosely chronicles the adventures of the seventeenth-century Welsh privateer, referencing many places in Wales – including Cardiff – within the narrative.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Steinbeck married Gwyndolyn Conger who, although a

⁹⁸ Although beyond the scope of this chapter, another comparison might be made back to other industrial writing from America, such as Upton Sinclair's *King Coal* (1917) and *Oil!* (1926).

⁹⁹ Yanoula Athanassakis, *Environmental Justice in Contemporary US Narratives* (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), p. 16; Grisel Y. Acosta, 'Ecocriticism and the Latino/a Landscape', in *The Routledge Comparison to Latino/a Literature*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), p. 196.

¹⁰⁰ John Steinbeck, *Cup of Gold: A Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History* (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1929]).

Chicago native, given her first name and the history of Welsh emigration to Illinois, perhaps had connections to Wales. Although published a year after *Black Parade*, Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936), can be compared to Jones's novel in its demand for increased wages and improved sanitary conditions for fruit workers in California.¹⁰¹ At one point in the text, the workers' accommodation is described as a 'kennel' by the protagonist, Jim, who then proceeds to lament the exploitation of the fruit pickers, who 'work all day; and the owner charges three cents extra for a can of beans because the men are too damn tired to go into town for groceries'.¹⁰² In terms of political disillusionment at conditions for working-class people, Jones is a worthy companion of Steinbeck, as Edwards reminds the reader that the former – in his autobiographical writing – 'emphasises that the authorities' neglect of the valley-people was a crime against humanity and that he would be their spokesman'.¹⁰³ This is a significant indication that Jones – like Steinbeck – viewed his work as a means of complaint against the injustices suffered by the people of Merthyr, and from the shared perspective of form, that the novel would be best suited for this purpose. Similarly, as Knight reminds us, on publication 'the Daily Worker reviewer urged that *Black Parade* should be 'widely read by all who seek to find the basis of the great social unrest in the British coalfields today'.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, this chapter argues that *Black Parade* can be viewed as a work of environmental justice, *avant la lettre*.

As Buell explains, the origins of the environmental justice movement were in America, but the exact date of beginning is contested. Although many view the official establishment as the '1982 North Carolina African American community's resistance to the siting of a waste dump in its backyard', Joan Martinez-Alier argues that the Love Canal disaster of 1978 cannot

¹⁰¹ John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1936]).

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 77.

¹⁰³ Edwards, 1974, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Knight, 'A New Enormous Music': Industrial Fiction in Wales', in *Welsh Writing in English*, ed. by M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 47–90, (p. 63).

be overlooked as an event that highlighted the large-scale environmental inequalities faced by American society.¹⁰⁵ Of course, environmental justice as a movement with a specific conceptual framework certainly emerged in the United States from the civil rights movement and theorisations of environmental racism, but resistance to ecological damage has a long and global history, tied up with colonialism and industrialisation across the world.¹⁰⁶ For example, the Chipko movement in 1970s India was inspired by the actions of Rajasthani villagers, who in the eighteenth century sacrificed their lives to protect local trees.¹⁰⁷

In the United Kingdom, the environmental justice movement primarily grew as a response to developments in America but, as a 2001 report by the Economic and Social Research Council explains, political discussion about environmental justice in the UK was initially scarce.¹⁰⁸ In 2008, the Environment Agency – a non-departmental public body of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – published a report on environmental inequality and water. In the report, environmental inequality – ‘a sub-component of environmental justice’ – is described as: ‘an aspect of the environment [that] is distributed unevenly amongst different social groups (differentiated by social class, ethnicity, gender, age, location)’.¹⁰⁹

In July 2000, a report published by *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in the USA, declared that the aims of the environmental justice movement

¹⁰⁵ Buell, 2005, p. 117. The prolonged dumping of toxic waste at Love Canal – a neighbourhood in Niagara Falls, New York – created an environmental disaster, which reached crisis point in the late 1970s. It is viewed as a turning point in the environmental history of the United States.

¹⁰⁶ Another significant moment in the history of environmental justice in the United States was the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster in which hundreds of miners died of silicosis between 1930 and 1935. Muriel Rukeyser’s poetry collection, *The Book of the Dead* (1938), remembers the tragedy, and would be a suitable text to analyse alongside works of Welsh industrial writing.

¹⁰⁷ See Thomas Weber, *Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement* (London: Penguin, 1989).

¹⁰⁸ Carolyn Stephens, Simon Bullock and Alister Scott, *Environmental Justice: Rights and Means to a Healthy Environment For All*, Special Briefing No. 7 (London: Economic and Social Research Council, 2001), online: <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/environmental_justice.pdf> [Accessed 10th August 2018], p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Damery, Gordon Walker, Judith Petts and Graham Smith, *Addressing Environmental Inequalities: Water Quality* (Bristol: Environment Agency, 2008), online: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/291068/scho0507bmr-u-e-e.pdf> [Accessed 10th August 2018], p. 8.

were: 'to achieve equity and fairness in the distribution of environmental burdens and environmental benefits, and the understanding that environmental issues are intrinsically connected to social justice issues'.¹¹⁰ Later in the report, the authors – Joni Adamson and Rachel Stein – lament the fact that 'there has been little academic work on the literature of environmental justice'.¹¹¹ Subsequently, Adamson and Stein suggest a selection of contemporary North American texts that would prove fruitful for studies into environment justice and literature, such as: Gerald Vizenor's *Landfill Meditation: Crossblood Stories* (1991), Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993) and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1994). Many of these texts were written by authors from Indigenous or immigrant communities, who draw on the inequalities experienced by their people over countless generations, and how these injustices are increasingly environmentally inflected.¹¹²

Jack Jones is a significant predecessor to these authors. He was writing from a deprived nation within the UK, which has experienced historical forms of environmental inequality, due to the exploitation of natural resources. Adamson and Stein focused on contemporary texts, yet, as is evident from the work of Steinbeck, accounts of environmental injustice were being written at the beginning of the twentieth century. In that regard, Jones's *Black Parade* actively questions the seemingly imbalanced ways in which a host of environmental burdens have been distributed. Through examining aspects like the relationship between poverty and river pollution, as well as the representation of the many public health issues that arise from poor sanitation, I reimagine Jones's novel as a work of environmental protest.

¹¹⁰ Joni Adamson and Rachel Stein, 'Environmental Justice: A Roundtable Discussion', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 7, 2 (2000), pp. 155–70, (p. 156).

¹¹¹ Adamson and Stein, 2000, p. 156.

¹¹² For a deeper examination of the relationship between minority literatures and environmental justice, as well as the civil rights origins of the movement, Paul Outka's *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) is an excellent resource.

‘RUNNING BY HER DOORSTEP’:
POLLUTED RIVERS AND THE PROXIMITY OF POVERTY¹¹³



Figure 8. Dixon Street, Merthyr Tydfil.¹¹⁴

Throughout *Black Parade*, Jones consistently depicts river pollution in terms of its relationship with poverty. As Edwards reminds us, this is unsurprising, given that fact that Jones ‘was reared among dirty and coarse neighbours in a late Victorian slum in a town where vile and degrading conditions were widespread’.¹¹⁵ In the novel, the narrator describes the notorious Iron Bridge district as an area in which prostitution was rife; here, Jones may be referring to ‘China’, the infamous quarter that, ‘earned Merthyr a reputation for immorality’.¹¹⁶ It was, as Joe England describes, ‘neither an ironworks community nor a part of the old village but a maze of alleys,

¹¹³ Jones, 2005, p. 181.

¹¹⁴ My own photograph. Dixon Street was part of the area known locally as ‘China’.

¹¹⁵ Edwards, 1974, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ England, 2017, p. 32.

narrow courts and tortuous lanes along the bank of the Taff from the lowest point of the High Street towards Cyfarthfa'.¹¹⁷ A newspaper report from the time delivered a damning verdict of the district:

Here it is that, in a congenial atmosphere, the crime, disease, and penury of Merthyr are for the most part located. Thieves, prostitutes, vagrants, the idle, the reckless, the dissolute, here live in a miserable companionship [...] what I that day saw of misery, degradation, and suffering, I shall remember to the end of my life.¹¹⁸

Through examining historical maps of Merthyr, it is clear to see that Jones's family home was located in very close proximity to 'China', and so the young boy would have been all too aware of the activities within the disreputable neighbourhood. In *Black Parade*, it is into this district that Glyn journeys, when asked by a friend, Shenk, "to go down to the Iron Bridge and get [...] a Moll apiece".¹¹⁹ Glyn – clearly wanting to maintain a sense of bravado – agrees, but is anxious, as 'the district was most dangerous for anyone with money in his pocket'.¹²⁰ The narrator then describes how this 'common lodging house district' was located 'on the banks of the River Taff' as was the notorious 'China' quarter, and furthermore confirms that the poorest areas, with the most social problems, are located close to the town's polluted rivers. Once more, there is also a moral connection between pollution and sin, as well as the question of the river being an agent of pollution or a victim itself.

As is evident throughout *Black Parade*, the characters' proximity to the polluted Morlais Brook is an indication of their lower social status, which, by definition, is an example of environmental inequality. There are many occasions in the text where Saran laments the terrible conditions experienced by her family. In the following passage, the protagonist

¹¹⁷ England, 2017, p. 33.

¹¹⁸ Jules Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849–1851. Vol. III: The Mining and Manufacturing Districts of North Wales and South Wales* (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass and Company, 1983), p. 39, quoted in England, 2017, p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Jones, 2005, p. 112.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 113.

describes in detail some of the worst aspects of her ramshackle house, and once more, this builds into a crescendo where the polluted river arrives as a sobering climax:

No back, that was the worst thing about the house, the back wall of which was serving as the foundation wall for the house above, one of “the Top Houses”, as the row of cottages built on the bottom row in which she lived was called. Then – pouf, smelling as strong as ever, she thought – running by her doorstep, was the stinking Morlais Brook [...]¹²¹

There is a significant sensory interruption in the free indirect speech, as the stench on the polluted river interrupts Saran’s internal monologue. With no garden space in the back and a heavily polluted river in the front, Saran and her family are imprisoned within the derelict confines of their lodgings. Moreover, viewing the garden as a home economy, they lack the ability to cultivate food and become self-sufficient. For Saran and her family, home exists merely as a holding cell; a place to endure, rather than enjoy. In Victorian Merthyr Tydfil, living conditions were not a consideration for the ironmasters and mine-owners, who placed profit over the health and wellbeing of their workforce. As Joe England explains, the local industries attracted a large migrant workforce, but there was inadequate preparation for their arrival, and the obvious environmental consequences quickly became social issues for the local populace:

The waves of incoming humanity compounded the environmental disaster by overwhelming the scanty accommodation. Shanties – *tai-unnos* – were swiftly flung up on the periphery of the village and around the works – sometimes within them – in total disorder. Local speculators – shopkeepers, farmers, publicans, builders – borrowed to build and sought the maximum return by randomly cramming houses without drains or lavatories into every available nook and cranny. Faced with this urgent human need, the ironmasters were slow to respond.¹²²

Given this state of affairs, it is clear to see how insufficient housing rapidly became an issue in the town, and families like Saran’s were forced to suffer inhumane conditions, in which public health and welfare were severely compromised. This theme is evident in other works of

¹²¹ Jones, 2005, p. 181.

¹²² England, 2017, p. 26.

industrial literature from Wales in both English and Welsh. In T. Rowland Hughes's *Chwalfa* (1946) [translated as *Out of Their Night*], Idris – a character originally from a slate mining community in north Wales – brings his family to the south in order to find work. Due to scant financial resources, the family have to take a dilapidated house in the ironically named Pleasant Row. Unfortunately, their property happens to be closest to the river, in which 'tuniau a'r potiau a'r ysbwrial'¹²³ [tins, pots and refuse]¹²⁴ are routinely discarded. Following a few days of heavy rainfall, the river rises up into the house and forces the family to relocate upstairs. Unsurprisingly, this leaves Idris's wife, Martha, with a great deal of anxiety, and she confesses to a friend that she fears for the health of her children:

“O, mae'r dŵr wedi mynd i lawr rŵan, meddo fo, Martha.”

“Ydi a gadael 'i faw a'i ddrewdod ar 'i ôl yn y tŷ a thros yr ardd. Mae arna' i ofn yn fy nghalon y bydd Kate ne' Ifan bach yn cael rhyw afiechyd mawr.”¹²⁵

[“Oh, the water has gone down by now, he says, Martha.”

“Yes, and leaving its filth and stink behind in the house and over the garden. I am afraid in my heart that Kate or Evan bach will catch some serious illness.”]¹²⁶

As in Jones's novel, lack of financial resources often has a direct correlation with proximity to river pollution. Consequently, families who live near contaminated rivers do so in constant fear of contracting waterborne viruses, obviously exacerbated through instances of flooding.

As *Black Parade* continues, it seems as if Saran and her family are condemned to a life of poverty, defined by the polluted brook that flows outside the front door. However, later on in the narrative, the family are finally able to afford a move away from the filthy hovel. As the narrator explains, Saran's 'eldest boy was by this time working with his dad in the pit, and her second boy was being got ready to go to the pit the following Monday'.¹²⁷ This increase in the shared family income slightly eases the financial burden, and allows Saran and her family to

¹²³ T. Rowland Hughes, *Chwalfa* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2016 [1946]), p. 183.

¹²⁴ T. Rowland Hughes, *Chwalfa* [*Out of Their Night*], trans. by Richard Ruck (Aberystwyth: Gwasg Aberystwyth, 1954 [1946]), p. 148.

¹²⁵ Rowland Hughes, 2016, pp. 188–89.

¹²⁶ Rowland Hughes, 1954, p. 152. In this quotation, 'bach' means little, in reference to the children.

¹²⁷ Jones, 2005, p. 194.

move to a ‘cottage high up on the rise above the town and far away from the stinking brook and the rats’.¹²⁸ This residential improvement is directly linked to the amount of physical distance between the new house and Morlais Brook. This is significant given that proximity to rivers in the early modern period was often associated with freedom and social and physical mobility, giving access to water by boat. Furthermore, when one considers the fact that many ancient and modern cities exist because of the rivers they are sited on, there is an ironic inversion in *Black Parade* when that life-giving source becomes detrimental to human existence.

‘OLD DEATH MOWED ALONG THE BANKS’:
WATERBORNE DISEASE AND THE ABSENCE OF SANITATION¹²⁹

As a further means of emphasising the relationship between poverty and river pollution, throughout *Black Parade*, Jones highlights instances of poor sanitation and the associated health consequences, which are directly exacerbated by an inability to access clean water. Early on in the novel, Glyn’s father – known locally as ‘Frank, the mason’ – is briefly introduced. In an elaboration of local detail, the narrator describes Frank as being in a:

[S]tate referred to as “the decline”, which had set in after he had worked slopping about in water for about twelve hours a day on the construction of a culvert to carry the Morlais Brook under a main road to join the River Taff. Yes, that job was the death of him, all right.¹³⁰

The construction of the culvert was a large engineering project – especially judging by the fact that it is still in use today – so it would have required workers to be exposed to high levels of water pollution for a long period. Glyn’s father is a casualty of the Morlais Brook, despite being a ‘tidy man’, who had never ‘touched the drink’, and ‘as regular as clockwork did he attend his

¹²⁸ Jones, 2005, p. 194.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 100.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 40.

chapel and his Sunday school'.¹³¹ However, it would seem that the polluted river does not recognise soberness and piety, and now Frank is confined to his bed, dependent on his children for support. This is the point in the text when the metaphor of the contaminated river becomes literal. Here, the Morlais Brook is an agent that truly corrupts the bodies of the working class.

As the novel progresses, Jones is more explicit in his references to the devastating health consequences of water pollution and poor sanitation. Recalling one of the many shocking public health catastrophes that occurred in Merthyr's history, the narrator describes:

[T]he typhoid epidemic which came about corn harvest time and wiped out thousands who thought they were going to live for ever. But old death mowed along the banks of the stinking Morlais Brook and along the banks of the River Taff.¹³²

Here, Jones's grim personification evokes medieval imagery of death. Equipped with his scythe, the shadowy figure significantly arrives at 'corn harvest time', ready to mow down thousands of unsuspecting citizens who live in close proximity to the deathly rivers. Moreover, a consultation of the local newspaper archives records significant typhoid epidemics at Merthyr in September 1900 and September 1903, which illustrates the frequency of these outbreaks during Jones's childhood.¹³³ As P. D. Abel explains, 'typhoid infection is usually caused by ingestion of bacteria from faecally-contaminated water or food'.¹³⁴ The following quotation describes in further nauseating detail exactly how the disease would have been contracted from the surrounding environment. The filthy banks of the brook are described as 'surfaced with human and animal excrement for about a foot above the original bank',¹³⁵ and over time, this has been hardened:

[I]nto layers of dung cakes which were by now capable of bearing the weight of all who hurried to the left bank to ease themselves when the three earth closets which the twelve

¹³¹ Jones, 2005, p. 41.

¹³² Ibid, p. 100.

¹³³ 'Typhoid Fever at Merthyr', *Evening Express*, 20th September 1900; 'Typhoid Epidemic at Merthyr', *The Cardiff Times*, 19th September 1903.

¹³⁴ P. D. Abel, *Water Pollution Biology* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2002), p. 168.

¹³⁵ Jones, 2005, p. 182.

families living in the twelve houses in the “Bottom Row” shared, were found to be engaged, as they usually were from morning to night.¹³⁶

In addition to the scatological revulsion of the passage, Jones highlights the problem of short-term building works which, based on profit, fail to account for either human, or ecological cycles. Coupled with the basic need for sanitation, there is no consideration of the river’s ebbs and floods, which compound the flow of waterborne disease. Unfortunately, Saran and her young children are often forced to ‘do their business’ in ‘broad daylight’, over ‘on the left bank owing to the closets being unavailable when nature called’.¹³⁷ Here, the use of ‘nature’ is contrasted with the defiled river, as Jones emphasises Saran and her children’s humiliation in their squalor. This is made worse at night, when Saran has to ‘accompany her children, who feared the rats, to the left bank’.¹³⁸ Concluding this sorry image, the narrator explains how the dire lack of sanitation provision had ‘drawbacks such as periodical fever and smallpox epidemics [...]’.¹³⁹ At these moments the novel is functioning like a social document, as Jones bemoans the lack of municipal provision for deprived families, which again results in adverse health consequences. However, eventually – as Borsay and Knight explain – those in power had to respond to the dire living conditions of the local populace:

The nineteenth century saw the introduction of significant legislation to tackle the public health problems associated with industrialization [...] the Public Health Act of 1872 created local sanitary authorities and made the appointment of a medical officer of health (MOH) obligatory [...] The 1936 Public Health Act consolidated the law in relation to sanitation, drainage, water supply and infectious diseases.¹⁴⁰

This last Act was a result of a damning survey by the Ministry of Health, conducted some years earlier in 1921, which concentrated specifically on the coalfields of south Wales. Again, as Borsay and Knight explain, one of the focuses of the report was ‘economy in the provision of

¹³⁶ Jones, 2005, p. 182.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Anne Borsay and Sara Knight, *Medical Records for the South Wales Coalfield, c. 1890–1948* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 193–94.

water supply, sewerage and other services'.¹⁴¹ The report found that, 'sanitation provision was poor and sometimes altogether absent', before recommending that a Regional Water Supply Board should be created, and that, 'amenities such as baths', should become widespread, and furthermore, 'the control and levelling of dumps and the cessation of river pollution' should be a major priority.¹⁴² It would appear that by the time *Black Parade* was published, the Government was beginning to respond to the reality of environmental inequality. However, Jones's text exists as a reminder of municipal neglect.

As previously discussed, when Saran and her family are afforded the opportunity to move into a new house – far away from the polluted Morlais Brook – the improvement in sanitation facilities is one of the most appreciated aspects of the change. Now Saran has 'a closet, which she and her family shared only with the family living next door, a closet which she and her children could expect to find empty and ready for use nearly every time they required use of it'.¹⁴³ However, they have only managed to achieve this move as a result of the unrelenting work of the men in the colliery and the equally exhausting effort of Saran, who is responsible for maintaining every other aspect of family life. In this regard, throughout *Black Parade*, Jones appears to hold the work of the mother in higher esteem, in comparison to the father. As Knight explains, Saran:

[I]s not the downtrodden mother of some industrial fiction, largely because very little is made of the heroics of male work. There are scenes in the pit, and the damaging effects of the work are noticed, but Glyn, as both collier and father, becomes a rather marginal character. It is one of the characteristics of Welsh industrial fiction to give women a strong role as coordinators, and this seems neither a product of early feminist urges nor yet the influence of Rhys Davies [...] but rather a simple realization of a world where men were away for long hours at work, and sometimes at drink, and both heavy physical labour and the bonds of social connection were the inevitable lot of the women.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Borsay and Knight, 2007, p. 194.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Jones, 2005, p. 194.

¹⁴⁴ Knight, 2004, p. 78.

From a feminist perspective, Jones is keen to recognise the significance of domestic labour, and even place it higher in value than the coal mining of the father. Saran is the heroine of the text, who triumphs despite being failed by the authorities. Consequently, the reader is glad when she manages to find a better life for her family, but it remains clear that there has been no municipal assistance in their long and exhausting journey. Jones leaves the reader in no doubt that the authorities fail to provide infrastructure for the large number of workers who flocked to the towns, and that labour is the only exit from poverty. As Joe England explains:

In 1798 when Cyfarthfa employed almost 1,000, it owned 70 workers' houses, Penydarren 49, Dowlais 58 and Plymouth 15. These were homes for the imported skilled workers, the core of the labour force, for whom additional houses of good quality were later built near Cyfarthfa at "Williamstown" and "Georgetown" and at Dowlais as the works expanded. Anthony Hill built "the triangle" for his core workers at Pentrebach. The unskilled and their families had to fend for themselves.¹⁴⁵

It is clear to see how these shocking inequalities played an instrumental role in shaping the individuals who would contribute to the founding of the National Health Service in the United Kingdom. Around ten miles east of Merthyr Tydfil is Tredegar, and in 1890, The Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid and Sick Relief Fund was formed to serve the local community.¹⁴⁶



¹⁴⁵ England, 2017, pp. 26–27.

¹⁴⁶ Niklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan* (London: I. B. Taurus & Co., 2015), p. 39.

Figure 9. The Central Surgery Nursing Home, Tredegar.¹⁴⁷

The idea was simple; members contributed part of their salary to the fund and received free healthcare in return. Tredegar-born Aneurin Bevan – as part of the post-war Labour government – turned to the Tredegar model in his establishment of the National Health Service in 1948.¹⁴⁸ Again, the characters of *Black Parade* are too early to enjoy the benefits of free healthcare, and have to face the negative health consequences exacerbated by the heavily polluted Morlais Brook.

Towards the end of *Black Parade*, Jones hints at a potential resolution to the lack of sanitation in Merthyr. One evening, as Harry – Saran’s brother – is searching for his old flame – Gypsy Nell – he combs the local public houses and finds them heaving with a new wave of migrant labourers, recently arrived in Merthyr to work on a large-scale, out-of-town engineering project:

He looked into two of the pubs in the district, looked in the bars and in all the rooms, without being able to find her. Then he tried the Patriot, which was crowded, for in addition to “the usuals” there were scores of navvies in for the weekend from the big waterworks job which was in progress about seven miles out of town.¹⁴⁹

This ‘big waterworks job’ may solve the sanitation issues faced by the population of Merthyr, or at least alleviate the town’s reliance on contaminated water sources. Here, and indeed throughout the novel, the author is using the historical past to envision Merthyr’s future. When Jones published the text in the 1930s, Merthyr – and south Wales – was once more in decline, following large-scale closures in the iron and steel industries. As the historian John Davies explains, ‘Cyfarthfa closed in 1921, Blaenavon in 1922, Ebbw Vale in 1929 and the greater

¹⁴⁷ My own photograph. The Central Surgery Nursing Home now operates in the original Grade II listed building that housed Tredegar’s Central Surgery, built using contributions from The Tredegar Workmen’s Medical Aid and Sick Relief Fund.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas-Symonds, 2015, p. 39.

¹⁴⁹ Jones, 2005, p. 235.

part of Dowlais in 1930'.¹⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, this had devastating consequences and, as Davies describes, joblessness:

[R]eached its zenith in August 1932, when 42.8 per cent of insured Welsh males were unemployed [...] the hardest-hit community was that of Merthyr Tydfil, with its 13,000 unemployed.¹⁵¹

Thus, Jones wrote *Black Parade* at a time when the future of his hometown was unclear. With 13,000 unemployed in the town, it would have been an extremely testing time for the local community. Of course, Jones was himself unemployed at the time of writing the novel, which would have imbued the writer with a keener awareness of the struggles that arise as a result of no financial support. In this regard, *Black Parade* can therefore be viewed as a work of protest, not just for the environmental catastrophe that occurred during Jones's own childhood in Merthyr, but for the potential disasters that might occur in the future.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of this chapter, I argued that 'Toxic Discourse' provides a useful model for approaching Jones's means of writing environmental degradation as a result of industrialisation. Although typically, Buell's notion has been applied to late-twentieth-century texts, Welsh industrial writing is arguably a forerunner to 'Toxic Discourse', as it shares the same preoccupations with contamination, as well as the realisation that the earth has been changed irrevocably, as a result of human – and increasingly industrial – intervention. Throughout Jones's text, the spectre of river pollution permeates every facet of life, including aspects as diverse as the formation of relationships, the human act of excretion and even the cultural escape of attending the theatre. As a result, characters respond to this heightened awareness of toxicity with increased levels of anxiety. In particular, rats play a significant role

¹⁵⁰ John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 2007 [1994]), p. 542.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

in ensuring anxiety is maintained at a consistently high level, whilst the industrial pollution of rivers confirms that explicit chemical modification also remains a threat. Rats themselves are the subject of chemical alteration, due to their proximity to the processes of the industrial works. Consequently, Jones's novel could be viewed as a work of protest against the environmental inequalities experienced by Merthyr's local populace.

In the second part of this chapter, I showed how *Black Parade* can be read as an environmental justice narrative alongside a tradition of social realist writing from America. In advocating for improved living conditions for some of the most unrepresented members of society, Jones can be compared to John Steinbeck. From the beginning of the text, Jones creates a clear correlation between poverty and exposure to river pollution, which means that often the people who are worst prepared to contend with waterborne diseases – such as cholera and typhoid – are the ones who are first to face the tragic consequences, due to their proximity to contaminated water. Furthermore, the lack of proper sanitation remains a constant concern within the narrative, and the subsequent normalising of unrestricted waste disposal in rivers only exacerbates this issue. Those who are most at risk are denied proper support from local authorities, as value is determined by an individual's ability to ensure large companies increase their profit. It would seem that the only way out of poverty is through unrelenting work, which means that many people's lives become nasty, brutish and short. Even though Jones was writing about historical events in his novel, the publication date suggests that the author was intending to make clear parallels with the contemporary crises that faced Merthyr – and Wales – in the 1930s. As a result, *Black Parade* clearly documents a society in disarray, and serves as a stark warning for future generations.

CHAPTER TWO | BLACK ROOTS

‘And scorn the tree’: Deforestation in Idris Davies’s *Gwalia Deserta*¹



Figure 10. The Spirit of Llynfi Woodland, Maesteg.²

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: THE LLYNFI VALLEY AND INDUSTRIAL DEFORESTATION

‘Sixty thousand new trees will make this valley scarred by mining look beautiful once again’, announced the headline on the popular news website, *Wales Online*, in November 2015.³ Adapted from a Bridgend County Council press release, the article explained that work had

¹ Davies, 1994, ll. 9–16, p. 6

² My own photograph.

³ Abby Bolter, ‘Sixty thousand new trees will make this valley scarred by mining look beautiful once again’, *Wales Online*, 3rd November 2015, available online: <<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/sixty-thousand-new-trees-make-10378912>> [Accessed 1st March 2019].

begun on ‘a 10-year project to transform the former Coegnant Colliery and Maesteg Washery site into an all-new Llynfi Valley community woodland’.⁴ A further page on the Natural Resources Wales website provides some additional information on the project, explaining that within the ‘Spirit of Llynfi Woodland’:

Over 60,000 trees have been planted [...] including a mixture of broadleaves, fruit and ornamental trees [...] The woodland was designed and developed with the community, for the community. It was sponsored by the Welsh Government Nature Fund and the Ford Motor Company Global Fund.⁵

In addition to this, on-site facilities include: ‘footpaths, running trails, cycle trail, bridleway, seating areas’ and ‘geocaches’.⁶ I can confirm that the Spirit of Llynfi woodland is a pleasant place to visit and clearly valued by the local community. However, the project raises questions about our complex relationship with the non-human environment – should we look beyond the needs of the human ‘community’ in the process of landscape change? Should we, ultimately, question the ethics of public space funded by fossil-fuel dependent corporations?⁷

The project also provokes a deeper sense of reflection on the place of trees throughout the industrialisation of Wales. During the early days of iron production in the southern counties, large swathes of forest were cleared in order to provide fuel for the immense blast furnaces. As the historian Frank Emery explains, ‘iron furnaces’ in ‘Aberdare, Merthyr’ and ‘Radyr’ ‘all consumed load after load of charcoal, which in turn caused the deforestation of hundreds of acres’.⁸ Moreover, a report from the Cardiff Naturalists’ Society records that ‘Welsh

⁴ Bolter, 2015.

⁵ ‘Spirit of Llynfi Woodland, near Bridgend’, *Natural Resources Wales*, available online: <<https://naturalresources.wales/days-out/places-to-visit/south-east-wales/spirit-of-llynfi-woodland-near-bridgend/?lang=en>> [Accessed 1st March 2019].

⁶ Ibid. ‘Geocaching is a real-world, outdoor treasure hunting game using GPS-enabled devices. Participants navigate to a specific set of GPS coordinates and then attempt to find the geocache (container) hidden at that location.’, see: <<https://www.geocaching.com/guide/>> [Accessed 1st March 2019].

⁷ The Spirit of Llynfi Woodland is, of course, a relatively minor issue when compared to some of the environmental abuses discussed in this thesis. However, the project raises questions about the implementation of climate change mitigation, especially in terms of carbon offsetting and greenwashing.

⁸ Frank Emery, ‘The Farming Regions of Wales: Rural Industries’, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: 1500-1640*, Vol. 4, ed. by Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1967]), pp. 157–60 (p. 158).

ironmasters [...] first began to smelt iron with coal at Merthyr Tydfil in 1759. But charcoal was also used, and this led to the deforestation of the district'.⁹ It would seem that this situation was widespread in south Wales, as the local historian, Tony Fisher – writing about Idris Davies's Rhymney valley – explains that, 'before industrialisation [...] it was a thickly wooded area [...] But as the trees were required for fuel in the iron making industry, the wooded areas soon disappeared'.¹⁰

This landscape change – initiated by the early ironmasters – was then continued by other industries. As Nerys Owens explains, 'when coal later replaced charcoal as a major industrial fuel, much of the surviving woodland in the mid Wales uplands was felled to fulfil the demand for pit-props from the colliers comprising the south Wales coal-mining industry [...]'.¹¹ As the coal industry in Wales boomed, the opening of new trade routes with other countries meant that many Welsh collieries were able to look further afield for better quality wood. Norwegian timber, largely consisting of pine trees, was valued by Wales's mining industry for its strength in forming pit props. At the peak of coal production, Norway and Wales formed a reciprocal trade link as the strong, Scandinavian wood was exported from Norway in large ships, and then coal was loaded into the empty vessels, before being sent back up the North Sea. The Norwegian church in Cardiff Bay, originally built in 1868, is a testament to this historical trade link, whilst also highlighting both the local and global impact of the coal industry.

⁹ Bruce Campbell, 'A Comparison of Bird Populations upon "Industrial" and "Rural" Farmland in South Wales', *Reports and Transactions: Cardiff Naturalists' Society*, Vol. LXXXI, 1950–52, pp. 4–65 (p. 6).

¹⁰ Tony Fisher, *A Few Steps Away: Coal Mining in the Rhymney Valley, 1816–1819* (Hengoed: Rhymney Valley District Council, 1990), p. 1.

¹¹ Nerys Owens, 'Forestry and the Challenge of Post-Industrial Transformation: A Study of the Mid Wales Uplands' in *Rural Wales in the Twenty-First Century: Society, Economy and Environment*, ed. by Paul Milbourne (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 301–21 (p. 309).



Figure 11. The Norwegian Church, Cardiff Bay.¹²

It is with a degree of circularity, then, that former industrial areas – like the Llynfi valley – are once again turning to trees in order to transform the local landscape. Previously, forests were cleared in order to allow easier access to the prized resources that lay beneath the surface, whilst also providing valuable fuel and construction materials to aid the industrial process. However, today afforestation is viewed as a means by which historical wrongs can be made right; ex-industrial sites can now be returned to their original state, with trees providing the dressing under which the scars of the past can be concealed, and perhaps forgotten.

Coal and trees are inextricably linked. As William Fordyce notes in one nineteenth-century history, ‘it would seem that, on the sites of the great Coal-seams, forests of gigantic

¹² Cardiff Bay was formerly known as Tiger Bay. My own photograph.

trees formerly grew, amidst a vast profusion of ferns, club mosses, and the like.’¹³ Furthermore, as Wendell H. Wiser explains, ‘coal is understood to have been formed from trees, ranging from large trees down to tiny shrubs, even spores and exudates.’¹⁴ The process of mining, then, can be viewed in terms of an exhumation of trees that have lain buried for centuries.

LITERARY BIOGRAPHY: RHYMNEY’S MOST FAMOUS SON



Figure 12. Idris Davies’s house, Victoria Road, Rhymney.¹⁵

¹³ William Fordyce, *A History of Coal, Coke, Coal Fields* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1860), p. 8.

¹⁴ Wendell H. Wiser, *Energy Resources: Occurrence, Production, Conversion, Use* (New York: Springer, 2000), p. 106.

¹⁵ My own photograph. The current owner of the house kindly allowed me to take the photograph and was happy to be included in the shot.

Less than thirty miles to the east of the Llynfi valley sits the town of Rhymney. Surrounded by imposing, green hills with sporadic clumps of woodland scattered about the slopes, the Rhymney valley exhibits some degree of topographical similarity to the Llynfi valley, at least to an outsider. Indeed, today, Rhymney is a relatively quiet place, but in 1905 it was a frenetic, vibrant town with almost all of the local population employed by the nearby collieries. It was in this year that Idris Davies was born. Coal miner, then schoolteacher and now Rhymney's most famous son, Davies aimed to document – through poetry – his experience of life in south Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century. Davies wrote many poems of varying lengths, but he is best known for his extended sequences, such as *The Angry Summer* (1943), *Tonypandy* (1945), and the earlier *Gwalia Deserta* (1938), on which this chapter will focus.

Gwalia Deserta is a long sequence of thirty-six poems, all of different structures, lengths and styles. Thematically, it is an impassioned response to the period of rapid industrialisation and subsequent economic decline experienced by south Wales during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Put simply, *Gwalia Deserta* documents change, which is felt both in terms of its human and environmental consequences. Published in 1938 by the London-based press J. M. Dent – which also introduced fellow south Walian poet Dylan Thomas to the wider literary public – Davies's poem initially garnered unfavourable reviews, with influential literary voices like Geoffrey Grigson labelling it 'the product of a simple and superficial mind'.¹⁶ However, Davies was not deterred, as the collection attracted praise from a range of respected poets, including T. S. Eliot, who was impressed enough to publish the Welsh poet's second volume in 1943, this time at Faber.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Grigson, 'Review of *Gwalia Deserta*', *New Verse*, 31/32 (1938), p. 26.

A great deal of scholarly work on Davies was produced by his cousin, Islwyn Jenkins, who edited the *Collected Poems*, and wrote a monograph on the poet, both published in 1972. In his contribution to the *Writers of Wales* series (1972), Jenkins offers an extended essay on the poet's life and work, arguing that *Gwalia Deserta* is best understood 'against the economic, social and cultural background of Rhymney'.¹⁸ A year later, Anthony Conran's *Mabon* article (1973) admires the poet's ability to create structural links with Aneurin's *Gododdin*, whilst at the same time adopting the modern 'collage-effect [...] of popular journalism'.¹⁹ Conran's powerful assessment of *Gwalia Deserta* in *The Cost of Strangeness* (1982), offers a close reading of the poem's structure, whilst also recognising the influence of William Williams Pantycelyn, and clearly acknowledging *Gwalia Deserta*'s limitations.²⁰ Conran's later essay, 'Pilgrims from a desert land' (1997), charts the influence of the Great Depression on *Gwalia Deserta*, through a skilful comparative study of the poem with 'Y Meirwon' ('The Dead') by the Welsh-language poet, Gwenallt.²¹ Dafydd Johnston's *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies* (1994) merits inclusion as a work of outstanding scholarship. Johnston includes a detailed summary of the poet's life, whilst also charting the development of his poetry, arguing that *Gwalia Deserta* provides Davies with the opportunity to 'give his own account of the effects of the Depression', which was so often depicted by detached observers.²² More recently, Alan Vaughan Jones has contributed some timely reassessments of Davies, firstly as an essay in

¹⁷ Anthony Conran, 'Idris Davies: An attempt at assessment', *Mabon* (English) 1, 6 (1973), pp. 16–29 (p. 20).

¹⁸ Islwyn Jenkins, *Idris Davies: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), p. 18.

¹⁹ Conran, 1973, p. 20.

²⁰ Anthony Conran, 'The Achievement of Idris Davies', in *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1982), pp. 104–54.

²¹ Anthony Conran, 'Pilgrims from a desert land: A study of Idris Davies's two sequences and Gwenallt's 'Y Meirwon' as responses to the Great Depression' in *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry*, ed. Anthony Conran (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 42–64.

²² Johnston, Dafydd, 'The Development of Idris Davies's Poetry', in *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), pp. xxxvi–lxxx (p. lvii).

Almanac, and then within his PhD thesis submitted at Aberystwyth.²³ In both pieces, Vaughan Jones challenges traditional assumptions of Davies as the authentic voice of industrial south Wales and, as a result, re-examines *Gwalia Deserta*, and other poems, through a new, de-familiarised lens. Finally, James Prothero, in his book on Wordsworth and Wales, traces the influence of Romanticism on Davies, positioning the Rhymney poet as the inheritor of a nature writing tradition that would initially appear at odds with the conventional image of the industrial poet.²⁴

Much of the work within this chapter is both a response to, and an elaboration of, these arguments. However, it is clear that there is a critical void when it comes to certain aspects of Davies's poem, as existing work shows little interest in examining the representation of environmental degradation as a result of industrialisation. This chapter remedies this issue by focusing specifically on the ways in which trees are implicated within the wider landscape of ecological decline. The first part will begin by examining the representation of trees in Welsh writing, which anticipates the consequent analysis of *Gwalia Deserta* and its emphasis on the relationship between trees and people. The second part will consider what happens to notions of place following the loss of trees.

PART I: BEFORE

Theoretical Beginnings: Anthropomorphism

In *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, argues that there is a

²³ Alan Vaughan Jones, 'Defamiliarising Idris Davies: A reassessment of *Gwalia Deserta* and *Gwalia My Song*', *Almanac: A Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English – Critical Essays*, 14 (2009–10), pp. 179–207.

²⁴ James Prothero, 'Idris Davies' in *Wordsworth and Welsh Romanticism*, ed. James Prothero (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), pp. 79–100.

[U]niversal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us.²⁵

In this passage, Hume appears to be gesturing toward ideas that are typically referred to as anthropomorphism. As the literary scholar Simon C. Estok explains, there are many definitions of the term, but ‘the basic and broadly agreed upon definition of anthropomorphism [...] is that it roughly describes the attribution of human psychological traits to nonhuman animals and things’.²⁶ Moreover, the anthropologist Stewart Elliot Guthrie argues that anthropomorphism is ‘both involuntary and necessary’.²⁷ With an emphasis on the latter, the leading environmental humanities theorist, Timothy Clark, has argued that anthropomorphism – when used correctly – ‘can become a powerful tool for questioning the complacency of dominant human self-conceptions’.²⁸ On the other hand, Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman contend that, ‘considered from a moral standpoint, anthropomorphism sometimes seems dangerously allied to anthropocentrism: humans project their own thoughts and feelings onto other animal species because they egotistically believe themselves to be the center of the universe’.²⁹ Whilst conscious of Daston and Mitman’s caution – and agreeing that anthropomorphism is not an entirely unproblematic concept – I am more sympathetic with Clark’s notion that analysing the ways in which humans render non-human objects in their own image will ultimately deliver more positive outcomes than negative. Consequently, in the first part of this chapter, I argue

²⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, and The Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1757]), p. 141.

²⁶ Simon C. Estok, ‘Theory from the Fringes: Animals, Ecocriticism, Shakespeare’, *Mosaic*, 40/1, March 2007, pp. 61–78, (p. 68).

²⁷ Guthrie, 1997, p. 51.

²⁸ Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 192.

²⁹ Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman. ‘Introduction: The How and Why of Thinking With Animals.’, in *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. by Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 1–14 (p. 4), quoted in: Simon C. Estok, ‘Theory from the Fringes: Animals, Ecocriticism, Shakespeare’, *Mosaic*, 40/1, March 2007, pp. 61–78, (p. 68).

that Davies's representation of trees in *Gwalia Deserta* can be read as part of a wider willingness in the poem – and indeed Welsh literature in general – to imagine the suffering of the non-human using anthropomorphism as a powerful empathic and rhetorical device.

‘GWNA FI FEL PREN PLANEDIG, O FY NUW’:
TREES IN THE LITERATURES OF WALES³⁰

In *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* (2008), Matthew Jarvis begins with trees. The three-page foreword to his study of the ways in which ‘recent English-language poetry from Wales has responded to the diverse physical environments of Wales’, starts with a personal reflection on trees in the Welsh landscape, before turning to R. S. Thomas's ‘Afforestation’, a poem that mourns the practice of planting non-native conifer trees in rural Wales.³¹ Jarvis, having been entranced by these coniferous forests on childhood holidays, ruefully reflects on the anthropomorphic significance: ‘[w]hat I had thought of as embodying Wales, were for Thomas nothing less than a colonizing attack on its communities – a takeover by an alien force’.³² In this brief but illuminating section, Jarvis inaugurates a vital starting point for a wider discussion on the place of trees in the literatures of Wales, and how anthropomorphism might illuminate this debate. If the process of planting new trees can be viewed in terms of an invasion by a colonising force, then what can be said about the historical loss of native forests? Furthermore, to what extent do these trees embody Wales, and what does the country become when they are gone?

Studying the map of Wales, it becomes clear that as well as rivers, Welsh place names emphasise the significance of trees. From Betws-y-Coed and Bangor-is-y-Coed to Pen-y-

³⁰ Ann Griffiths, ‘Gwna fi fel pren planedig, O fy [Nu]w [O! Make me as a planted tree, dear God]’, in *The Hymns of Ann Griffiths*, ed. by John Ryan and trans. by Robert O. F. Wynne and John Ryan (Caernarfon: Y Llyfrfa, 1980), p. 160.

³¹ Matthew Jarvis, *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), back cover.

³² Jarvis, 2008, p. 4.

Wenallt and Alltwen, the influence of trees on Welsh onomastics is obvious.³³ The names of individual tree varieties are also evident in many locations across Wales, such as Y Ddraenen Wen, Derwen and Llwyn Onn, suggesting that such deep-rooted place names could help to provide an index of native tree species, before the coming of the conifers.³⁴ However, another way in which trees can be registered from a cultural perspective is the extent to which the nation's literature reflects their importance in the Welsh consciousness.

One of the earliest poems in the Welsh language, 'Cad Goddeu' [The Battle of the Trees], preserved in the fourteenth-century manuscript referred to as *Llyfr Taliesin* [Book of Taliesin], features a lengthy section in which the legendary sorcerer, Gwydion, persuades the trees of a forest to become an army and fight for him:

Nu, Gwern, ymlaen llin,
A want gysevin.
Helyg a Cherdin
Buant hwyr i'r vyddin.

Eirinwydd yspin –
Anwhant o ddynin –
Ceri, cyvrenhin,
Gorthrychan wrthrin.

[Now, the Alders, at the head of the line,
Thrust forward, the first in time.
The Willows and Mountain Ash
Were late joining the army.

The Black thorns, full of spines –
(How the child delights in its fruit!)
And their mate, the Medlar,
Will cut down all opposition].³⁵

³³ Betws-y-Coed [The prayer house in the wood]; Bangor-is-y-Coed: known as Bangor-on-Dee in English, although the Welsh can be translated as Bangor [A settlement within a wattle enclosure] under the wood; Pen-y-Wenallt [Top of the white wooded slope]; Alltwen [White wooded slope].

³⁴ Y Ddraenen Wen [Hawthorn] (Rhondda Cynon Taf); Derwen can be translated as Oak in English, although the Denbighshire village is known as Derwen in both languages; Llwyn Onn: the [Ash Grove] reservoir can be found in the Brecon Beacons National Park.

³⁵ *Poems from the Book of Taliesin*, ed. and trans. by J. Gwenogfryn Evans (Tremfan, Llanbedrog: Series of Welsh Texts, 1915), p. 30 and 31.

Even in this early example, the anthropomorphic identification of trees as a human-like army is striking. The variety of different species come together to form a larger unit, symbolising Celtic unity within a landscape of battles and invasion. Later, in the sixteenth century, a fascinating response to the industrial destruction of trees in Glamorganshire, south Wales, vividly anticipates much of the literature that would emerge from the same area centuries later. The anonymously authored, ‘Coed Glyn Cynon’, is stark in its objection to widespread deforestation. As Meic Stephens explains, Coed Glyn Cynon was ‘a wood of oak and birch which, in the sixteenth century, filled the valley of the Cynon from Penderyn to Abercynon’.³⁶ Yet, these trees were felled ‘by English industrialists’, Stephens continues, ‘for the purpose of obtaining charcoal, used in the smelting of iron before the discovery of coal’.³⁷ This event inspired a passionate poetic response:

Aberdâr, Llanwynno i gyd,
Plwy Merthyr hyd Lanfabon,
Mwyaf adfyd a fu erioed
Pan dorred Coed Glyn Cynon;

Torri llawer parlwr pur
Lle cyrchfa gwŷr a meibion;
Yn oes dyddiau seren syw,
Mor araul yw Glyn Cynon.

O bai ŵr ar drafael dro
Ac arno ffo rhag estron,
Fo gâi gan oes lety erioed
Yn fforest Coed Glyn Cynon. [...]

Llawer bedwen las ei chlog
(Ynghrog y bytho'r Saeson!)
Sydd yn danllwyth mawr ar dân
Gan wŷr yr haearn duon.

[Aberdare, Llanwynno, all
Merthyr and Lanfabon,
The worst thing ever to befall
Was cutting the woods of Cynon.

³⁶ Meic Stephens, (ed.) ‘Coed Glyn Cynon’, in *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 116.

³⁷ Stephens, 1998, p. 116.

They cut down many a parlour sweet
So pleasant with the sun on,
Places where men and boys would meet
In the forest of Glyn Cynon.

If man had to take flight
From vengeance of the alien
He'd get a lodging for the night
With the nightingales of Cynon.

Many a birch in green attire
(Hanged high be every Saxon!)
Is heaped as fuel for the fire
By the cold men of iron].³⁸

Here, the removal of trees symbolises more than the loss of native woodland. Indeed, deforestation by foreign – English – forces is viewed in terms of a wider destruction of Welsh identity. Moreover, the trees are described in human terms, as in the line from the fourth stanza, ‘Llawer bedwen las ei chlog’ [Many a birch in green attire], the final word in the original Welsh, ‘chlog’, is mutated from ‘clog’, meaning cloak, and this specific aspirate mutation indicates a grammatical feminisation of the birch tree, adding an additional, gendered dynamic to interpretation.

Another poem from the same century, ‘Coed Marchan’, by the Denbighshire poet, Robin Clidro (1545-1580), is written ‘on behalf of the squirrels who went to London to file and make an affidavit on the bill for the cutting down of Marchan Wood, near Rhuthyn’.³⁹ In the short poem, one red squirrel is particularly praised, for arguing the case of the forest in forthright terms to the attending council. In the following passage, the celebrated squirrel speaks to the court’s bailiff, and emphasises the impact of deforestation in the area:

[A]nrheithio holl goed Rhuthyn
A dwyn ei thŷ a’i sgubor
Liw nos du, a’i chnau a’i stôr.

³⁸ ‘Coed Glyn Cynon [The Woods of Cynon]’, in *The Old Red Tongue: An Anthology of Welsh Literature* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2017), ed. by Gwyn Griffiths and Meic Stephens, pp. 311–12 and p. 313. It is worth noting that in the Welsh language, ‘Saeson’ means Englishmen, but ‘Saxon’ fits with the rhyme of the translation.

³⁹ Gwyn Williams, *The Burning Tree: Poems from the First Thousand Years of Welsh Verse* (London: Faber & Faber Limited: 1956), p. 163.

Mae'r gwiwerod yn gweiddi
 Am y coed rhag ofn y ci.
 Nid oes fry o goed y fron
 Ond lludw y derw llwydion.
 Nid oes gepyll heb ei gipio,
 Na nyth brân byth i'n bro [...]

[All Rhuthyn's woods are ravaged;
 My house and barn were taken
 One dark night, and all my nuts.
 The squirrels are all calling
 For the trees; they fear the dog.
 Up there remains of the hill wood
 Only grey ash of oak trees;
 There's not a stump unstolen
 Nor a crow's nest left in our land [...]].⁴⁰

In addition to the beautifully intricate cyghanedd structure of the original Welsh – quite a departure from the relatively modest hen benillion of 'Coed Glyn Cynon' – the trees are further described in anthropomorphic language with the use of the strong verb '[a]nrheithio' [to ravage or destroy], which is often applied not just to land, but people. A perfect example of this can be found in Eiseia 33 [Isaiah 33]:

Gwae di, anrheithiwr na chefaist dy anrheithio,
 ti dwyllwr na chefaist dy dwyllo;
 pan beidi ag anrheithio, fe'th anrheithir,
 pan beidi â thwylo, fe'th dwyllir di.⁴¹

[Woe to you, destroyer who has not been destroyed,
 You cheat who has not been cheated;
 When you stop destroying, you will be destroyed,
 When you stop cheating, you will be cheated.]⁴²

This shift toward Biblical language invites a brief consideration of the eighteenth-century, Montgomeryshire [Sir Drefaldwyn] poet and hymn writer, Ann Griffiths, who includes many

⁴⁰ Robin Clidro, 'Coed Marchan [Marchan Wood]', in Gwyn Williams, *The Burning Tree: Poems from the First Thousand Years of Welsh Verse*, trans. by Gwyn Williams (London: Faber & Faber Limited: 1956), p. 162 and 163.

⁴¹ Eiseia 33, *Y Beibl Cymraeg Newydd*.

⁴² My English translation of the Welsh. The King James Bible reads: 'Woe to thee that spoilest, and thou wast not spoiled; and dealest treacherously, and they dealt not treacherously with thee! when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled; and when thou shalt make an end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee', (Chapter 33: 1) *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 794.

examples of tree imagery in her work. One of her most celebrated hymns opens with the following:

Gwna fi fel pren planedig, O fy [Nu]w,
Yn ir ar lan afonydd Dyfroedd byw,
Yn gwreiddio ar led, ai ddail heb wywo mwy,
Ond ffrwytho dan gawodydd dwyfol glwy.

[O! Make me as a planted tree, dear God,
All green on ground where living waters flow,
Wide-rooting and with never fading leaves,
But fruiting 'neath the showers from God's own wound].⁴³

In the hymn, Griffiths creates a persona who desires to metamorphose into a tree in order to become closer to God. Using suppliant language, the speaker yearns for the stability with which roots can render the tree a part of the earth.

In the Welsh language, Y Prifardd T. H. Parry-Williams,⁴⁴ wrote extensively about 'his own neighbourhood, his family background, his relationship with the mountains of Eryri [Snowdonia], and the ways in which natural environment moulds human personality'.⁴⁵ A perfect crystallisation of all these concerns is found in the poem, 'Moelni' [Barrenness] (1931), in which the poet's austere surroundings near his childhood home in Rhyd-Ddu, Gwynedd, are defined by the absence of trees:

Nid oedd ond llymder anial byd di-goed
O gylch fy ngeni yn Eryri draw,
Fel petai'r cewri wedi bod erioed
Yn hir lyfnhau'r llechweddau ar bob llaw⁴⁶

['Twas but a treeless desert of austerity,
In the far Snowdonia of my youth –
As if the giants had always been
Smoothing the hillsides on all sides;]⁴⁷

⁴³ Ann Griffiths, 'Gwna fi fel pren planedig, O fy [Nu]w [O! Make me as a planted tree, dear God]', in *The Hymns of Ann Griffiths*, ed. by John Ryan and trans. by Robert O. F. Wynne and John Ryan (Caernarfon: Y Llyfrfa, 1980), p. 160 and p. 161.

⁴⁴ 'Y Prifardd' literally translates as The Chief Bard. This is a title bestowed on those who have been awarded either the chair or the crown at the Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru [National Eisteddfod of Wales].

⁴⁵ Meic Stephens, (ed.) 'Parry-Williams, Thomas Herbert', in *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 571.

⁴⁶ T. H. Parry-Williams, 'Moelni', in *Casgliad o Gerddi* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1987, [1931]), p. 41.

⁴⁷ My English translation of the original Welsh.

Indeed, the levelling hands of the ‘cewri’ [giants] in Parry-Williams’s poem ironically provide a suitable metaphor for the sweeping scythe of industrialisation that deforested hills in the coal mining communities of south Wales, as well as the slate mining communities of Gwynedd. Fittingly, some years later, the Swansea-born poet Harri Webb appears to be imagining a similar figure in his poem, ‘Valley Winter’ (1959):

All the encompassing glory, the heroic crests
And soft voices of an older Wales are abolished
That we saw from every street-corner of our brief summer,
And the black axemen have felled the singing forests.⁴⁸

Once more, trees are attributed with human characteristics, and arguably a distinctly Welsh identity, as they are brought down mid-song. Accompanying the destruction of the forests, the poet is equally lamenting the loss of the ‘soft voices of an older Wales’, presumably silenced by the homogenising forces of industrialisation.⁴⁹ Indeed, Webb titled one of his poetry collections *The Green Desert*, perhaps providing a subtle link to Davies’s own *Gwalia Deserta*.

Finally, a major voice to emerge from the literature of industrial south Wales was the Welsh-language poet D. Gwenallt Jones. Born in Pontardawe, Cwm Tawe [Swansea Valley], Gwenallt ‘besides much anger, bitterness, courage and resolve, [...] shared with Idris Davies a capacity, especially in *Eples*, to incorporate not only an industrial landscape but the whole experience of an industrial community’.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Harri Webb, ‘Valley Winter’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Meic Stephens (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1995 [1959]), p. 43.

⁴⁹ One of Webb’s few Welsh-language poems is entitled, ‘Colli iaith’. The linguistic homogenisation of south Wales as a result of industrialisation remains amongst the nation’s greatest losses.

⁵⁰ Meic Stephens, (ed.) ‘Jones, David James’, in *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 372.



Figure 13. The remains of Esgair-ceir, near Rhydcymerau.⁵¹

In ‘Rhydcymerau’ (1951) – a poem from *Eples* [Leaven] – Gwenallt shifts the focus away from the coalfield, and instead opens with the planting of trees on his family’s ancestral land in Carmarthenshire:

Plannwyd egin coed y Trydydd Rhyfel
 Ar dir Esgeir-ceir a meysydd Tir-bach
 Ger Rhydcymerau⁵²

[The saplings of the third world war were planted
 On the land of Esgeir-ceir and the fields of Tir-bach
 Near Rhydcymerau.]⁵³

⁵¹ Photograph © Alan Richards. Gwenallt would spend summer holidays on the Esgair-ceir farm with his grandmother.

⁵² D. Gwenallt Jones, ‘Rhydcymerau’, in *Cerddi Gwenallt: Y Casgliad Cyflawn* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2001 [1951]), pp. 148–49.

⁵³ D. Gwenallt Jones, ‘Rhydcymerau’, in *Sensuous Glory: The Poetic Vision of D. Gwenallt Jones*, ed. by Donald Allchin and D. Densil Morgan, and trans. by Patrick Thomas, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000 [1951]), pp. 114–15.

Here, Gwenallt – a staunch pacifist – is alluding to the fact that after the First World War, a timber shortage resulted in the Forestry Commission selecting parts of Wales for vast plantation programmes, in anticipation of future conflict. The poet appears to be emphasising that historically, Welsh land – and its natural resources – has been viewed in terms of utility by British colonial masters, and trees remain another resource with which to fuel the larger machine.⁵⁴ As the poem continues, in a similar mode to R. S. Thomas, Gwenallt views the afforestation of his familial land as an erasure of Welsh culture:

Ac erbyn hyn nid oes yno ond coed,
 A'u gwreiddiau haerllug yn sugno'r hen bridd:
 Coed lle y bu cymdogaeth,
 Fforest lle bu ffermydd,
 Bratiaith Saeson y De lle bu barddoni a diwinydda,
 Cyfarth cadnoid lle bu cri plant ac ŵyn.
 Ac yn y tywyllwch yn ei chanol hi
 Y mae ffau'r Minotawros Seisnig;
 Ac ar golfenni, fel ar groesau,
 Ysgerbydau beirdd, blaenoriaid, gweinidogion ac athrawon Ysgol Sul
 Yn gwynnu yn yr haul,
 Ac yn cael eu golchi gan y glaw a'u sychu gan y gwynt.⁵⁵

[And now there are only trees there,
 With their impudent roots sucking the old earth:
 Trees where there was a community,
 Forest where there were farms,
 The ragged slang of the Southern English where there was poetry and theology,
 The bark of foxes where children and lambs once cried.
 And in the darkness at its centre
 Is the den of the English Minotaur;
 And on trees, as on crosses,
 The skeletons of poets, chapel elders, ministers and Sunday School teachers
 Bleaching in the sun,
 And being washed by the rain and dried by the wind.]⁵⁶

Whereas in the 'Cad Goddeu', when Gwydion conjures a legion of trees to fight internal battles within an old Wales divided by tribal lines, Gwenallt's nightmarish, twentieth-century vision of a vulnerable, post-war nation sees trees becoming a distinctly English army, crucifying their

⁵⁴ The Welsh village of Capel Celyn and the surrounding valley was flooded in 1965 to create a reservoir, Llyn Celyn, to provide water for the people of Liverpool, England.

⁵⁵ Gwenallt Jones, 2001, pp. 148–49.

⁵⁶ Gwenallt Jones, 2000, pp. 114–15, trans. by Patrick Thomas.

enemies and destroying Welsh land and culture. Similarly, in ‘Y Coed’ (1969), the final poem that Gwenallt wrote before his death, trees once again become symbols for lost people and cultures, but this time viewed from a global perspective:

Chwe milwn o goed yng Nghaersalem, fe’u plannwyd hwy
Yn goeden am bob corff a losgwyd yn y ffyrnau nwy.

Coed sydd yn estyn eu gwreiddiau i ganol lludw pob ffwrn,
Y lludw sydd wedi mynd ar goll, heb fynwent na bedd nac wrn.⁵⁷

[Six million trees were planted in Jerusalem,
A tree for each body that was burnt in the gas ovens.

A forest that extends its roots to the ash of each oven,
Ash that has gone missing, without a cemetery, grave or urn].⁵⁸

In these stark lines, Gwenallt refers to Ya’ar Hakdoshim [Forest of the Martyrs], a real forest of six million trees, planted on the outskirts of Jerusalem as a memorial to Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust. Although this commemorative woodland is embedded in Middle Eastern soil, its roots have the power to extend back to the European nations in which the original horrors befell.

It is evident from the above-quoted poems that trees have occupied a significant place in the Welsh literary canon, and the use of anthropomorphism as a theoretical approach can emphasise the repeated identification of the human as tree. Consequently, in what follows, I will use this analysis to demonstrate how Idris Davies’s presentation of trees in *Gwalia Deserta* continues this literary tradition by connecting the suffering of trees with the plight of Welsh industrial communities during the Depression.

⁵⁷ D. Gwenallt Jones, ‘Y Coed’, in *Y Coed* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1969), p. 73.

⁵⁸ My English translation of the Welsh original.

‘BABES WERE BORN TO FEED THE FIRE’:
THE HUMAN AS TREE IN *GWALIA DESERTA*⁵⁹

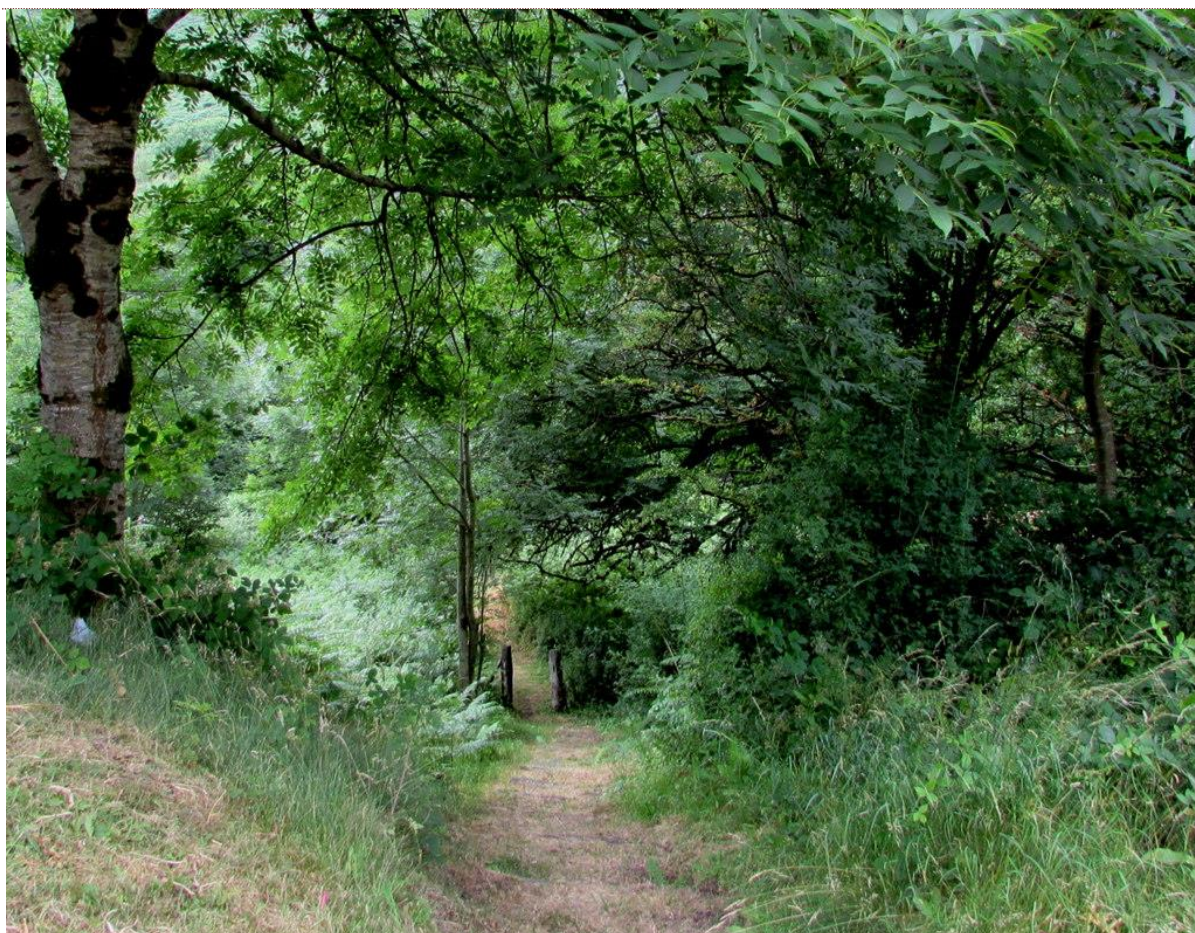


Figure 14. Deri, near Rhymney.⁶⁰

Idris Davies worked as a coal miner and, as a young man, became fascinated by the natural world. As Dafydd Johnston notes in his essay, ‘Idris Davies’s Life’, the Rhymney poet felt most at home in rural surroundings. In a diary entry uncovered by Johnston, Davies writes: ‘[w]henver I came home after a day or two from Deri, I used to long to return there – the farmhouses and the little fragments of “wood” had gripped me [...]’.⁶¹ Deri is a small village situated five miles to the south of Rhymney, and given that ‘Deri’, is the Welsh word for

⁵⁹ Davies, 1994, IX, ll. 13–16, p. 6

⁶⁰ Photograph © Jaggery.

⁶¹ Dafydd Johnston, ‘Idris Davies’s Life’, in *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), pp. xi–xxxv (p. xvi)

‘Oaks’, it is not surprising to learn that Davies was so captivated by the abundant woodland that gave the place its name. Indeed, in the same essay, Johnston hints at how the distinct topography of Rhymney intensified the poet’s link with the landscape. Echoing Raymond Williams’s sentiments in *The Welsh Industrial Novel*, Johnston argues that ‘the contrast between the industrial town and the surrounding hills was a constant feature of life in Rhymney’.⁶² Davies’s clear affection for nature contributes to the feelings of loss caused by industrialisation in *Gwalia Deserta*. In the first poem of the sequence, the industrial settlement is established using a series of austere images:

The Commissioners depart with all their papers
And the pit-heads grin in the evening rain;
The white deacons dream of Gilead in the Methodist vestry
And the unemployed stare at the winter trees.⁶³

Johnston notes how this opening section is characteristic of Davies’s ‘documentary style, of which the principal structural technique is the list’.⁶⁴ This is the Rhymney poet providing a detailed account of the Depression from within, but Davies is far from neutral. There is a sense of abandonment as the Commissioners exit the settlement, and neglect as the religious figures dream of distant Bible lands. Yet, the most striking image is of the unemployed locals who remain, staring blankly at the surrounding cluster of winter trees. It is as if these individuals are perceiving their own image reflected back at them from the nearby woods, with the leafless winter trees symbolising the absence of hope within the industrial community. As the first four lines of the poem, this is a significant establishing moment that creates a firm link between trees and the suffering of the working class. Skilfully, Davies initiates a subtle anthropomorphosis of the former, placing the human and the environment on an equal footing.

⁶² Johnston, 1994, p. xviii.

⁶³ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, I, l. 4, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Johnston, 1994, p. lvii.

In these opening lines, the suffering of one is reflected in the other and, returning to the words of Clark, ‘the complacency of dominant human self-conceptions’ is delicately deconstructed.⁶⁵

This theme is then continued in Poem IX, one of the most ecologically aware moments in *Gwalia Deserta*, as the speed with which change came to south Wales is firmly emphasised:

No time to dream,
No time to stare,
In that fell scheme,
To foul the air⁶⁶

The frantic pace of industrialisation is felt in the first two lines, as the absence of time puts paid to any sort of meaningful contemplation. Echoing the words of W. H. Davies’s ‘Leisure’ in ‘No time to stare’, Idris Davies presents a chaotic past, in which there was no time to absorb the present, as the nation came together to advance the industrial beast into a supposedly infinite future.⁶⁷ W. H. Davies was a great inspiration to Davies and, as Johnston explains, ‘[i]t was quite natural for him to be drawn to the work of his fellow Monmouthshire poet [...] even though W. H. Davies’s background in Newport was very different to the industrial valleys’.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the word ‘fell’, employed here in its literary usage to mean ‘deadly’, has a double significance considering the levels of deforestation that occurred during industrialisation.⁶⁹ Indeed, this ‘fell scheme’ provides an accurate description for the organised programme of forest clearance that, according to the speaker, blights the history of Monmouthshire. Then, the next four lines of poem IX make explicit reference to deforestation, in the exploitation of the speaker’s land:

To grab the coal
And scorn the tree,
And sell the soul,
To buy a spree.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Clark, 2011, p. 192.

⁶⁶ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, IX, ll. 9–12, p. 6.

⁶⁷ W. H. Davies, ‘Leisure’, *The Complete Poems of W. H. Davies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), pp. 140–1.

⁶⁸ Johnston, ‘The Development of Idris Davies’s Poetry’, p. xlv.

⁶⁹ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, IX, l. 10, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid, ll. 9–16, p. 6.

The reference to trees, greed and ownership, layered with the repetition of the sibilant ‘s’ evokes the familiar imagery of Genesis. Davies’s use of short stanzas featuring all monosyllabic words mirrors both the mechanical nature of the process, and the immense speed with which it was performed. For Davies, the extraction of coal is always described in terms of its negative consequences on the land. In this case, coal is grabbed while the living trees, resolutely standing in the way of instant prosperity, are destroyed. Furthermore, there is Biblical symbolism attached to the tree which, now scorned, suggests a further rejection of Christian principles by immoral capitalists. The Bible contains many references to the tree, and consistently associates the symbol with piety in people. In Exodus 15. 16–17, Moses asks God to shelter the children of Israel, likening their bodies to trees: ‘[t]hou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established’.⁷¹ In Psalm 1, religious purity in people is again linked to trees. The first verse begins by stating that: ‘Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful’.⁷² Then, in the third verse, explains: ‘And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper’.⁷³ A similar sentiment is presented in Jeremiah 17. 7–8, which announces:

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.⁷⁴

⁷¹ ‘Exodus 15:16-17’, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 84.

⁷² ‘Psalm 1:1’, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 640.

⁷³ ‘Psalm 1:3’, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 640.

⁷⁴ ‘Jeremiah 17:7-8’, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 847.

The sources of inspiration for Ann Griffiths's hymns can clearly be detected in these Biblical sentiments, where trees are linked to religious purity, and fecundity. A further examination of Griffiths's other hymns provides additional avenues of interpretation with regards to Davies's poem. In 'Rwy'n hiraethu am yr Amser', Griffiths likens the body of Jesus Christ to a tree:

Rwy'n hiraethu am yr Amser
Y caf ddatguddiad o fy mhraint,
Iesu Grist, gwir bren y Bywyd,
Hwn yw cyfiawnder pur y saint:
Ei gleimio'n ail a'm cadarn Sail,
Yn lle gwag obaith ffigys ddail.

[I am yearning for the time
When my right is all revealed –
Jesus Christ, true tree of life,
Fount of all our justice he;
My strong support, my second made,
No empty hope of fig-leaves' shade.]⁷⁵

Then, in the hymn beginning, 'Ni ddaeth i fwrdd cyfiawnder Duw', Griffiths compares Jesus's crucifix to a tree:

Ni ddaeth i fwrdd cyfiawnder Duw,
Wrth gofio pechod,
Ond cysgodau o'r Sylwedd byw
A oedd i ddyfod;
A Jubili pan ddaeth i ben,
Y llen a rwygwyd,
A'r ddeddf yn Iesu ar y pren
A ddigonwyd.

[There came not from God's justice table,
In weighing sin,
But shades of the living Substance sweet
Soon to appear;
When came the day of Jubilee,
The veil was rent;
The law, in Christ upon the tree,
Henceforth content.]⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ann Griffiths, 'Rwy'n hiraethu am yr Amser [I am yearning for the time]'; oddly, the title is misprinted as 'Rhyw'n hiraethu am yr Amser' in *The Hymns of Ann Griffiths*, ed. by John Ryan and trans. by Robert O. F. Wynne and John Ryan (Caernarfon: Y Llyfrfa, 1980), p. 124 and p. 125.

⁷⁶ Ann Griffiths, 'Ni ddaeth i fwrdd cyfiawnder Duw [There came not from God's justice table]', in *The Hymns of Ann Griffiths*, ed. by John Ryan and trans. by Robert O. F. Wynne and John Ryan (Caernarfon: Y Llyfrfa, 1980), p. 134 and p. 135.

Reading Davies's lines in poem IX in light of Ann Griffiths's hymns, the religious significance becomes stronger. Although Davies attended many different chapels in childhood and received a substantial religious education, he would later reflect that 'religion was a habit, and no more'.⁷⁷ However, as Glyn Jones, his friend and fellow poet argues, 'the Bible, and the social gospel widely preached from the pulpits of Wales in his youth, were more fundamental to his socialism than *Das Kapital* or the *Communist Manifesto*'.⁷⁸ Phil Williams shares this view, arguing that although Davies 'can make gentle fun of the chapels [...] he never quite rejects religion'.⁷⁹ Consequently, the poet's image of a scorned tree suggests a rejection of Christianity's principles by the industrialists and a further betrayal of the devout local populace. Indeed too, the subtle half-rhymes of 'sell' and 'soul', contribute to a rich, complex prosody that suggests influence from Welsh-language poetry.⁸⁰

As poem IX draws to a close, the speaker appears to suggest deeper parallels between the colliery community and the area's native trees:

And breasts were bruised
In dismal dens,
And streets were used
As breeding pens,
And babes were born
To feed the fire,
When hills were torn
In Monmouthshire.⁸¹

The offspring of the local residents are certainly 'born | To feed the fire', as in the speaker's description, they are bred to either maintain the furnaces of the local ironworks, or mine the coal to sustain the hearths of others. However, as in 'Coed Glyn Cynon', where birch trees are 'heaped as fuel for the fire', the children of Monmouthshire's working-class community are

⁷⁷ Idris Davies, 'Young Man from Rhymney', in *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), l. 57, p. 195.

⁷⁸ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing*, ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 156.

⁷⁹ Phil Williams, 'Good Bad Poetry', *Planet*, 13 (1972), 56–60 (p. 59).

⁸⁰ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, IX, ll. 11–15, p. 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 13–16, p. 6.

also – like the swathes of nearby forest – sacrificed ‘[t]o feed the fire’ of Mammon. Once more, through a subtle anthropomorphism, Davies appears to equate the suffering of the local people with the destruction of the environment. Turning once more to Clark’s terminology, Davies’s form of representation questions ‘dominant human self-conceptions’ by creating a sense of parity between the suffering of people and landscape, in the face of annihilation by an imperial power.

As *Gwalia Deserta* progresses, poem XXIII continues with an emphasis on the loss of native woodland:

In my Gwalia, in my Gwalia,
The vandals out of Hell
Ransacked and marred for ever
The wooded hill and dell.⁸²

Claiming an ownership of the land with a possessive determiner, the speaker condemns the satanic criminals who have destroyed the natural surroundings for eternity. The absence of a Christian moral compass is evident in the speaker’s description of the industrial invaders. They have not simply altered the appearance of the landscape, but have somehow tainted the purity of the topography. Moreover, the speaker’s usage of the words ‘for ever’, confirms that there is no opportunity to regain the previous innocence. Nevertheless, as in previous quotations, the speaker does rely on evoking a memory that recalls a former time when nature grew resplendent. Indeed, the use of ‘dell’ – a word associated with pastoral poetry – meaning ‘a deep natural hollow or vale [...] usually clothed with trees or foliage’,⁸³ sees Davies moving beyond Wales to create a dialogue with English literary history. Edmund Spenser, in his emulation of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, ‘The Shepheardes Calender’ (1579), notably describes an ‘unhappye Ewe’, that falls ‘headlong into a dell’,⁸⁴ whilst Wordsworth registers plentiful usage

⁸² Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XXIII, ll. 1–4, p. 13.

⁸³ ‘Dell, n.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49489>> [Accessed 19th June 2018].

⁸⁴ Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [1579]), p. 14.

of the word in ‘Michael: A Pastoral Poem’ (1800). Most notably capitalised at the beginning of the poem, where the pastoral scene is described in the following bucolic language:

No habitation can be seen; but they
Who journey thither find themselves alone
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites
That overheard are sailing in the sky.
It is in truth an utter solitude;
Nor should I have made mention of this Dell
But for one object which you might pass by,
Might see and notice not. [...] ⁸⁵

Davies’s use of this word suggests a clear evocation of English pastoral literature.⁸⁶ In this sense, the poet’s beloved landscape is constructed using the terms of his inherited literary past and indicates that the destruction of actual rural space also results in the erasure of metaphorical literary territory. However, the speaker’s concern is equally with the physical environment, which has been desecrated by satanic figures. This recalls the testimony of Rhymney historian Tony Fisher, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, who explains that ‘before industrialisation came to the valley, it was a thickly wooded area [...] But as the trees were required for fuel in the iron making industry, the wooded areas soon disappeared’.⁸⁷ This was an obvious concern for local people, especially those old enough to remember a time before the coming of the pit wheels. The inherited, rural experiences of both Davies’s parents – his father was a Rhymney native and his mother originated from the village of Tre-Taliesin, in Ceredigion – would have heightened the young poet’s appreciation of a time before industrialisation.⁸⁸ Indeed, the loss of trees is a particularly bitter pill to swallow for Davies, who, as Jenkins explains, ‘by tradition [...] was a nature lover’.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ William Wordsworth, ‘Michael: A Pastoral Poem’, in *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994 [1800]), p. 131.

⁸⁶ There is a great deal of evidence that Idris Davies was a great admirer of the English Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Shelley. The poet himself admits as much in ‘I Was Born in Rhymney’; see *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies*, ed. by Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), ll. 165–72, p. 81.

⁸⁷ Fisher, 1990, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Islwyn Jenkins, *Idris Davies: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), p. 1.

⁸⁹ Jenkins, 1972, p. 22.



Figure 15. Tre-Taliesin, in Ceredigion.⁹⁰

In the second stanza of poem XXIII, the speaker continues to describe the desecration of rural space, and significantly, the ‘wooded hill and dell’ of the previous stanza appear to be given human characteristics:

They grabbed and bruised and plundered
Because their greed was great⁹¹

Using distinctly corporeal language, the earlier ‘vandals out of hell’ are described as grabbing and bruising their victims. Once again, the speaker renders a forested landscape in anthropomorphic terms, signalling a willingness to understand the torment of the trees. As Daston and Mitman argue, humans projecting their emotions onto non-humans can allow the

⁹⁰ Photograph © Chris Denny.

⁹¹ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XXIII, ll. 5–8, p. 13.

former to ‘egotistically believe themselves to be the center of the universe’.⁹² However, throughout *Gwalia Deserta*, Davies’s anthropomorphism – linking local people and place – consistently questions the ‘dominant human self-conceptions’ that render both interrelated terms as separate entities.⁹³ Essentially, the poem presents a space in which the human and non-human suffer on equal terms. The dehumanisation of the local people is equated with the deforestation of the local landscape. However, what is left of people and place, once industrialisation reaches its zenith?

PART II: AFTER

Theoretical Beginnings: Layers of Decline in *Gwalia Deserta*

In July 1938, Idris Davies’s *Gwalia Deserta* was published by the London-based press J. M. Dent and Sons. On publication, T. S. Eliot described the debut collection as ‘the best poetic document I know about a particular epoch in a particular place’, before adding, ‘and I think that [the poems] really have a claim to permanence’.⁹⁴ Eliot’s admiration was genuine as the American-born poet would go on to publish Davies’s second volume of poems, *The Angry Summer: A Poem of 1926* (1943). Although the former’s relationship with the latter in terms of publishing is well documented, the literary – or perhaps textual – relationship between the two poets has been explored in less detail. Firstly, Eliot’s positive response to *Gwalia Deserta* is noteworthy, especially given the fact that other metropolitan critics had derided Davies’s debut collection.⁹⁵ It might be argued that the naturalised English poet detected aspects of his own *The Waste Land* (1922) in the Welsh writer’s work. In ‘*The Waste Land* as Ecocritique’,

⁹² Daston and Mitman, 2005, p. 4.

⁹³ Clark, 2011, p. 192.

⁹⁴ T. S. Eliot, quoted in Islwyn Jenkins, *Idris Davies of Rhymney: A Personal Memoir* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1986), p. 224.

⁹⁵ See Johnston, ‘Idris Davies’s Life’, 1994, pp. xi–xxxv (p. xxv).

Gabrielle McIntire undertakes an environmentally inflected reading of Eliot's poem, arguing that throughout *The Waste Land*, and indeed many of his other poems, 'Eliot consistently shows sensitivities to fragile or degraded environments'.⁹⁶ In *The Waste Land*, McIntire sees Eliot 'simultaneously render[ing] the postwar world as quasi-apocalyptic and replete with personal, political, spiritual, and cultural problems that threaten to unravel all meaning'. Her conclusion is that:

In suggesting that ecological crises accompany these other problems of early twentieth-century modernity, Eliot pushes us to consider the analogies between compromised environmental exteriors and a complex range of similarly polluted interior states.⁹⁷

The Waste Land and *Gwalia Deserta* are, of course, very different poems that explore very different themes. However, they share a similarity in that their 'compromised environmental exteriors' bear some relationship to 'a complex range of similarly polluted interior states'. In Eliot's poem, England's exterior is represented as dilapidated following a world war that raised fundamental 'interior' questions about the damaged country's future trajectory. In Davies's poem, Wales's exterior is depicted as derelict following a period of rapid industrialisation that shook the very foundations of the small nation's 'interior' identity. Building on the first part of this chapter, which examined the loss of Welsh trees during the industrial revolution and the potential metaphorical meaning contained within that bereavement, this second part will take deforestation as a symbol for industrialisation and consider the identity – both exterior and interior – of the nation in an era of environmental degradation.

‘THE DERELICT VALLEY’:
COMPROMISED ENVIRONMENTAL EXTERIORS⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Gabrielle McIntire, 'The Waste Land as Ecocritique', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*, ed. by Gabrielle McIntire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 178–93 (p. 178).

⁹⁷ McIntire, 2015, p. 178.

⁹⁸ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XIV, 11. 1–3, p. 9.

Throughout *Gwalia Deserta*, the word ‘derelict’ occurs six times, and it is an appropriate term to describe the state of Wales in the 1930s. Derelict is defined as ‘forsaken, abandoned, left by the possessor or guardian’, and from a contemporary perspective, one imagines a whole host of forlorn settings, from deserted housing in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to abandoned automotive factories in Detroit.⁹⁹ Images of derelict spaces have become part of a familiar post-industrial aesthetic that has defined life in the twenty-first century. In ‘Marginalia: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Urban Wastelands’, Matthew Gandy argues that, in defining the meaning of these sites, there is often ‘a common emphasis on the “unproductive” characteristics [...] in relation to agriculture, industry, or other former land uses’.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the concept of ‘wasteland’ is itself a logical progression from imagining derelict spaces, and somewhat appropriately, the word is defined as ‘a [...] treeless region, a desert’.¹⁰¹ In his essay, Gandy also references ‘terrain vague’, a term initially popularised by the Catalan architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió. In *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America*, Alan Berger describes ‘terrain vague’ as ‘a theory of empty and abandoned space’, which ‘describes urban locales associated with a past economic or industrial status, falling in-between cycles of investment. Specific sites typically include industrial wastelands, vacant and derelict properties, and declining suburban developments’.¹⁰² Although concepts like ‘terrain vague’, and other examples of late-twentieth-century theory on post-capitalist spaces have been more frequently applied to North American cities, the associated language and imagery is relevant to examinations of industrial communities in south Wales. Moreover, *Gwalia Deserta* is a poem that describes a place with many similarities to the former centres of mass production in the United States, which

⁹⁹ ‘Derelict, adj. and n.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online:

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/50569?rskey=mkn7Gu&result=1>> [Accessed 22nd April 2019].

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Gandy, ‘Marginalia: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Urban Wastelands’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, (2013) 103:6, pp. 1301–316, (p. 1302).

¹⁰¹ ‘Wasteland, n.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online:

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226037?redirectedFrom=wasteland>> [Accessed 18th April 2019].

¹⁰² Alan Berger, *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), p. 34.

highlights the potential for theories of landscape and urbanism to find new meanings beyond their familiar territory. In this section, I will consider the ways in which the dereliction of Gwalia results in a compromised environmental exterior that is unproductive for both human and non-human.

In Davies's poem, depopulation is one of the reasons for the dereliction of Gwalia. In addition to the departures of authorities mentioned at the poem's opening, perhaps the most vividly expressed abandonment is one that is enforced by economic necessity. Throughout the poem, the emigration of Welsh people to England adds to the overall sense of Gwalia as a derelict space. As the historian John Davies explains, this had parallels with the nation's history as

[T]here was a huge outflow from Wales in the wake of the Depression. Between 1921 and 1925, the population of Wales rose from 2,656,474 to 2,736,800; by mid-1939 it had fallen to 2,487,000, a decrease of 249,800 in fourteen years. As the Welsh population experienced a natural growth of 140,171 during those years, the net loss through emigration was 389,971 [...] In some of the mining valleys, the exodus was immense: 50,000 people moved from the Rhondda and 27,000 from Merthyr and, as a disproportionate number of the migrants were young adults, such a haemorrhage had a marked impact upon the age structure of the population.¹⁰³

The enormous loss of Welsh people can be felt strongly throughout *Gwalia Deserta*. In Poem VIII, the speaker addresses an unnamed other: “do you remember 1926?”¹⁰⁴ With 1926 being the year of the General Strike, few could forget. In the final three lines of the poem, the speaker receives a reply:

“Ay, ay, we remember 1926,” said Dai and Shinkin,
As they stood on the kerb in Charing Cross Road,
“And we shall remember 1926 until our blood is dry.”¹⁰⁵

Significantly, Dai and Shinkin respond from London, where they have been forced to move following the repercussions of the industrial action. The General Strike of 1926 was long and brutal, and the colliers finally returned to the pits with inferior employment conditions. As John

¹⁰³ John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 2007 [1993]), p. 562.

¹⁰⁴ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, VIII, l. 1, p. 6

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, ll. 10–13, p. 6

Davies explains: '[t]he miners of south Wales were forced to work an eight-hour day, for which they received little more than ten shillings [...] they would be working for about half the pay they had been receiving for a seven-hour day in 1921'.¹⁰⁶ It is some indication as to the appalling circumstances faced by the miners during the strike that they accepted this reduction in salary. Once more, John Davies clarifies that:

Severe deprivation had forced the miners to accept such harsh terms. None of them had any money to fall back upon; indeed, many were still burdened by debts arising from the lock-out of 1921. In 1926, the miners of south Wales lost a total of £15,000,000 in wages – about a billion pounds at present-day values. Their standard of living was meagre when they were at work, but between May and December 1926 they were obliged to survive on less than a third of the money they would have received had they been working.¹⁰⁷

It is not surprising that following this period of immense struggle, and extreme debt acquisition, many south Walian men left the region to find employment across the border in England. In Davies's poem, the Charing Cross Road is a significant setting, given that this was also the location of the Welsh Presbyterian Chapel.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Davies, 2007, p. 539.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 539.

¹⁰⁸ Although still extant, the building no longer functions in a religious capacity.

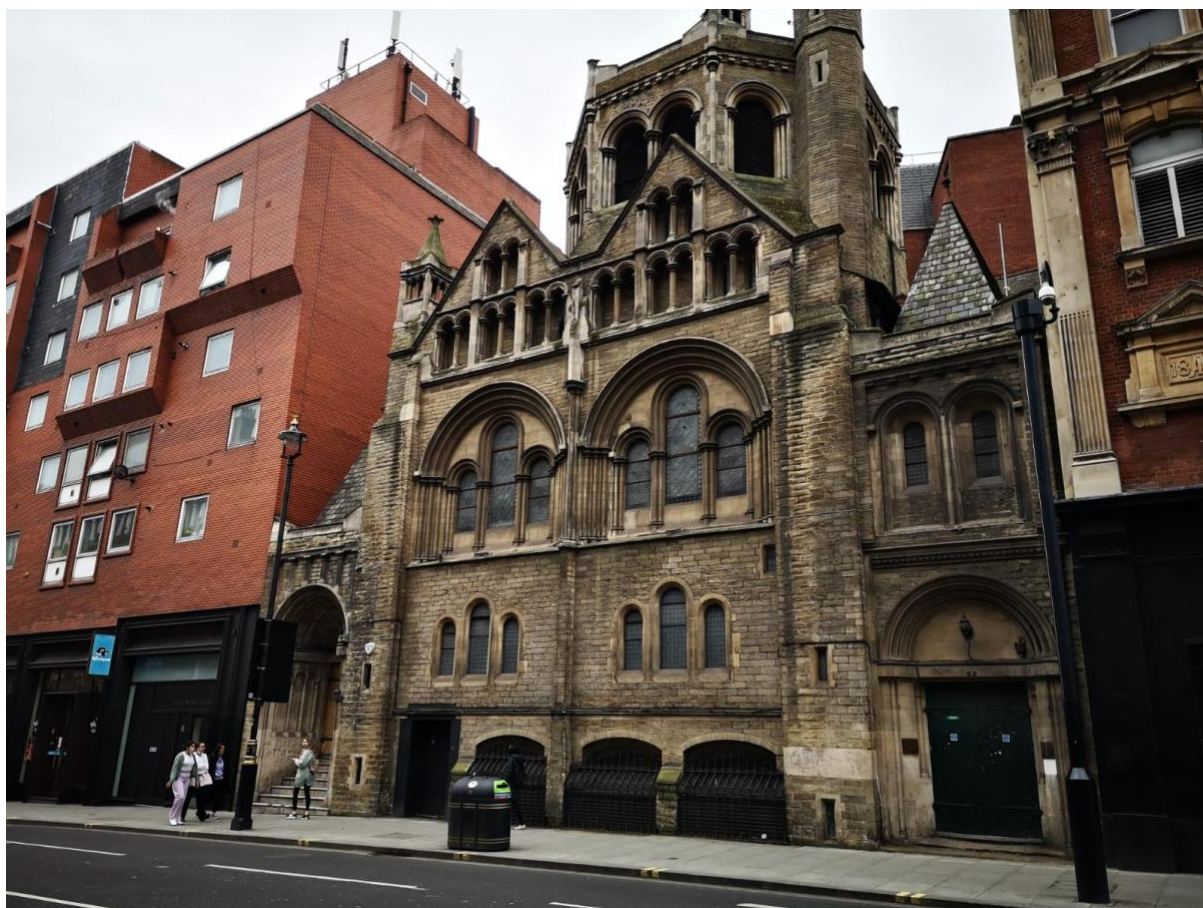


Figure 16. Former Welsh Presbyterian Chapel, Charing Cross Road, London.¹⁰⁹

From a personal perspective, the area was significant to Davies – himself a Welsh exile in the English capital – who regularly met Welsh friends nearby. As Dafydd Johnston explains, ‘[i]t was the circle of exiled Welshmen centred on Foyle’s Bookshop in Charing Cross Road (and later Griff’s bookshop in nearby Cecil Court) which provided Idris with the company he needed’.¹¹⁰ Like the fictional Dai and Shinkin, Davies would have been keenly aware of the emotions experienced by emigrant Welsh people, as they forged new existences hundreds of miles away from their ancestral homes.

However, in derelict Gwalia, it is not just men who have had to flee the industrial wasteland in order to find employment. In Poem XII, the speaker describes a widow in the

¹⁰⁹ Photograph courtesy of my sister, Martha Armstrong-Twigg.

¹¹⁰ Johnston, ‘Idris Davies’s Life’, 1994, pp. xi–xxxv (p. xxiii.).

mining community who, after having already lost her husband following a pit collapse, is now bereft of her daughters, due to the harsh economic climate:

But the widow on the hillside remembers a bitterer day,
The rap at the door and the corpse and the crowd,
And the parson's powerless words.
And her daughters are in London serving dinner to my lord,
And her single son, so quiet, broods on his luck in the queue.¹¹¹

The modest 'hillside' dwelling of the widow is juxtaposed with the ostentatious residence of 'my lord'. The class divide is further emphasised by the subservient role performed by the daughters who, unable to find work in south Wales, work as maidservants in the English capital.¹¹² Gloomily, her sole remaining means of support is her son who, like many others at the time, waits in the queue to receive charitable assistance.

For every Welsh exile who managed to establish themselves over the border, there would have been an equal number who struggled to find meaningful employment. In Poem XX, the speaker surveys the desolate scene back in Wales, noting that 'the deacons are groaning and the sheep-dogs are thin', highlighting the internal despair within those religious figures tasked to care for the people that remain, whilst also hinting at similar difficulties faced by local agriculture.¹¹³ However, once more returning to the figure of Dai, the speaker announces that he 'is in London drinking tea from a tin', which seems to suggest that he has become a tramp.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, from a wider perspective, Idris Davies would have been aware that the word 'derelict' is sometimes used for tramps and rough sleepers, which illustrates that even those who succeed in leaving Wales do not escape the ruin.

Due to the entanglement of the human and more-than-human world, the depopulation of Gwalia results in a reduction of stewardship, and this compromises the environmental

¹¹¹ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XII, ll. 9–13, p. 8.

¹¹² Deirdre Beddoe's *Out of the Shadows: A History of Welsh Women in Twentieth-Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001) has a great deal of material on the vast numbers of Welsh girls and women who went into domestic service in English cities, especially Liverpool and London.

¹¹³ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XX, l. 7, p. 12.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 8, p. 12.

exterior, rendering the land, to use Gandy's word, 'unproductive' for everyone and everything that remains. Even the poem's title has further significance from this perspective. '*Gwalia*' is an archaic name for Wales, and '*Deserta*' is the Latin word for desert. As well as connotations of desertion, suggesting an 'Abandoned Wales', the title can also be construed as '[The] Desert of Wales'. The OED defines 'desert' as: '[a]n uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country; a wilderness', with the addition: 'now conceived as a desolate, barren region, waterless and treeless, and with but scanty growth of herbage'.¹¹⁵ Given the focus of the first part of this chapter, imagining '[The] Desert of Wales' as a 'desolate, barren region, waterless', and most importantly, 'treeless', seems particularly apt. Certainly, the title of the poetic sequence initiates the impression of a compromised environmental exterior, which the poems within continue. Early on, in Poem VI, the speaker creates a sharp contrast between the glorious pastoral uplands, and the desolate valley and port towns, with their industrial and urban sprawl encroaching on rural land:

Down from your shining mountains,
 Dreamers of glory to be,
 Back to your derelict valleys,
 Back to your slums by the sea.¹¹⁶

The speaker calls out to idealistic dreamers, who must descend from their lofty heights and return to the grim reality of their homes. However, there is a further contrast between the valley and port towns, as the 'derelict' former has been abandoned due to its unproductivity, whereas the 'slums' of the latter suggest overpopulation. Is the dereliction of *Gwalia* more localised than the title of the poem would suggest?

As *Gwalia Deserta* continues, the 'derelict valleys' are examined in more intimate detail. In Poem XI, for example, the speaker beseeches a higher power to save the remaining local populace from their misery:

¹¹⁵ 'Desert, n.2', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online:

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/50774?rskey=91IIIE&result=2>> [Accessed 27th April 2019].

¹¹⁶ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, VI, ll. 1–4, p. 5.

Dark gods of all our days,
Have mercy upon us.

Dark gods, take away
The shadows from our towns,

The hopeless streets, the hovels
Behind the colliery sidings.

Dark gods of grime and grief,
Soften the bitter day.¹¹⁷

It would seem that this space is now bereft of Christianity, as the speaker appeals to a besmirched pantheon of deities for assistance. The repetition of ‘dark gods’ – significantly not capitalised – highlights the desperation with which the speaker makes a forlorn plea.¹¹⁸ Even the omnipotent forces that govern the heavens, or hells, of the colliery settlements are blackened by the contaminating dust of coal. Shadows are cast over towns – suggesting pollution – whilst local people are denied the light to sustain growth. Next, the speaker insinuates a connection between a damaged environmental exterior and an absence of hope. ‘Hopeless streets’ intersect a landscape consisting of practically unliveable ‘hovels’, worsened by their proximity to the ‘colliery sidings’, the dirtiest part of town. As George Ewart Evans explains, ‘wherever there was a colliery it would be linked with the main line by a short length of colliery sidings. Here three or four trains could be assembled before being fed into the main line to the coast’.¹¹⁹ The pollution of the steam trains, coupled with the dust rising from the coal being loaded onto the wagons, would have made living conditions intolerable.

Once more, the theme of dereliction is revisited in Poem XIV, as the speaker narrates a solitary walk through the dejected valley at the latter stages of twilight:

Roaming the derelict valley at dusk,
Breathing the air of desolation,
Watching the thin moon rise behind the mountain church¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XI, ll. 1–8, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, l. 1, l. 3 and l. 7, p. 7.

¹¹⁹ George Ewart Evans, ‘The Strength in the Hills’, in *The Heart of Wales: An Anthology*, ed. James A. Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 1994), p. 174.

¹²⁰ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XIV, ll. 1–3, p. 9.

Davies employs a clever use of wordplay with ‘air of desolation’ referring both to the polluted atmosphere, as well as the tone of misery that permeates the community. Evidently, this is more than an emaciated landscape, as even the ‘thin moon’ mirrors the pervasive sense of collective withering. The particular time of day further emphasises the emptiness in the valley, as the speaker moves through the space with ease, unobstructed by any obstacles. However, as the poem continues, people slowly begin to appear, and the speaker watches their faces for traces of emotion:

I seek in the faces of men glimpses of early joy,
I seek in the sounds of human speech
The echoes of some far forgotten rapture...¹²¹

Yet, this is not to be found – and ‘alas’ cries the speaker, only the sound of ‘the wind from the moor’ reverberates in this empty landscape. Coupled with the manifold economic problems facing the people, it is as if the compromised environmental exterior heightens the community’s depression. The dereliction of the valley results in an abandonment of hope, as the remaining few inhabitants carry the suffering of the landscape in their hearts, and on their faces.

This communion of suffering between people and place is further evident in Poem XX, as the speaker turns to paternal figures in search of lost fraternity:

O where are our fathers, O brothers of mine?
By the graves of *their* fathers, or awaiting a sign.
The Welsh skies are sullen and the stars are all dim,
And the dragon of Glyndwr is bruised in the limb.¹²²

Once more, the atmosphere of sorrow is reflected both above and below. ‘The dragon of Glyndwr’ referring to Y Ddraig Aur [The Golden Dragon], the royal standard of the last true Prince of Wales, Owain Glyndŵr – has been injured, suggesting a similar wound in the pride

¹²¹ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XIV, 11. 4–6, p. 9.

¹²² Ibid, XX, 11. 1–4, p. 12.

of the Welsh people. The mention of ‘graves’ in the second line is significant, especially given that the fifth line continues the sentiment by explaining that ‘[t]he brown earth is waiting for brothers of mine’.¹²³ Although Gwalia’s soil is unproductive, it is still able to receive the dead.

Davies continues this theme of a fragmented society in Poem XXX, but this time chooses to name the place, returning to an earlier mentioned location: Merthyr Tydfil. In the first stanza, the speaker commands an unknown other – presumably the reader – to visit this long-forgotten landscape:

Ride you into Merthyr Tydfil
Where the fountains have run dry,
And gaze upon the sands of fortune
But pray not to the sky.¹²⁴

The dereliction of Merthyr Tydfil appropriately assumes the guise of the wilderness on the Israelites’ path to Mount Sinai. It is literally a deserted place where the ‘fountains have run dry’ and ‘the sands of fortune’ have returned to cover the ground.¹²⁵ However, whereas the Israelites could pray to ‘the sky’ in order to receive divine intervention, this is not a possible outcome in Merthyr, suggesting that even God has abandoned this dilapidated landscape.¹²⁶ As the poem resumes, the speaker continues to construct a stark image of desolation, using overtly Biblical imagery, and commanding an unnamed other to further abandon their hope in this godforsaken place:

If you will to Merthyr Tydfil
Ride unarmed of dreams;
No manna falls on Merthyr Tydfil,
And there flow no streams.¹²⁷

The Israelites had their ‘dreams’ of Israel, but there is little hope in this landscape for the redemption of a new kingdom. Though God saved the Israelites with food and drink on their

¹²³ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XX, l. 5, p. 12.

¹²⁴ Ibid, XXX, ll. 1–4, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Ibid, ll. 2–3, p. 17.

¹²⁶ Ibid, l. 4, p. 17.

¹²⁷ Ibid, ll. 5–8, p. 17.

journey, there is no sustenance proffered in this unproductive landscape. Furthermore, this extract appears as a deliberate contrast to Ann Griffiths's hymn, 'Gwna fi fel pren planedig, O fy Nuw', [Make me like a tree, planted, oh my Lord] in which 'afonydd dyfroedd byw', [rivers of living waters] flow abundantly in the fecund land.¹²⁸ Davies's description of Merthyr as a town devoid of streams also recalls the heavily polluted Morlais Brook of Jones's *Black Parade*. Yet, in the final verse of Davies's poem, the speaker arrives in the present, describing the only source of solace for the people of this discarded town:

Pints of pity give healing,
Eyes go blind that will not see,
Ride you into Merthyr Tydfil
With salt of charity.¹²⁹

To drown their sorrows, the inhabitants of Merthyr have turned inwards, to the public houses and 'pints of pity', which provide a sense of 'healing', albeit temporarily.¹³⁰ For the visitor to Merthyr, all that is left to do is arrive with open hands carrying the 'salt of charity'.¹³¹ It could be that real compassion is absent from this abandoned landscape, and 'salt of charity' – understood with its Latin connotations of salary – refers to financial aid. In this sense, the lines suggest that it is not prayers that are needed to rebuild the industrial valleys, but real economic investment. Yet, will superficial repair be enough to solve derelict Gwalia, or are its issues more internalised than previously thought?

‘THIS STRICKEN TOWNSHIP’:
POLLUTED INTERIOR STATES¹³²

In her ecocritical analysis of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, McIntire argues that the poet's literal presentation of a compromised environmental exterior is connected to its polluted interior state:

¹²⁸ Ann Griffiths, 'Gwna fi fel pren planedig o fy Nuw', in Sian Megan, *Gwaith Ann Griffiths* (Llandybïe: Gwasg Christopher Davies, 1982), pp. 31–32.

¹²⁹ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XXX, ll. 9–12, p. 17.

¹³⁰ Ibid, l. 9, p. 17.

¹³¹ Ibid, l. 12, p. 17.

¹³² Ibid, XXI, ll. 1–4, p. 12.

‘he is inviting us to understand his bleak setting and ecology as offering symbolic and metaphorical commentary on our wasted (and wasteful) existences’.¹³³ Similarly, in Gandy’s essay on the aesthetics of dereliction, the geographer elaborates on his assertion that ecologically degraded spaces often share: ‘a common emphasis on the “unproductive” characteristics’, by stating that – from an exterior perspective – these compromised zones ‘are often also places of unease and symbolic signification’.¹³⁴ In what ways, then, are the interior states of ecologically compromised spaces polluted in *Gwalia Deserta*, and how do the ‘symbolic and metaphorical’ commentaries offered by Davies help reveal them?

In the second poem of *Gwalia Deserta*, the sacrifice of natural landscapes for industrial development is lamented. Here, the speaker highlights the absence of moral guidance, as well as the decline in societal values as contributing factors:

My fathers in the mining valleys
 Were slaves who bled for beer,
 Who had no saviour to acclaim
 And whose god was Fear.

And they sold the fern and flower
 And the groves of pine
 For a hovel and a tankard
 And the dregs are mine.¹³⁵

Although in *Gwalia Deserta* as a whole the speaker blames the capitalist mine-owners for inflicting incomparable damage to the previously rural valleys, this opening poem highlights the complicity of those who served them. There is a palpable sense of frustration with the paternal figures of the ‘mining valleys’ who, as an already subjugated community, merely ‘bled for beer’. As John Davies explains,

Following the Beer Act of 1830, there was a huge increase in the number of drinking places; in Blackwood in 1842 there was one for every five inhabitants, and the Dowlais Ironworks was surrounded by two hundred taverns. Over-indulgence was a cause of concern to many [...]¹³⁶

¹³³ McIntire, 2015, p. 178.

¹³⁴ Gandy, 2013, p. 1302.

¹³⁵ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XXX, ll. 1–8, p. 3.

¹³⁶ Davies, 2007, p. 363.

As is evident in Jones's *Black Parade* with the repeated drunkenness of the male characters, the mass consumption of alcohol became an essential part of life in coal-mining communities. However, in the next two lines – perhaps more forgivingly – the speaker of Davies's poem acknowledges that this is due to a deficiency in moral direction, as the only religious figure available to the enslaved people was '[f]ear'. The subsequent transaction, which sees 'the fern', 'flower', and 'groves of pine' exchanged for substandard accommodation and a 'tankard' full of beer, is condemned by the speaker with an air of despondency. As the inheritor of the derelict wasteland that Gwalia has become, the speaker expresses a sense of frustration, which is channelled through sardonic humour. Conclusively – and very early in *Gwalia Deserta* – this poem highlights a connection between extreme degradation of the land and a similar deterioration in societal values.

At other early moments in the poem, the speaker implores others to awaken from an absentminded state of despondency. In Poem VI, for example, the local populace is told: 'dream no more on your mountain', but instead: 'face the savage truths | That snarl and yell in your valleys | Around your maids and youths'.¹³⁷ In this troubled community, there is no opportunity for daydreaming in the rural uplands, as it is selfish to escape from the grim realities that plague the derelict valleys below. There is a palpable sense of moral discomfort within this wasted land, and the speaker's repeated plea is continued in the next stanza:

Down from your dreams in the mountains,
Back to your derelict mate,
For the dreamers of dreams are traitors
When wolves are at the gate.¹³⁸

Perhaps this is a moment of self-criticism, as poets are particularly prone to dreaming and escaping.¹³⁹ When others are suffering, one individual's dreaming appears as a betrayal of the

¹³⁷ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, VI, ll. 9–12, p. 5.

¹³⁸ Ibid, ll. 10–13, p. 5.

¹³⁹ As Glyn Jones expresses in his poem, 'Merthyr', in *The Collected Poems of Glyn Jones*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 41–44, (p. 42).

multitudes. As the previously firm structure of the community begins to erode – precipitated by years of damage to the environmental exterior – a sense of moral panic has erupted within the valley’s interior, and ‘wolves’ wait menacingly at the periphery, ready to exploit the remaining population.

As *Gwalia Deserta* continues, the degraded interior life of the community is explored in more intimate detail. In Poem XVIII, the speaker wonders what is left for those whose society is decaying around them:

Play dominoes till dusk, play dominoes and sigh,
For who will give you work again?
Your fists are growing tender with the years,
And all the April hopes you had
Are lifeless leaves in autumn gutters.
So call your cronies to that table by the stove
In the little Welfare Institute,
And play and talk until the valley lights are lit.
Gaze out through dusty window panes
On delicate parsons passing by,
And the children of Gwalia seeking soup.¹⁴⁰

There is no work, and so the jobless men sit idly, playing dominoes and visibly revealing their frustration in physical terms. As the years of unemployment continue, their previously robust bodies are softening with inactivity, and even the ‘April hopes’ of spring have failed. The only remedy for the afflicted community can be found in the ‘Welfare Institute’, where games – and presumably drink – provide some sense of distraction to dull their inner frustration. However, as the men while away endless hours inside, outside the ‘children of Gwalia’ go hungry.

In Poem XIX, the speaker reflects critically on the place of Christianity within the depraved community, and argues that faith offers nothing more than a hollow sense of optimism for the hopeless local populace:

We have fooled ourselves that a Heaven
Awaits our bodiless selves
Or built out of fear a savage Hell
Of eternally flaming shelves.

¹⁴⁰ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, VI, ll. 10–13, p. 5.

And we raise our far Eldorados
In invisible valleys of air
While we crawl 'twixt the pub and the chapel,
Chewing the cud of despair.¹⁴¹

Gwalia lacks a sense of spiritual guidance, but evidently, it is not to be located in the long-established chapels, which perpetuate a religion constructed by falsehoods. Yet, the crucial moment arrives in the third line of the second stanza, in which the speaker dichotomises the breakdown of society in terms of alcohol and religion. Both possess the power to dupe the individual into imagining the existence of alternatives; both create a forlorn community of lifelong dependents; and ultimately, both maintain the status quo within depraved Gwalia. The community are described as cattle, 'chewing the cud', but where they used to graze on greenery, their pasture has been removed, and they flounder on a wasteland of barren 'despair'.

However, there are moments in the poetic sequence where solutions and saviours are sought. In Poem XXI, for example, the speaker appeals to a mythical poet who, calling from the rural uplands, appears as an apposite liberator of the forsaken community:

I hear you calling on the mountains,
Poet of the promised day,
I hear you from this stricken township,
Calling far away.¹⁴²

In the third line, the word 'stricken' suggests more than a sense of dereliction or poverty. It is as if the 'township' has been plagued by a terrible sickness. Significantly, 'stricken' is defined as: '[o]f a person, community: Afflicted with disease or sickness; overwhelmed with trouble or sorrow, and the like'.¹⁴³ Like Oedipus's cursed Thebes or the Plagues of Egypt sent by God to disobedient people in the Book of Exodus, the case of Davies's depraved Gwalia illustrates

¹⁴¹ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XIX, ll. 1–8, p. 12.

¹⁴² Ibid, XXI, ll. 1–4, p. 12.

¹⁴³ 'Stricken, adj.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online:
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/191564?redirectedFrom=stricken>> [Accessed 23rd April 2019].

how a degraded environmental exterior has resulted in the moral deterioration within the community's interior, an affliction from which it will perhaps never recover.

This viral sense of affliction is also represented through the physical process of staining. In Poem XXII, the speaker mourns how the 'landscape of Gwalia' is 'stained for all time | By the bloody hands of progress'.¹⁴⁴ Intriguingly, the OED offers a definition of the verb 'to stain' as: 'to defile or corrupt morally; to taint with guilt or vice'.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, in addition to reading this line as the physical marking of the environmental exterior – through loss of trees, polluted rivers and vast spoil tips – it could be argued that the moral interior of the place has been similarly compromised. Moreover, the emphasis on 'for all time' illustrates the perpetuity of this scandalous act, committed by the 'bloody hands' of economic development. From this line, there is a firm sense that Davies apportions blame elsewhere to a definite, bygone era in his rejection of 'progress', the mantra of Victorian Britain.

Despite the fact that at other moments in *Gwalia Deserta*, the speaker seems to confront those unnamed others who choose to escape through dreams, there are occasions when the portrayal is more sympathetic. Poem XXIX begins with the folkloric line: 'there was a dreamer in the mining town'. Yet the tone shifts when the content of the dream is explored in more detail:

There in the dusk the dreamer dreamed
Of shining lands, and love unhampered
By the callous economics of a world
Whose god is Mammon.¹⁴⁶

Crucially, the imaginary 'shining lands' are described in stark contrast to the callous capitalism of the industrial wasteland, where the only deity present is Mammon. With a subtle touch, the absent insipidity of derelict Gwalia is summoned by the magnificent appearance of the abstract

¹⁴⁴ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XXII, ll. 3–4, p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ 'Stain, v.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/188732?rskey=o54ZCI&result=2> [Accessed 23rd April 2019].

¹⁴⁶ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, 1994, XXIX, ll. 15–18, p. 16.

dreamscape. Then, as *Gwalia Deserta* moves toward its conclusion, the speaker mounts a conclusive attack on the corruption of Welsh space. Poem XXXI addresses the recurring character of Dai for the final time:

Consider famous men, Dai bach, consider famous men,
All their slogans, all their deeds,
And follow the funerals to the grave.
Consider the charlatans, the shepherds of the sheep!
Consider the grease upon the tongue, the hunger of the purse!
Consider the fury of the easy words,
The vulgarity behind the brass,
The dirty hands that shook the air, that stained the sky!¹⁴⁷

Davies's unfussy use of repetition – where 'consider' is repeated five times – slowly builds to the moment of exclamation. It is as if the poet is rewriting and challenging the well-known phrase, 'let us now praise famous men', from the Book of Ecclesiasticus.¹⁴⁸ The passion of the speaker's argument, which creates an almost frantic catalogue of misconduct, is remarkable. Yet, once more, in the final quoted line, the image of staining returns, hinting both at the obvious air pollution created by the coal industry, and the metaphorical tainting of the atmosphere in depraved Gwalia. Unmistakeably, this is a corrupt space where lazy 'slogans' replace valuable actions, and 'charlatans' hold sway over the local populace. With 'grease upon the tongue', these men talk at great length, but possess no real substance in their empty discourse. Finally, these are the figures that remain at large within depraved Gwalia, and their 'dirty hands' have not only compromised the environmental exterior but polluted the community's moral interior.

CONCLUSION

¹⁴⁷ Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, XXXI, ll. 1–8, p. 17.

¹⁴⁸ 'Ecclesiasticus', *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 392.

Using deforestation as a starting point, this chapter has offered a wide-ranging discussion of the representation of degraded Welsh space. In the first part of the chapter, I examined how the literatures of Wales – over the course of many hundred years – have provided vivid representations of trees within the larger landscape of the nation. Building on this notion, I proposed that this depiction obeyed patterns that sought to identify human traits in non-human trees. Throughout my examination of trees in Welsh literary space, I found that the country's woods and forests were often used to understand the human experience of history and, as a result of this, the close relationship between non-human and human was emphasised. Then, I turned specifically to Davies's *Gwalia Deserta*, using anthropomorphism, both as a definition and theory, to examine how the poet, like his many literary forebears, continues to identify the human as a tree. Using Daston and Mitman's assertion that humans projecting their emotions onto non-humans can often permit the former to 'egotistically believe themselves to be the center of the universe',¹⁴⁹ I demonstrated that, throughout *Gwalia Deserta*, Davies's subtle anthropomorphism – linking local people and place – consistently questions what Clark terms the 'dominant human self-conceptions' that render both interrelated terms as separate entities.¹⁵⁰ Essentially, the poetic sequence presents a space in which the human and non-human suffer on equal terms. The dehumanisation of the local people is equated with the deforestation of the local landscape.

I then shifted focus from the act of deforestation itself, to its consequences, and asked: what does a place become when it loses its trees? As the poem suggests, loss of native woodland renders land as derelict, and – drawing on parallels with Eliot's *The Waste Land* – I considered the ways in which this wasteland could be analysed from both an exterior, literal perspective and an interior, figurative viewpoint. This led to an examination of physical

¹⁴⁹ Daston and Mitman, 2005, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ Clark, 2011, p. 192.

changes that rendered Gwalia a derelict space, drawing on theories of wasteland aesthetics, and ‘terrain vague’. Through both the abandonment of exploitative industrialists and the eventual departure of the hopeless local population, Davies shows how the dereliction of land is immediately visible through the sheer absence of people. In addition to this, building on Gandy’s attempt to define the meaning of these sites as sharing ‘a common emphasis on the “unproductive” characteristics’, I explored the many ways in which Gwalia is presented as a no longer functioning space, both for human and non-human.¹⁵¹ In the second section, I shifted my focus to examining the dereliction of Gwalia from an interior perspective, exploring the process by which exterior damage could contribute to internal deterioration, and even depravity. Throughout *Gwalia Deserta*, Davies represents a Welsh space plagued by the remnants of capitalism, with a scant, residual population that depend on religion, alcohol and unproductive games to distract themselves from the reality of a hopeless future. In sum, Davies’s identification of humans as trees, suggests that with their loss comes a dispossession of Welsh identity. Devoid of its identity, the resultant nation resembles a derelict and depraved wasteland; both literally and figuratively, a Gwalia Deserta.

¹⁵¹ Gandy, 2013, p. 1302.

CHAPTER THREE | BLACK LUNGS

‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust’: Air Pollution in B. L. Coombes’s *These Poor Hands*¹



Figure 17. Ffos-y-fran opencast pit.²

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: AIR POLLUTION, FFOS-Y-FRAN AND THE RETURN OF DUST

In February 2018, a report commissioned by the Research Service of what was then the National Assembly for Wales [Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru], highlighted the significant threats posed by air pollution in Wales. Summarising some of the major findings within the introductory notes, the report stated that:

¹ ‘The Order for the Burial of the Dead’, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, The Church of England, available online: <<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/burial-dead>> [Accessed 13th October 2020].

² My own photograph.

Wales has some of the worst air quality in the UK. Cardiff and Port Talbot both have higher particulate matter levels than Birmingham or Manchester and a road in Caerphilly is the most polluted outside of London. This air pollution contributes to around 2,000 deaths per year in Wales. It has been described by Public Health Wales as an urgent public health crisis, second only to smoking. Some areas in Wales have breached EU regulations for several years, culminating in the Welsh Government being taken to court for its lack of action.³

Although historically the skies of Wales have suffered from high levels of pollution due to the various heavy industries that harness the nation's natural resources, it would seem that the contemporary reduction in air quality has new, additional, causes. Elaborating on previous assertions, the report further states that:

Pollutants come from a range of sources, but the vast majority arise from the burning of fuels. This makes road transport the primary mobile source of emissions, and industrial combustion or production processes the main static sources.⁴

As in many Western nations, the rapid growth of private car ownership in Wales has led to higher levels of atmospheric pollution. Unsurprisingly, this has had a significant impact on public health statistics and, further expanding on previous assertions, the report outlines:

The main risk occurs through the exacerbation of existing cardiovascular diseases, as well as being a cause of asthma and lung cancer. The long-term impacts of air pollution are not well understood. Children are particularly vulnerable, meaning the effects of today's air pollution may be seen well into the future.⁵

Overall, the report makes for uncomfortable reading. Pollution in Wales is a troubling problem that is increasing in severity, and it is imperative that awareness of the issue is raised by all sectors of academia, as well as those who occupy significant roles in public life.

From an industrial perspective, multinational conglomerates based in Wales have recently faced criticism from global monitoring agencies due to their poor record on air pollution. In January 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights, Baskut

³ Robert Abernethy, *Research Briefing: Air Quality* (Caerdydd [Cardiff]: Comisiwn y Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru [The National Assembly for Wales Commission], 2018), available online: <<http://www.assembly.wales/Research%20Documents/18-009/18-009-Web-English.pdf>> [Accessed 1st February 2019], p. 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abernethy, 2018, p. 2.

Tuncak, visited the Ffos-y-fran opencast coalmine near Merthyr Tydfil. On his arrival in south Wales, Tuncak met with local residents to discuss allegations of air pollution and other industrially aggravated grievances at the largest mine of its kind in the United Kingdom. Speaking to the BBC following the visit, Tuncak stated that he “‘found the way the community's concerns had been handled by the authorities to be inadequate’”, and that in some cases, Miller Argent – the mine’s operator – had suggested that the residents themselves were to blame for their own health complaints. On this subject, Tuncak recalled:

“I heard some dismissal of certain allegations as being more linked to lifestyle choices or other factors among this working-class community, but what I didn't see was a solid investigation by the authorities to look into these claims.”⁶

The BBC’s report also documented testimonies from local residents, many of whom outlined clear examples of air pollution caused by the nearby opencast mine. One such resident, Terry Evans, whose house is located just thirty-seven metres from the boundary of the mine, described “‘being affected by absolutely phenomenal amounts of dust’”, before adding that “‘on a fine day when the wind is blowing from an easterly direction you just see it coming over us – it’s frightening’”.⁷ Other local residents, Alyson and Chris Austin, whose house is situated a ‘few hundred yards away’, offered similar testimonies, with the former lamenting: “‘I find it difficult to put the washing out on the clothes line or enjoy my garden. On hot days we can’t even open the windows’, with the latter adding ‘and all that dust goes straight into our lungs’”.⁸

In the void left by absent politicians – both in Westminster and Cardiff Bay – local people formed a resistance group to protest against the return of opencast mining to Merthyr. ‘Stop Ffos-y-fran’ began as a website, and through their online presence organised demonstrations and distributed a wide range of protest material in the local area. One such

⁶ Steffan Messenger, ‘UN expert urges Ffos-y-fran opencast health inquiry’, *BBC News*, 9th March 2017, available online: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-39195066>> [Accessed 1st February 2019].

⁷ Steffan Messenger, ‘UN expert urges Ffos-y-fran opencast health inquiry’, *BBC News*, 9th March 2017, available online: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-39195066>> [Accessed 1st February 2019].

⁸ Ibid.

poster features a poem by the Merthyr-based poet, Mike Jenkins, entitled ‘Merthyr Film Sets’. In the poem, Jenkins responds to the town’s derelict Hoover factory being used as a location for the film, ‘Dagenham Girls’ (2010), and considers how other parts of Merthyr could offer similar opportunities for the movie industry:

What about Ffos-y-fran
as a new planet for “Doctor Who”,
one called Devastation
with mutant creatures
trying to take over the Earth
with their poisonous dust?⁹

Jenkins’s perspective on the dust caused by opencast coal mining in Merthyr is humorous, yet it simultaneously raises serious questions about the nature of exploitation, both from a human and environmental perspective. Moreover, the inclusion of Jenkins’s poem within the protest material of the ‘Stop Ffos-y-fran’ group demonstrates that literature remains a powerful, and popular, means of documenting environmental degradation.

The accusations of industrial pollution at the Ffos-y-fran site were not reported by media outside of Wales, and despite promises of a full UN report, it would appear that local residents remain bereft of a resolution. More recently, as mining operations at the site are coming to an end, there have been disputes between Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council and Miller Argent about land restorations payments but, once more, it is unclear whether a portion of these funds will be made available to those who have suffered instances of air pollution.¹⁰ Certainly, the situation at Ffos-y-fran is significant in that it signals the return of dust pollution to south Wales, many years after the region’s coal mines ceased to operate. Indeed, the recent testimonies of local residents recall accounts of those who lived and worked within colliery communities at the height of the coal industry. Of the many who bore witness to dust pollution

⁹ ‘Welcome to Merthyr Tydfil’ poster, available online:
<<https://www.indymedia.org.uk/media/2009/09/437402.pdf>> [Accessed 1st October 2018].

¹⁰ ‘Ffos-y-Fran: Clean-up row over opencast mine’, *BBC News*, 1st June 2018, online:
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-44335857>> [Accessed 1st October 2018].

during this time, the writer B. L. Coombes is remembered today for producing one of the most enduring accounts of life in south Wales during the 1930s. Like Jack Jones's *Black Parade*, Coombes's writing reveals that the notion of environmental justice has a long history in Wales. At a time when the nation faces new threats from multinational companies, revival and reinterpretation of this historical literature can provide evidence in support of groups that oppose further exploitation of natural resources, and reveal the long-term damage to people and nature caused by polluting industries.

LITERARY BIOGRAPHY: COMPELLED TO WRITE



Figure 18. Coal from Deep Navigation Colliery, Treharris.¹¹

B. L. Coombes was born in Wolverhampton on 9th January 1893, the only child of James Coombs Griffiths – then a grocer – and his wife, Harriett Thompson.¹² A Wulfrunian by birth, Coombes spent the majority of his childhood in Herefordshire. However, when he was around ten years old, Coombes lived for a period in Treharris, Glamorgan, where his father and uncles

¹¹ Photograph taken Thursday 9th April, 1987 © Roger Geach.

¹² The writer chose 'Coombes' as his surname, as opposed to 'Coombs' or 'Griffiths', see Bill Jones and Chris Williams, *B. L. Coombes: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 2.

worked in the Deep Navigation Colliery.¹³ After receiving all his formal education in the Taff Bargoed Valley [Cwm Taf Bargoed], Coombes and his family moved back to Madley, Herefordshire, where they obtained the tenancy of a small farm. Consequently, when Coombes properly left England at the age of seventeen to work in the anthracite mines of Resolven [Resolfen], in the Vale of Neath [Cwm Nedd], his move was more of a return than a new beginning.

Although Coombes began working as a miner at a relatively young age, it would be many years before he began documenting his experience of life at the coalface. Indeed, Coombes worked underground for well over two decades until he was finally compelled to write, at the grand age of forty.¹⁴ His first piece of writing to be published was an article entitled ‘Distressed’: ‘a bitter critique of the National Government’s Distressed Areas Policy’, which appeared in the political magazine, *Welsh Labour Outlook*, in January 1935.¹⁵ Two years later, Coombes’s literary ambition became evident, and the working miner published his first short story, ‘The Flame’, in *New Writing* in 1937.¹⁶ The London-based, left-wing publishers were impressed by Coombes’s ostensibly authentic accounts of working life in the south Wales coalfield. As Stephen Knight explains, John Lehmann – founder of *New Writing* (1936–50):

was keen to print a novel by Coombes in a new series, but when this fell through, [Victor] Gollancz accepted the book: he had been looking for a worker’s autobiography and Coombes reshaped the manuscript, first finished in July 1937, into what he called “an autobiographical novel”.¹⁷

In a similar vein to the writers discussed in previous chapters, Coombes’s ascent to literary success was rapid and remarkable. However, the reason why he was compelled to write is particularly significant.

¹³ Jones and Williams, 1999, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁷ Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 92.

As Jones and Williams explain, following the traumatic death of two close friends in a mining accident, Coombes was called to give evidence at the customary inquest as a witness.¹⁸ This would prove to be a pivotal moment in the miner's life, as suddenly Coombes 'realised that neither coroner, solicitors, or hardly any one present had the least idea of what happens underground'.¹⁹ As he detailed later in an unpublished autobiography, *Home on the Hill* (1959), the inquest stirred Coombes into action, and after ruminating at length on possible next steps, he finally came to the conclusion that writing was the most effective response to public ignorance:²⁰

Inside me somewhere was the determination that I must do something to let the world know more about our way of life. I pondered long over it, lonely in my idea, but I never forsook the intention. Months later I started to write.²¹

However, Coombes's definition of 'our way of life' has an important dual emphasis. In an unpublished radio play, *I Stayed a Miner* (1957), Coombes explains: 'I'll try to tell the world what really happens underground and in our villages as a miner sees it'.²²

For Coombes, the essence of the Welsh industrial experience was the pit and the village.²³ Building on this distinction, the first part of this chapter will begin underground, focusing on the ways in which Coombes represents dust and physical labour, before then considering depictions of occupational lung diseases caused by coal mining. The second part will follow the latter half of Coombes's literary objective, returning aboveground to the colliery village, to examine the description of localised air pollution, with a particular focus on the anxiety of dust, as well as the physical staining of the community.

¹⁸ Jones and Williams, 1999, p. 18.

¹⁹ *The Neath Guardian*, 27th September 1963.

²⁰ Extracts of which feature in Jones and Williams's edited anthology: B. L. Coombes, *With Dust Still in His Throat: A B. L. Coombes Anthology*, ed. by Bill Jones and Chris Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

²¹ B. L. Coombes, *Home on the Hill* (1959), quoted in: Jones and Williams, 1999, p. 18.

²² B. L. Coombes, *I Stayed a Miner* (1957), quoted in: Jones and Williams, 1999, p. 19.

²³ Coombes's experience of Welsh industry is, of course, approached from a male, working-class perspective.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP:
'THE MOST EFFECTIVE WRITING ABOUT MINING LIFE'²⁴

Like many writers that have been placed within the category of Welsh industrial literature, Coombes came to his craft much later in life. In a similar way, scholarly criticism was late in responding to his work. Of course, there had been short literary appraisals, with *These Poor Hands* receiving 'very favourable reviews by J. B. Priestley and Cyril Connolly', but on the whole, it would be many years until a book-length academic study of Coombes was published.²⁵ Aside from that, Glyn Jones describes *These Poor Hands* as an 'admirable autobiography', in *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* (1968), but does not elaborate further on this singular piece of praise.²⁶ In 1974, Dai Smith wrote an article for the *Anglo-Welsh Review*, in which he attributes the success of Coombes's writing to his straight, uncomplicated style:

Metaphor and simile are expunged and there is no desperate reaching for a linguistic vehicle for what is inexpressible in direct language. Coombes wants to tell it plain. The colliers' life is a living death, and too often in a literal sense.²⁷

Similarly, Beata Lipman, writing in *Planet* (1974), praises Coombes's text as a work of 'unfailing clarity', arguing that, 'his descriptions of that world of dark, wet, stony hardship are bettered only by his descriptions of the men who shared it and whom he evokes so movingly'.²⁸ In the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (1977), Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville recall that Coombes's text describes in 'a concise and unemotional way the living and working conditions – in particular the inseparability of the two – of the Welsh miners he knew'.²⁹ Moreover, Bellamy and Saville argue that Coombes's 'tendency towards understatement when he is

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1978), p. 9.

²⁵ Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. 4 (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), p. 63.

²⁶ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001 [1968]), p. 101.

²⁷ David Smith, 'Underground Man: The Work of B. L. Coombes, "Miner Writer"', *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 24, No. 53, 1947, pp. 10–25 (p. 22).

²⁸ Beata Lipman, 'Bert Coombes', *Planet*, 23, 1974, pp. 17–20, (p. 17).

²⁹ Bellamy and Saville, 1977, p. 63.

retailing [...] accounts of accident, death or extreme courage, makes the content even more telling'.³⁰ Further praise came from Raymond Williams, in his short but influential essay, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (1979), in which he states that 'the most effective writing about mining life in South Wales is in the autobiographical work of B. L. Coombes, and especially in *These Poor Hands*'.³¹ However, it was in 1999 that Bill Jones and Chris Williams finally published the first – and to this day, only – comprehensive study of Coombes for the University of Wales Press. This text offers a study of the miner-writer's life, including some useful analysis of his texts, and in that regard, it has been a valuable support in the writing of this chapter. Jones and Williams also published an aforementioned anthology of Coombes's writing in the same year, *With Dust Still in His Throat*, which contains extracts from his unpublished autobiography, *Home on the Hill*, as well as some of his short stories. Following this, in 2002, *These Poor Hands* was reissued by the University of Wales Press, with a new introduction and much-needed glossary, appropriately provided by Jones and Williams.

Recent criticism has responded to this renewal of interest in Coombes, instigated by the scholarly efforts of Jones and Williams. In the M. Wynn Thomas edited collection, *Welsh Writing in English* (2003), Stephen Knight labels *These Poor Hands* 'a plainly told and searching account of a miner's life', before contrasting the 'quiet, even recessive authorial voice' of Coombes to the 'powerful, even flamboyant voice' of other Welsh writers like Jack Jones, discussed in the first chapter.³² A year later, Knight again provided more comment on Coombes's work, in his survey of Welsh writing in English, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (2004). For Knight, *These Poor Hands* 'outlines the dangers of mining work', whilst Coombes's 'calm style gives a moving description of injury and death'.³³ Published in the same

³⁰ Bellamy and Saville, 1977, p. 63.

³¹ Raymond Williams, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1978), p. 9.

³² Stephen Knight, 'A New Enormous Music', in *Welsh Writing in English*, ed. by M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 47–90, (pp. 63–4).

³³ Knight, 2004, p. 93.

year as Knight's text, Barbara Prys-Williams's monograph on Welsh Writing in English, *Twentieth Century Autobiography* (2004), takes a markedly different viewpoint. Prys-Williams questions the unofficial coronation of Coombes as the authentic voice of the Welsh coal miner, suggesting that the 'naïve proletarian eyewitness has sometimes seemed to suit people's preconceptions'.³⁴ However, following her examination of the author's papers, Prys-Williams concludes: 'archive material has provided hard evidence of the inventiveness and, indeed literary ability Coombes brought to the many constructed versions of his life story'.³⁵ Building on this assertion, the ensuing chapter seeks to shift the focus from questions of authenticity, towards an emphasis on Coombes's literary ability.

As with many writers of Welsh industrial literature, the extant scholarly criticism on Coombes – despite being praiseworthy – exhibits an obsession with authenticity. Although Jones and Williams may not agree with most of Prys-Williams's arguments, they would concur that *These Poor Hands* contains definite fictional elements. In some ways, Coombes's own presentation of his text as an autobiographical account of working life is partly to blame for inviting the inevitable scepticism from scholars like Prys-Williams. Most certainly, the text does contain some inaccuracies, yet it remains one of the most iconic accounts of the Welsh industrial experience. However – and to place the authenticity debate to one side – until now, there has been no academic research published on how Coombes's text responds to the question of dust. The sole discussion of the subject is to be found in an unpublished conference paper, delivered by Chris Williams in 2004, entitled: "‘Is a Working Man any Greater Value than the Dust?’: Lung Disease in the Writings of B. L. Coombes", which the author was kind enough to share with me.³⁶ In the paper, Williams examines Coombes's presentation of dust in his four

³⁴ Barbara Prys-Williams, *Twentieth-Century Autobiography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 79.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

³⁶ Chris Williams delivered an unpublished paper, entitled "‘Is a Working Man any Greater Value than the Dust?’: Lung Disease in the Writings of B. L. Coombes", at the 'Dust at Work' Conference, Glasgow Caledonian University, 28–29th May 2004, pp. 1–9.

books, *I Am A Miner, Fact* (1939), *These Poor Hands* (1939), *Those Clouded Hills* (1944) and *Miners' Day* (1945), and focuses specifically on: 'first, Coombes's use of dust as a metaphor; second, the ubiquitous presence of dust in Coombes's writing; and third, what Coombes has to say specifically about lung disease amongst coal miners'.³⁷ This chapter, then, aims to both respond to Williams's work and advance the critical discussion, by approaching Coombes's depiction of dust pollution from an environmental perspective.

PART I: UNDERGROUND

Theoretical Beginnings: Stacy Alaimo's Trans-corporeality

Dust permeated every aspect of work and life within the industrial communities of the south Wales coalfield. After each shift down the pit, filthy coal particles caked the clothes and settled in the lungs of those who worked to free the coal from the seams hidden deep underground. For the local community, airborne dust-stained windows, washing, and garden vegetables, whilst also entering the lungs of those who went about their daily lives, from children playing in the park to parents buying the weekly groceries.

Reading Coombes's *These Poor Hands* alongside recent developments in ecocriticism, this chapter argues that the text engages with fundamental questions relating to humanity's relationship with the so-called 'external' environment. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), Stacy Alaimo introduces her notion of trans-corporeality. For Alaimo, trans-corporeality, 'in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world [...] underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"'.³⁸ Furthermore, Alaimo explains: 'thinking

³⁷ Williams, 2004, p. 3.

³⁸ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 2.

across bodies may catalyse the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions'.³⁹ Reading *These Poor Hands* in the light of trans-corporeality, I argue that Coombes's depiction of the reciprocal damage inflicted on miner and earth through coal extraction, challenges previous nature/culture distinctions, and reveals the true human and non-human cost of coal mining.

‘MY SKIN WAS SMARTING’:
PHYSICAL LABOUR AND THE OMNIPRESENCE OF DUST⁴⁰

If the essence of Coombes's literary ambition is to render accurately both the practice of deep mining and the experience of living in a colliery community, it is inevitable that his portrayal of the former would focus heavily on the harsh working conditions of the pit. In this regard, coal mining was an act of physical labour with few parallels. As Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston argue, ‘miners’ bodies were intimately affected by the work they did, and perhaps more so than almost any other occupational group.’⁴¹ In industrial literature, one of the most prevalent – and often harrowing – representations of coal mining's impact on the body focused on the roof fall. Coombes himself depicted such an incident in his powerful short story, ‘Twenty Tons of Coal’ (1939), which was originally published by John Lehmann's *New Writing* magazine. In the ensuing passage from the story, the narrator describes the frenzied moments following a roof fall, in which the surviving men desperately search through the rubble for Griff, their missing comrade:

Men can lift great weights when fear forces their strength. These stood six in a row, then tumbled big stones away until the largest one in the centre was left. This one needed leverage, so a man knelt alongside to place the end of two rails in position; they

³⁹ Alaimo, 2010, p. 2.

⁴⁰ B. L. Coombes, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002 [1939]), p. 21.

⁴¹ Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 38.

had to be careful not to put the end on a man's body. Several men put their shoulders under the rails then they prised upwards. As the stone was slowly lifted they blocked it up again by packing with smaller stones, then started to lift again. When the stone was two feet off the ground they paused; surely it was high enough. There was something to be done now that each man dreaded; then, as if their minds had worked together two men knelt down and reached underneath. Very carefully they drew out what had been Griff.⁴²

The intense physicality of the miners' efforts to reach their friend is sharply contrasted with the final sentence, in which the remains are discovered. In this moment of trauma, the narrator is unable to identify the mangled body as his fallen butty, and instead describes the figure as 'what had been Griff'.⁴³ Yet, shortly after, the narrator regains composure, and notices that 'Griff seems to be no more than half his usual size'.⁴⁴ This statement arrives as a powerful corporeal contrast to stereotypical images of coal miners, and it is the vulnerability of the working body that is most striking. From a trans-corporeal perspective, the roof fall is one of the most terrible and dramatic instances of the process by which the miner's body and the earth are incorporated; crushed together, erasing the dividing line between self and other.

In addition to the constant threat of death in the form of a roof fall, miners like Coombes had to contend with the invasive presence of coal dust throughout their working existences. Dust infiltrated all aspects of life as a collier, from blackened clothes to coal-stained bodies: there was no escape. As Chris Williams explains, dust was always set to play a major role in Coombes's literary ambitions, even from the beginning:

His initial idea for a novel, in 1937, was that it should be about "a very ordinary young man living in a mining area who marries a girl there. They try to lead a decent, clean life in spite of dust, accidents, bad housing, lockouts, poor pay, and eventually silicosis." This idea eventually became transmuted into autobiography, though without the denouement.⁴⁵

⁴² B. L. Coombes, 'Twenty Tons of Coal', in *The Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories*, ed. by Alun Richards (London: Penguin, 2011 [1939]), pp. 153–73 (p. 169).

⁴³ 'Butty' means 'mate' and is used as a term of endearment for a friend or colleague. Coombes, 2011, p. 169.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 170.

⁴⁵ Williams, 2004, p. 3.

Coombes's emphasis on living a life 'in spite of dust' highlights the centrality of air pollution in colliery communities. Throughout *These Poor Hands*, the narrator paints a grim picture of labour in the anthracite mines of the Vale of Neath. Early on in the text, when the narrator has recently arrived in the community, he completes his first night shift underground. However, the young man must contend with more than just the physical effects of eight hours' toil at the coalface. He writes:

[T]he dust compelled me to cough and sneeze, while it collected inside my eyes and made them burn and feel sore. My skin was smarting because of the dust and flying bits of coal. The end of that eight hours was very soon my fondest wish.⁴⁶

Evidently, these early recollections of mining are besmirched by the spectre of airborne dust. The invasive particles of coal permeate the narrator's lungs and eyes, causing involuntary bodily reactions. In this regard, as soon as the miner begins to chip away at the coalface, human and earth become merged. The collier extracts coal from the seam, and stows it both in his wagon and in his body. To use Alaimo's phrasing, through the act of physical labour, the coal miner – like poor Griff from 'Twenty Tons of Coal' – becomes 'intermeshed' with the environment, and thus damage committed to one results in similar injury to the other.

As the text progresses, and Coombes's narrator becomes settled into the role of an experienced collier, the dusty, stifling conditions of the pit increasingly begin to jar with the pastoral image of life on the surface. Beyond the text, Coombes's Welsh industrial experience differed from that of other figures, like Jack Jones. This is important because the writer's own history, and subsequent geographical location within the coalfield, may have intensified his experience of issues such as air pollution.

⁴⁶ B. L. Coombes, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002 [1939]), p. 21.



Figure 19. Resolven from above.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding his largely agricultural upbringing in rural Herefordshire, Coombes worked in an anthracite mine in Resolven, situated in the equally rural Neath Valley. In comparison to the bituminous coal of the larger eastern valleys, the anthracite coal found around Resolven was not in the same kind of demand for overseas export. In this regard, the topography – and population of the Neath Valley – differ noticeably from the larger eastern valleys. As Hywel Francis and David Smith explain in their influential text, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (1980), the ‘semi-rural’ anthracite coalfield retained an individual identity because many miners ‘could live off the countryside whilst others were still

⁴⁷ My own photograph. B. L. Coombes lived for many years at 10 New Inn Place, one of the terraced houses at the bottom left of the image.

part-time farmers'.⁴⁸ This connects Coombes's experience to that of the Welsh-language author Kate Roberts, who famously depicted the slate quarrying communities of north-west Wales, where many families were also smallholders. However, in her most celebrated text, *Traed Mewn Cyffion* [Feet in Chains] (1936), Roberts emphasises the fact that with the men at work in the quarry, tending to the animals was a task often left to the women:

Gyda dwy fuwch a llo, dau fochyn, a dau fabi, un yn ddwyflwydd a chwarter a'r llall yn hanner blwydd, nid oedd ganddi amser i fyned i dŷ neb petai arni eisiau. Ni fedrai fynd i dŷ neb am 'de ddeg' fel y gwnâi merched y tai moel.⁴⁹

[With two cows and a calf, two pigs, and two babies – one two and a quarter and the other six months old – she had no time to visit anyone even if she'd wanted to. She couldn't go to anyone's house for 'elevenses' as other women did who had no smallholding to look after.]⁵⁰

Arguably, the contrast between the harsh conditions of both the quarry and the mine and the nearby unspoilt landscape would have been more pronounced for Roberts in Rhosgadfan and Coombes in Resolven than for those living in the more developed communities of south Wales's eastern valleys. Perhaps unsurprisingly, even Coombes's robust, documentary-style writing is not immune from some clearly pastoral reflections, as in the following quotation where the narrator recalls:

It is a grand day, and this valley is beautiful, with the glitter of the slow-moving river down the centre and the several shades of green among the trees that shade the mountain on each side. The sun is warm; some pigeons wheel above the village, and their white undersides show like puffs of steam; the polish shows on the laurel leaves when they move slowly with the warm wind; and the steam that rises from the turf has the smell of rain that has fallen to good purpose.⁵¹

This is a vivid rendering of pastoral landscape that would not look out of place in Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*, discussed in the final chapter. In the same vein as Llewellyn, Coombes uses this pastoral imagery to create a juxtaposition with the harsh working

⁴⁸ Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p. 247.

⁴⁹ Kate Roberts, *Traed Mewn Cyffion* [Feet in Chains] (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer [Gomer Press], 2014 [1936]), p. 35.

⁵⁰ Kate Roberts, *Feet in Chains*, trans. by Katie Gramich (Cardigan: Parthian, 2012 [1936]), p. 23.

⁵¹ Coombes, 2002, p. 158.

conditions of the nearby, subterranean mine, in which all-pervading dust plays a significant role:

Underneath the mountain that is over to my right more than a thousand of my mates are shut away from the sight of this day. They are swallowing dust with each gasping breath; they are knocking pieces out of their hands or bodies because of the feeble light; they are sweating their insides away so that they, and those dear to them, may live.⁵²

The difference between Llewellyn and Coombes's portrayal is that where the former sees the pastoral and then pans to the image of a towering spoil tip, the latter begins with the rural picture but then contrasts this with life underground. Coombes acknowledges the beauty of the nearby rural setting, but then turns to the industrial scene to emphasise the suffering of those who work in hellish conditions below. In Coombes's quotation, the working men are, once again, 'swallowing' the material that they are extracting from the seam, whilst simultaneously giving 'pieces' of their body to the mine in return. The same phrasing is used in Jack Jones's *Black Parade*, in which Glyn ironically extols the benefits of working in the nearby ironworks in comparison to the dusty pits: 'so if you don't like swallowing coal-dust you'd better get yourself a job in one of them'.⁵³ Yet, in Coombes's text, the colliers are forced to surrender more in order to feed their families. As they work, the men are described as 'sweating their insides away' and, in a sense, sacrificing their overworked organs to labour and coal. As Alaimo argues, 'trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures', and Coombes provides a clear example of this transaction between miner and environment; the former takes the coal, but sacrifices his body in return.⁵⁴

However, this mutual exchange between collier and environment is also an assimilation of the two previously distinct entities. In the mine, the labyrinthine tunnels and miles of pit props bear the mark of humanity at every turn. The earth becomes shaped by humanity below ground and above, where the waste is deposited in conical mounds. In a similar way, the miners

⁵² Coombes, 2002, pp. 158–9.

⁵³ Jack Jones, *Black Parade* (Cardigan: Parthian [Library of Wales], 2009 [1935]), p. 10.

⁵⁴ Alaimo, 2010, p. 2.

who emerge from the ground are stained by the black dust with which they have been intimately engaged throughout their arduous shift. Within the confines of the colliery buildings, Coombes's narrator explains in detail how every aspect of the site was tainted by the men whose bodies have almost become lumps of coal. Clearly, he is referring to a time before the introduction of pithead baths, when the workers would have remained stained with dust until they were able to bathe at home, in a tin tub by the fire. Later in the text, when the narrator goes to collect his earnings, he notices how even the colliery buildings exhibit the markings of the miner:

I shake out my money [...] That's all correct, so I move past the doorway [...] There must have been a wall-covering on that passage once – green, I should imagine – but now it is all grey-black, with a thicker coating of coal dust where the colliers have leaned their bodies against it.⁵⁵

The blackened bodies of the miners leave their mark on the walls of the colliery office, which significantly used to be 'green'. Here, Coombes's symbolic use of the colour recalls the greenness of the pastoral landscape that exists as a stark contrast to the filthy mine, but also, there is a reminder that the bodies of the colliers – once energetic, productive and full of life – are now starting to weaken with the years of hard labour, as well as the ingestion of the mine's coal and rock particles. Soon, the hallways and corridors of the colliery buildings will resemble the underground passageways of the pit, besmirched by the figures that rest their exhausted bodies on the wall. This is a very potent literary metaphor and displays Coombes's ability to write with a literary awareness that many critics have declared absent.

Another fusion of the miner's body and the earth is through the former's inhalation of coal dust during the process of labour. In the next section, I will examine Coombes's portrayal of occupational lung disease in *These Poor Hands*, focusing on conditions such as silicosis, a form of pneumoconiosis.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Coombes, 2002, p. 160.

⁵⁶ McIvor and Johnston explain that silicosis is a form of pneumoconiosis (or Miner's Lung), (2007, p. xviii). However, it may be the case that Coombes is not entirely clear about the distinction between the many lung

In 1930, construction began on one of the largest engineering projects in the history of the United States. As William Crandall and Richard E. Crandall explain:

The Hawks Nest tunnel diverted water from the New River near Ansted, West Virginia, and sped it through a three-mile long corridor inside of a mountain, to a hydroelectric facility just outside of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. The electricity was then used to power the Union Carbide facility in Alloy, West Virginia.⁵⁸

Due to the immense scale of the project, the contractors required migrant labour from across the country, and the majority of workers were African Americans.⁵⁹ As this was the time of the Great Depression, and levels of unemployment were at a record high, men were desperate for work and vulnerable to exploitation. This, Crandall and Crandall explain, had devastating consequences, as

The building of the tunnel resulted in hundreds of worker deaths from silicosis, a disease caused when silica dust becomes embedded in the victim's lungs. The result was a slow, agonizing death. Evidence exists indicating that the tunnel contractor knew of the dangers of silica dust, yet did not act to protect its workers. The resulting deaths were so numerous that even the exact number has been debated. The tunnel contractor figures put the death toll at sixty-five while Union Carbide calculated 109 deaths. In his documentary of the incident, physician Martin Cherniak has estimated that 764 died.⁶⁰

The American poet and political activist Muriel Rukeyser visited Gauley Bridge during the construction of the Hawks Nest tunnel and witnessed the unfolding tragedy. In 1938, she published a poem about the disaster, *The Book of the Dead*. Alaimo analyses Rukeyser’s text in *Bodily Natures*, highlighting that – like Coombes’s *These Poor Hands* – critics have placed *The Book of the Dead* ‘within the context of the popular as well as the specifically leftist 1930s documentary tradition’.⁶¹ In her presentation of industrial disease in the poem, Alaimo argues

conditions that affected coal miners. For example, there is a specific condition called anthracosis, which affected miners who worked with anthracite coal, but Coombes does not mention this word. I will therefore focus on silicosis, as this is the term that Coombes uses in his text.

⁵⁷ Coombes, 2002, p. 161

⁵⁸ William "Rick" Crandall and Richard E. Crandall, ‘Revisiting the Hawks Nest Tunnel Incident: Lessons Learned from an American Tragedy’, *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 8, 2 (2002), pp. 261–83 (p. 261).

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 276

⁶⁰ Ibid. See Martin Cherniak, M. 1986. *The Hawks Nest incident: America's worst industrial disaster* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁶¹ Alaimo, 2010, p. 47.

that Rukeyser creates ‘a transcorporeal landscape, as she traces the movement of silica dust from the rock to the body of the worker and even throughout the wider environment’.⁶² This has an impact on traditional representation of the environment, as Alaimo argues:

Nature in *The Book of the Dead* is neither a debased wilderness nor a pristine image of the sublime, but instead a peopled place, a powerful force, and, significantly, a material substance that moves through human bodies, inseparable from networks of power and knowledge. This nature requires an environmentalism concerned with all environments – including the industrial workplace.⁶³

This notion of a ‘transcorporeal landscape’, and the acknowledgement that the environment is intimately bound to the human and industry, creates further parallels with Coombes’s depiction of industrial disease. *These Poor Hands* and *The Book of the Dead* confirm that literature remains a potent force in exposing occupational negligence, whilst connecting the deaths of African-American workers with Welsh coal miners.

In *Miners’ Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining* (2007), McIvor and Johnston provide an overview of respiratory illness and its relationship to coal extraction in the United Kingdom:

The most [...] disabling of coal miners’ chronic occupational diseases were undoubtedly the cluster of diseases of the respiratory system, caused by inhaling dust. These included bronchitis and emphysema [...] and pneumoconiosis – where the inhalation of stone (silica) dust and coal dust clogged up the lungs, causing progressive damage and scarring (fibrosis) and a deterioration in lung function, leading to breathlessness, wheezing and coughing. This impaired physical capacity, reduced the ability of miners to perform their arduous labour, as well as many other physical activities, such as walking. In the most serious cases, death resulted from lung failure, or cardiac failure as the impaired lung capacity put pressure on the heart.⁶⁴

From a national perspective, medical statistics demonstrate that for many years, south Wales had the highest proportion of miners suffering from pneumoconiosis in the whole of the United Kingdom. Once more, as McIvor and Johnston explain:

The disease was particularly prevalent in the early/mid-twentieth century within the South Wales coal field. Moreover, mainly because of the practice of Welsh miners beginning work at the coal face at a younger age than in most other coal fields, the

⁶² Alaimo, 2010, p. 48.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 58.

⁶⁴ McIvor and Johnston, 2007, p. 53.

prevalence rate in South Wales was particularly high amongst younger miners: 33% of all pneumoconiotics in the Aberdare Valley and 26% in the Rhondda Valley were under 40 years of age in the mid- to late 1950s, compared to a UK average of less than 15%.⁶⁵

It is ‘no wonder, then,’ as McIvor and Johnston ironically conclude, ‘that dust was such a recurring motif in Bert Coombes’s evocative biography of working in the South Wales pits in the 1920s and 1930s’.⁶⁶ In that regard, Chris Williams argues that Coombes’s work is unique, when compared with other literary depictions of miners in the 1930s:

In contrast with George Orwell’s depiction of the miner in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, where there is little mention of lung disease, but much glorification of the magnificent physicality of the miner’s body, Coombes’s work stresses the essential vulnerability of the miner and his susceptibility to accidents and injuries. This is a body that has no necessarily heroic connotations, but is locked in a losing battle with dust.⁶⁷

Although Coombes did not suffer from serious lung conditions during his life, *These Poor Hands* is replete with references to the respiratory effects of coal mining. Early in the text, as Coombes’s narrator arrives in south Wales, he signs on for his first shift at the local colliery, and the absence of lung disease is one of the employment conditions:

The signing on was a serious affair. I had to satisfy five different clerks and provide material for detailed entries in their books. The first wanted assurance that I had not suffered from nystagmus, miner’s chest complaints, “beat” knees or elbows, had any serious injury, or been paid compensation due to or arising from the afore-mentioned. I struggled through that lot satisfactorily.⁶⁸

There is irony in the colliery stipulating that new employees should be free from ‘chest complaints’, in order to obtain a job that will probably cause them to develop respiratory-related conditions in the future. In this regard, Coombes artfully mirrors the sanitising language of the officials who render the serious health conditions as mere ‘complaints’. This passage also serves to highlight the value placed on the health of men, whose utility and ability to support their family depended on physical wellbeing. The coal mine provided an opportunity for workers to use their bodily utility to earn a valuable wage, but conversely, with every hour

⁶⁵ Alaimo, 2010, p. 56.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Williams, 2004, pp. 8–9.

⁶⁸ Coombes, 2002, pp. 16–17.

worked in the pit and further particles of dust inhaled, productivity levels decreased until eventually, miners became unable to work. For the collier, this is the consequence of living a life – to use Alaimo’s words – in ‘the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature’.⁶⁹

The harsh reality of occupational health becomes tragically evident as the young man grows increasingly more aware of lung disease:

Meanwhile, there was no improvement in the ventilation at our colliery. I was feeling the effects of working there myself, and there was a ghostly look about many of the men who worked with us. Some of them lost weeks of work through chest troubles.⁷⁰

The ineffective actions of those tasked to improve conditions at the colliery is also emphasised, as Coombes’s narrator paints a negligent image of capitalist mine owners. With every day of inadequate ventilation at the colliery, the reduced oxygen levels become gradually more unmanageable. Even the young, fit miner admits that he is beginning to experience a decline in health, which is no doubt worsened by the haunting presence of the figures who are succumbing to dust at a quicker pace. Here, Coombes introduces his recurring use of supernatural imagery to describe silicosis sufferers, emphasising their indeterminate status as figures in limbo. This further highlights Coombes’s skill as a literary artist, and not just a documentarist, as the use of literary tropes – far from suggesting inauthenticity – arguably renders the political and human aspects of the narrative more vivid and memorable.

As the text develops, Coombes’s narrator begins to sketch detailed portrayals of these figures, who struggle to deal with the incessant onslaught of dust:

I sympathise with the older men, and watch their struggle to keep up. I listen to the labour of their dust-clogged chests when they climb the drift to go out. They climb a few steps, pause to regain their breath and watch the younger ones hurry past. Down that coal-drift rushes a current of air that is forced and always ice-cold. This meets the sweating men as they come up and chills them to their insides. It tells on chests that are already weakened by clogging dust and the rush of work.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Alaimo, 2010, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Coombes, 2002, p. 52.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 154.

Clearly, the men who have been working the longest are more intensely affected by the dust. As they exit the mine shaft after a long shift, they bring the contents of the colliery out with them, laboriously carrying the black particles of silica in their lungs. Like the men who toil within the underground mazes of the coal mine, the particles of dust now sit uncomfortably within the respiratory tubes of the miner's body. As Alaimo argues, 'understanding the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity'.⁷² For Coombes and his fellow miners, it is impossible to hide from humanity's impact on the land. In this 'transcorporeal landscape', the collier's world is so entangled with the environment that the notion of the self must shift. Working deep underground, the men have agency and act upon the earth, but then also understand the agency of the environment itself, and its own ability to act upon and within them. This adds a further dimension to Raymond Williams's assertion that the act of labour in industrial fiction is not merely what men do, but who they are.⁷³

Perhaps the most memorable figure presented is Dai, a late-stage silicosis victim. This tragic character is introduced towards the end of the text, whilst a group of men – including the narrator – are sat drinking in the local pub. As the men talk idly at the bar, a seemingly unknown person enters 'with the silence of a ghost'.⁷⁴ Struck by the condition of the figure, Coombes's narrator describes how 'his features, too, are ghost-like in their pallor. His skin stretches tightly across his cheek-bones, and his eyes are like two large drops of water in holes that have shrivelled into his face'.⁷⁵ The language clearly suggests that the man is not far from death, and as the men watch him enter the bar, he is observed to be 'hardly strong enough to close the

⁷² Alaimo, 2010, p. 20.

⁷³ Williams, 1978, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Coombes, 2002, p. 161

⁷⁵ Ibid.

door, and his sigh sounds clearly across that quiet room'.⁷⁶ After the barman brings the newcomer a drink, two men begin a conversation about him, overheard by the narrator:

"God in heaven, Jack! What's the matter with that chap, eh? [...]"

"Where've you been living lately?" his mate asks. "Don't you know a chap as have got silicosis when you sees him?"

"Silicosis? Phew!' the other gasped. "His face looks like a dead man's face, that it do."

"Won't be long first," his mate replied. "I've seen enough of it to know as he can't last long."⁷⁷

Coombes's narrator listens to this conversation, but also gazes at the ghostly man, who is now forcing a smile back at him. Suddenly, he realises that he knows the shadowy figure – it is Dai. Hurriedly, the narrator goes over to the man and sits with him, beginning a long discussion about the nature of his illness:

It is more than twelve months since he staggered home after his last working shift and had to realise that his usefulness was over. The stone-dust had got inside his lungs, then every respiration had damaged and torn the delicate lining of the chest [...]⁷⁸

Even though the years of working at the seam are over, the dust still sits in Dai's lungs. The earth is literally carried inside him; damaging the inner workings of his respiratory system. In this regard, Dai's body is a vessel for humanity's exploitation of the environment. This powerful image is also explored in Duncan Bush's much later poem, 'Pneumoconiosis' (1985):

This is the dust:

Black diamond dust

I had thirty years in it, boy,
A laughing red mouth
Coming up to spit smuts black
Into a handkerchief.

But it's had forty years
In me now:
So fine
You could inhale it
Through a gag.
I'll die with it now.
It's in me,

⁷⁶ Coombes, 2002, p. 161.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 162

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 163

Like my blued scars.⁷⁹

Both Coombes and Bush acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between miner and dust. For the latter, forty years of lung disease is the price to pay for thirty years spent underground. There is a reasoned sense of acceptance in the direct, staccato lines of Bush's poem. The dust is within the speaker and will remain there until his final day. In this way, the miner never actually leaves the mine, but instead, carries its memory deep within a pair of beleaguered lungs, just as his body bears the 'blued scars' of the job's brutal physicality.

After talking at length to Dai – who remains heartbreakingly confident that he will receive a large sum of compensation for his occupational lung disease – Coombes's narrator does not share the man's misplaced optimism. For the healthy man, this episode instigates an inward consideration of coal mining's risks:

Many men know the danger of this dust-inhalation, but, as they have the choice of this work or none, they choose the course that will shorten their lives but will give their families food for a while and a lump sum in a few years – if they are lucky. Of course, every man who goes in these headings hopes that he will be luckier than his fellows, and that he will either avoid the dust, or that it will not affect him.⁸⁰

Essentially, the harsh economic climate means that the miner is forced into choosing between his own health and his family's survival. Coombes's narrator concludes with perhaps one of the most significant lines in the text: 'Man seems to be very sure that he can beat the mountain, but Nature nearly always wins'.⁸¹ In this ultimate conclusion on the question of industrial disease, humanity is placed in direct conflict with nature, with the latter overcoming the former. As discussed in the first part of the chapter, the entire process of mining can be viewed in similar terms, yet the crowning of a conqueror remains problematic. In the extraction of coal, the miner damages the environment, but then is damaged in return. In this regard, both receive

⁷⁹ Duncan Bush, 'Pneumoconiosis', in *Coal: An Anthology of Mining*, ed. by Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ Coombes, 2002, p. 164.

⁸¹ Ibid.

mutual losses, because, as Alaimo suggests, they are ‘intermeshed’ within a ‘transcorporeal landscape’, and destruction caused by one, will only result in equal injury to the other.

PART II: ABOVEGROUND

Theoretical Beginnings: Victorian Literature and the Origins of Air Pollution

In the last five years, there has been an upsurge in academic research on the literary representations of air pollution, with a particular focus on Victorian (English) writing, and especially with regards to representations of the city of London. Allen MacDuffie’s *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014) established the burgeoning field, with a book-length study on how the concept of energy is depicted by a range of nineteenth-century writers, including Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells.⁸² Expanding the field further, Christine L. Corton’s *London Fog: The Biography* (2015), traces the enduring cultural impact of air pollution in the English capital. ‘London fog’, Corton explains

was born in the 1840s, when the city’s rapid expansion multiplied the number of domestic coal fires and mingled their smoke as it poured out into the atmosphere with the noxious emissions of factory chimneys and workshops in the early stages of the industrial revolution in the capital.⁸³

However, Jesse Oak Taylor, in *The Sky of our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016), perceives the cause of the city’s air pollution in more singular terms:

Whereas the smoke pollution of such cities as Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham was synonymous with industrialization, London’s smog was the product of a simpler and

⁸² Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸³ Christine L. Corton, *London Fog: The Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 1.

more profound force – population growth. It was a sign of consumption rather than production [...]⁸⁴

What Macduffie, Corton and Oak Taylor's texts highlight is an academic tendency to focus on places of consumption rather than production. In the introduction to Glenda Norquay and Gerry Smyth's edited collection on changes in cultural identity in the Atlantic archipelago, the point is made that 'insufficient attention' has been given to the 'relationship between "Celtic spaces" and other areas of "difference"'.⁸⁵ Wales was a major centre of production throughout the industrial revolution, and if there is more to be understood about the history of climate change – as both Corton and Oak Taylor propose is the aim of their respective projects – then producer, as well as consumer, must be afforded an equal focus. This part of the chapter will emphasise that air pollution was not simply confined to the English capital but, in fact, was a serious problem for the communities responsible for extracting the coal at its source. In the words of Macduffie, if the Victorian era can be characterised as the 'period that first articulated questions about sustainability, the limits to growth, and the implications of energy pollution for the entire global environment', these proto-environmental questions were then elaborated by Welsh writers such as B. L. Coombes in the 1930s.⁸⁶

‘A THICK HAZE OF DUST’:
HUMAN ECOCRITICISM AND THE ANXIETY OF AIR POLLUTION⁸⁷

In an essay for the ecocritical journal, *Green Letters*, John Parham argues that the 'Condition of England' novel – a subgenre of the Victorian novel associated with writers including Charles

⁸⁴ Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), p. 3.

⁸⁵ Norquay, Glenda and Gerry Smyth. 2002. "Introduction: crossing the margins." In *Across the margins: Cultural identity and change in the Atlantic archipelago*, edited by Glenda Norquay and Gerry Smyth (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), pp. 1–12, (p. 2).

⁸⁶ Macduffie, 2014, *front matter*.

⁸⁷ Coombes, 2002, p. 159

Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Emily Brontë – ‘offer[s] a template for the types of literature that might inform a “human ecocriticism”’.⁸⁸ Constructing his theory on the foundation of work by the noted American critic, Catherine Gallagher, Parham argues for:

[A] less dichotomous ecological theory that would substitute (broadly) romantic, deep ecology with a more dialectical understanding in which the now recognised complexity of ecological systems would extend to encompass the human realm including, ultimately, issues around environmental injustice.⁸⁹

The principal aim of this, argues Parham, would be that ‘greater emphasis on the human dimension might in itself engender consideration of humanity's own environmental impact – storylines, for example, about pollution or the erosion of the countryside and green space.’⁹⁰ In this chapter, I have discussed how dust pollution – for those working below ground – brought human and environment together, merging the previously distinct, but not disengaged, entities. The human, who prior to this fusion perceived the impact of industrialisation on the environment as a spectator, now is unable to separate their body from the damage. Consequently, the invasive nature of airborne pollution instinctively demands a ‘greater emphasis on the human dimension’, and Parham’s notion of a ‘human ecocriticism’ in this next part, will be initially used to approach Coombes’s treatment of dust in the colliery community.⁹¹

What distinctive features would a text exhibit in order for it to invite a specific human-inflected ecocritical reading? According to Parham, the aforementioned template for a ‘human ecocriticism’ would encompass literary texts that are: ‘informed by those scientific paradigms which correspond to ecological understanding in the period’; ‘ideally maintain some semblance

⁸⁸ Sophie Ratcliffe, ‘The Condition of England novel’, (London: British Library, 2014), available online: <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-condition-of-england-novel#authorBlock1>> [Accessed 1st February 2019]; John Parham, ‘For you, Pollution’. The Victorian Novel and Human Ecology: Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sibyl* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, *Green Letters*, 14:1 (2011), pp. 23-38, (p. 26).

⁸⁹ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Parham, 2011, p. 23.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 24.

⁹¹ Parham, 2011, p. 24.

of deep ecological affinity for other species and/or the landscape/environment as a whole'; 'employ a resultant sense of interconnectivity, or ecological materialism, towards diagnosing the risks posed to nonhuman and human environments alike by polluting, unsustainable economic practices'; investigate 'the (human) causes of and responsibilities for the social and environmental conditions under discussion'; and finally, are 'characterised by the pragmatic deployment of narrative towards a presentation of that author's preferred political remedies'.⁹² Over the next few pages, I argue that Coombes's presentation of dust pollution in the community can be understood as exhibiting aspects of all the preceding criteria. However, before doing this, I will briefly return to Parham, and some specific works of Victorian literature.

In the main body of his essay, Parham analyses two 'Condition of England' novels, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sibyl* (1845) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848). The majority of the analysis focuses on both texts' treatment of localised water pollution. There are passing references to air pollution, such as the following quotation from Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, in which the eponymous character journeys to Liverpool by train for the first time:

The very journey itself seemed to her a matter of wonder. She had a back seat, and looked towards the factory-chimneys, and the cloud of smoke which hovers over Manchester, with a feeling akin to the "Heimweh."⁹³

This, argues Parham, indicates that the novel 'exhibits a sense, amongst its working-class characters, that "home" is the city'. It clearly does, yet there is a greater point here regarding the extent to which air pollution, specifically, is a normalised component of the working-class experience. Indeed, airborne pollution is a theme throughout Gaskell's work, and by the time her fourth novel, *North and South* (1855), was published, reduction in air quality has a significant influence on the narrative. Early on in the novel, the sense of 'Heimweh' sharply

⁹² Parham, 2011, p. 26.

⁹³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (A Norton Critical Edition), ed. by Thomas Recchio (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008 [1848]), p. 246.

turns to ‘Fernweh’ as the protagonist, Margaret Hale, is unwillingly transplanted to the English industrial town of Milton.⁹⁴ The move has been prompted by Margaret’s father who, after acrimoniously leaving his job as a vicar in the leafy southern village of Helstone, relocates to the polluted northern town of Milton, eventually finding work as a private tutor. The family are unhappy with their move, and the pervading presence of noxious air is a major factor in this melancholy. In the following quotation from the novel, Margaret is addressed by her father Mr Hale, who openly laments his decision to move the family from the south of England:

“Margaret, I do believe this is an unhealthy place. Only suppose that your mother's health or yours should suffer. I wish I had gone into some country place in Wales; this is really terrible,” said he, going up to the window.

There was no comfort to be given. They were settled in Milton, and must endure smoke and fogs for a season; indeed, all other life seemed shut out from them by as thick a fog of circumstance [...]⁹⁵

The environmental degradation of the industrial town is keenly perceived from a human perspective, as the polluted air becomes something to physically ‘endure’, whilst also possessing the potency to sever contact with the outside world. Margaret’s father is noticeably anxious that the lack of clean air will have a negative impact on his wife and daughter, and ironically longs for the apparently pure Wales. This sense of disquiet is continued as the novel progresses, and in the following quotation, Margaret receives a letter from her cousin, Edith, who – living overseas in Greece – implores the Hale family to visit her. Unsurprisingly, Edith uses the polluted air of Milton as a means of persuasion:

Dearest Margaret!—you must come and see me; it would do Aunt Hale good, as I said before. Get the doctor to order it for her. Tell him that it's the smoke of Milton that does her harm. I have no doubt it is that, really. Three months (you must not come for less) of this delicious climate—all sunshine, and grapes as common as blackberries, would quite cure her.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ ‘Heimweh’, or homesickness and ‘Fernweh’, the desire to travel. Also, Milton is a thinly disguised version of Manchester.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin, 1994 [1855]), p. 75.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 278.

Echoing Mr Hale's premonition at the beginning of the novel, the extended family are keen to accentuate the link between Milton's noxious air and Mrs Hale's deteriorating health. The smoky skies of the northern industrial town are no match for the warm Mediterranean climes of Greece. Mrs Hale, learning of the letter's content, agrees with her niece's assessment of the situation, announcing: "I don't like this Milton," said Mrs. Hale. "Edith is right enough in saying it's the smoke that has made me so ill."⁹⁷ Gaskell's presentation of Mrs Hale, who eventually dies following her deterioration in health, highlights the starkness of environmental injustice within Victorian Britain, where people situated in working-class, industrial communities are disproportionately affected by pollution. Unfortunately, this state of inequality was still widespread by the time Coombes published his most famous text.

Although Parham uses the 'Condition of England' novel as the template for his notion of a 'human ecocriticism', space is left deliberately vacant for other texts to occupy. Consequently, in this first part, using Parham's detailed template, I will examine the extent to which *These Poor Hands* can be classified as a type of literature that might inform a 'human ecocriticism'. With regards to the template itself, Parham admits that there is 'plenty of scope for adaptation and improvement'.⁹⁸ In that regard, I will add a further criterion to the template, and argue that a sense of anxiety about the impact of human-driven pollution is another significant aspect that might inform a 'human ecocriticism'. Consequently, this first part will examine the extent to which *These Poor Hands* corresponds with the criteria established by Parham, whilst also emphasising how the text extends these principles, through its emphasis on the anxiety surrounding air pollution.

Aboveground, the threat of air pollution is prevalent throughout *These Poor Hands*. The airborne, black dust of the Welsh colliery community is distinct in character from the

⁹⁷ Parham, 2011, p. 281.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 26.

sprawling smog of Manchester in *Mary Barton* and the smoke-filled sky of Milton in *North and South*. It is the all-pervading nature of the noxious air within the mining village that is directly evident in Coombes's account. Early on in the text, as the narrator surveys the begrimed scene around his fictionalised mining village, Treblewyd, the toxic presence of air pollution is emphasised, along with its accompanying medical consequences:

In Treblewyd that afternoon dust, black dust, blew in through every open window; the many empty tins that were about filled rapidly with dust that contained a large percentage of the mixture that caused silicosis.⁹⁹

Evidently, dust is one of the means by which colliery and community are linked, and the inescapable nature of its dispersal is immediately apparent. Geographically, Coombes's 'Treblewyd' is clearly based on Resolven – in the writer's adopted territory of the Neath Valley – and with 'tre' meaning town in the Welsh language, and 'blewyd', probably being a corruption of 'clwyd', meaning 'gate', the initial suggestion is that the name of the settlement has overall connotations of 'protection', 'cover' or 'defence'.¹⁰⁰ However, the local population has no shelter from the thick 'black dust' that saturates the air; its distinctly dark appearance is emphasised by the narrator in order to differentiate the substance from more benign variations. Yet, delving deeper, the word 'blewyd' is also very similar in sound and spelling to 'clefyd', which means 'disease'. This sonic association would perhaps be more appropriate in a discussion on the health impact of air pollution in the community, and given Coombes's description throughout the text, 'town of disease' would perhaps be a more suitable meaning for Treblewyd. Overall, this passage serves to accentuate the vulnerability of the community, defencelessly grouped inside the houses as the dust silently creeps in through the 'open window[s]'. Moreover, the 'empty tins' may be seen as a metaphor for the lungs of the vulnerable bodies that endure within the walls, and the speed with which the hollow vessels

⁹⁹ Coombes, 2002, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ 'Clwyd', *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, available online: <<http://welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html>> [Accessed 5th December 2018].

become blackened further emphasises the helplessness of the populace. As the narrator once more underlines, this is not benevolent dust, but toxic airborne particles, containing the harmful elements that combine to cause deadly silicosis in the lungs of the people. Moreover, Coombes's reference to silicosis accentuates – with some degree of adaptation – the first criterion of Parham's template, which refers to texts: 'informed by those scientific paradigms which correspond to ecological understanding in the period'.¹⁰¹ Although Coombes is not intending to engage with advances in medical knowledge – or perhaps even being entirely accurate with his labelling of occupational lung disorders – the reference to silicosis does suggest an attempt to assume a sense of authority, or authenticity, with regards to health conditions associated with dust pollution. Furthermore, from the perspective of a 'human ecocriticism', Coombes's evocation of the disease highlights the extent to which environmental injustice is central to the text, as the colliery community are forced to contend with the negative health consequences of dust pollution, as a result of residing close to a coal mine.

As the text continues, a sense of anxiety regarding dust pollution appears to increase. In the following quotation, when the narrator attempts to sleep during the day after a night shift, he is faced with the choice between excruciating heat or unbearable dust:

When the wind was the wrong way I had the choice of stewing in a bedroom with a tightly closed window or swallowing coal dust while I slept on bedclothes that became blacker every minute.¹⁰²

In Coombes's text there is no need for metaphor, as when the wind blows 'the wrong way', nothing but filthy 'coal dust' arrives in the community from the nearby mine. Even at rest, the narrator's lungs – exhausted after a gruelling night shift down the pit – are allowed no reprieve, as he is forced to choose between sleeping in an unventilated room, or being exposed to the black dust that lingers in the atmosphere; neither option provides the luxury of clean air. Once

¹⁰¹ Parham, 2011, p. 26.

¹⁰² Coombes, 2002, p. 25.

more, as in the previous section, Coombes uses the verb ‘swallowing’ to describe the reluctant, enforced process by which dust enters the body. Furthermore, Coombes’s awareness of the interconnection between community and pollution corresponds to another of Parham’s criteria, which refers to texts that ‘employ a resultant sense of interconnectivity, or ecological materialism, towards diagnosing the risks posed to nonhuman and human environments alike by polluting, unsustainable economic practices’.¹⁰³ Indeed, Coombes’s description of his bedroom, which blackens with coal dust as every minute passes, is a clear example of the way in which human environments are affected by the ‘polluting, unsustainable’ processes of the nearby colliery.

As the text progresses, Coombes’s narrator describes walking to his colliery in order to collect wages, and in the ‘edgelands’ between community and mine, the presence of coal dust increases dramatically. The concept of ‘edgelands’ is a useful way of imagining this between-space, where high levels of air pollution dominate the setting. Originating from an essay written by Marion Shoard, ‘edgelands’ are places that exist ‘between town and country’, and are ‘by an anarchic mix of unloved land-use functions ranging from gravel workings to sewage disposal plants set in a scruffy mixture of unkempt fields, derelict industrial plant and miscellaneous wasteland’.¹⁰⁴ The neglected, uncontested land between colliery and community in Coombes’s text, is clearly evocative of this notion of ‘edgelands’, as demonstrated in the following quotation. ‘The colliery where I work’, Coombes’s narrator explains, ‘is about four miles from this village, so I have quite a journey to get my money’.¹⁰⁵ On foot, the narrator is afforded a unique perspective, through which the harsh reality of dust pollution becomes overwhelming:

[...] When I have walked over two miles I pass under a bridge that carries the coal-trams from one of the collieries. Just past this bridge, alongside the road, are the screens
[...] Whilst these screens are working, a thick haze of dust covers all around. It is

¹⁰³ Parham, 2011, p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Marion Shoard, ‘Edgelands of Promise’, *Landscapes*, 1, 2, (2000), pp. 74-93 (p. 74).

¹⁰⁵ Coombes, 2002, p. 158.

difficult to see the way along the main road, and one feels that evening has come suddenly.¹⁰⁶

Here, in this no-man's-(edge)land, between colliery and community, the narrator experiences the extent to which the former is encroaching on the latter. The dust is so potent that it forces the weary traveller to lose his way, whilst obscuring the boundary between night and day. In this regard, Coombes's emphasis on both the human and environmental impact further corresponds to another one of Parham's criteria, which refers to texts that: 'ideally maintain some semblance of deep ecological affinity for other species and/or the landscape/environment as a whole'.¹⁰⁷ In the preceding quotation from Coombes's text, the narrator is keen to stress that the dust 'covers all around', creating an all-encompassing 'haze' that renders the entirety of the surrounding landscape as a dead space.

This significant moment forces an epiphany in the narrator, who suddenly becomes angry at the local, non-mining population. As they carelessly speed through the haze, ignorant about the reality of dust for the working man, Coombes's narrator declares:

The car-drivers rush through this cloud of coal-dust as quickly as they dare, but I have often thought that they should be compelled to stop and made to get out to stand for some time in that dust, so that they could taste it and enjoy a few sneezes [...] These people might then value the men more who get the coal, or, if they had to be with me this afternoon, they might discover some of the misery that is caused by that black mineral which comforts them with its heat.¹⁰⁸

As Coombes's narrator edges closer to the colliery, he becomes emotionally detached from the community, and is able to direct accusations of ignorance at the local populace. Perhaps Coombes is making a comment on class in this passage, by juxtaposing his own pedestrian, proletarian narrator with an emergent middle class, whose improving living standards are typified by car ownership. Yet, ironically, the car protects its driver from dust, whilst also

¹⁰⁶ Coombes, 2002, p. 159. Colliery screens were large conveyor belts where coal was sorted from waste rock and debris. The motion of the belt would have created a thick layer of dust, as described by Coombes in the above passage.

¹⁰⁷ Parham, 2011, p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ Coombes, 2002, p. 159.

contributing further pollution to the already contaminated air. Furthermore, the evident political tone of the passage corresponds to another aspect of Parham's criteria, which refers to texts that: are 'characterised by the pragmatic deployment of narrative towards a presentation of that author's preferred political remedies'.¹⁰⁹ Certainly, in the preceding passage, Coombes's narrator expresses a sense of anger at the local population's ignorance of dust, which is then perceived as a further obliviousness to the plight of those who are employed in an industry responsible for its existence. In an avowedly political tone, Coombes's narrator demands some sense of change, with regards to the widening gap between the working man and an emergent middle class. This also recalls the author's initial inspiration for his own writing, founded on the realisation that people were ignorant and oblivious to miners' lives.

Yet, as Coombes's narrator continues his journey on to the next village, he witnesses another colliery screen at work, discharging more black dust towards the nearby village. In this location, where both colliery and community exist in close proximity, the narrator's sympathy for the people returns:

The higher atmosphere is no clearer, because a tall stack gives out a continual smudge of black smoke, which soon releases more soot to fall on the houses. I have heard it stated that nearly twenty per cent of all the air breathed in this village contains the dust that causes silicosis. Children in the school yard breathe that dust, people in bed inhale it as they sleep; the posters outside the newsagents' are covered with soot, and a dress or collar is not clean for ten minutes.¹¹⁰

In this village, removed from his own community, the narrator is able to quickly identify the wide-ranging impact of dust pollution. The village is blanketed from above by a thick layer of polluted air which, gradually falling downward onto the populace below, emphasises the extent of industrial air pollution. This exploration of cause and effect accentuates the final criterion of Parham's template for a 'human ecocriticism', which refers to texts that: 'investigate 'the (human) causes of and responsibilities for the social and environmental conditions under

¹⁰⁹ Parham, 2011, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Coombes, 2002, pp. 159–60.

discussion'.¹¹¹ In the passage, Coombes's narrator attaches blame to the 'tall stack', which blights the local community with noxious air. Although the nearby coal mine is identified as the cause of the pollution, Coombes's narrator leaves the question of responsibility unanswered. Unlike Idris Davies, who is clear in his accusations of those responsible, no one is being held accountable for the noxious air that blights the community in *These Poor Hands*.

‘THE FALLING DUST WAS SETTLING’:
DENATURE AND THE STAINING OF THE LOCAL¹¹²

It is difficult to comprehend the physicality of air pollution. To use a simple example: once a car has driven past, the smell of exhaust fumes lingers for a minute or so but, relatively quickly, the air appears to purify.¹¹³ Occasionally, roadside houses can display visible marks, where a sustained level of pollution over time has blackened bricks. Yet, for the most part, the inconspicuous, largely colourless characteristics of exhaust fumes often conceal the real dangers contained within the haze. However, for the coal mining towns and villages of south Wales in the 1930s, the legacy of airborne dust pollution was evident in the widespread staining of the local community, vividly depicted throughout Coombes's *These Poor Hands*. The noun 'stain' is defined as first, 'the action of staining; pollution, disgrace', and further as, 'a discoloration produced by absorption of or contact with foreign matter; usually, one that penetrates below the surface and is not easily removable', and finally as, 'a mark or discoloration on the skin'.¹¹⁴ Clearly, given these definitions, the act of staining involves the physical alteration of an object; in which appearance becomes distorted and degraded. From a critical perspective, staining bears a relationship to the ecocritical notion of 'denaturing', or the

¹¹¹ Parham, 2011, p. 26.

¹¹² Coombes, 2002, p. 168.

¹¹³ This example is not intended to underestimate contemporary urban air pollution (largely caused by car exhaust emissions), which in recent years has reached epidemic proportions.

¹¹⁴ 'Stain, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/188731?rskey=dmT0ha&result=1&isAdvanced=false> [Accessed 1st February 2019].

process of becoming ‘denature’. The verb ‘to denature’, is defined as: ‘to render unnatural’, but this definition is now largely obsolete in contemporary usage.¹¹⁵ However, from an ecocritical perspective, the term has been used to describe the process in which the seemingly distinct non-human world has been altered by the human. The American critic Timothy W. Luke, in an essay on his early ideas of ‘denature’, explains that

Becoming enmeshed in complex networks of scientific rationalization and commercial exploitation, nature becomes denature(d). The entire planet now is increasingly either a “built environment,” a “planned habitat,” a “wilderness pre-serve,” an “economic development,” or an “ecological disaster.” If nature is mostly now “denature,” then perhaps one must begin thinking about a state of denature - a process that becomes helpful, ironically, in understanding the cyborgs that evolve there.¹¹⁶

Later, Luke further elaborates on this idea, suggesting that ‘because we have not protected Nature from humans, it is now different in many respects – it has become “denatured.”’¹¹⁷ In this brief quotation, Luke appears to be referring to the process in which, through a lack of stewardship, humans have altered the inner construction of the non-human. What was previously considered ‘nature’, becomes ‘denature’ – an entirely different entity that bears the mark of humanity at every turn. Finally, in his book, *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (1997), Luke further elaborates on this idea of ‘denature’, arguing that:

Nature increasingly is no longer a vast realm of unknown, unmanageable, or uncontrollable wild nonhuman activity. After becoming completely ensnared within the megamachinic grids of global production and consumption [...] Nature is turning into “Denature”.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ ‘Denature, v.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online:

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49926?redirectedFrom=denature>> [Accessed 1st February 2019].

¹¹⁶ Timothy W. Luke, ‘Liberal Society and Cyborg Subjectivity: The Politics of Environments, Bodies, and Nature’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1996), pp. 1–30, (p. 6).

¹¹⁷ Timothy W. Luke, ‘Ecocritique in Context: Technology, Democracy and Capitalism as Environment’, presented at the IGCC/MacArthur Scholars Seminar on International Environmental Policy, Newport Beach, CA, May 31st–June 1st (1998), available online: <<https://www.cddc.vt.edu/tps/e-print/Tim601.PDF>> [Accessed 1st March 2019], p. 31.

¹¹⁸ Timothy W. Luke, *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 195.

In *These Poor Hands*, Coombes's depiction of the dust-stained places and objects that define the mining community resemble Luke's description of 'denature'. Early on in the text, when the narrator sets the scene in dust-filled Treaclewyd, the dwellings situated nearest the colliery are described as:

Grey house crouched tightly to grey house with no relief of colour and no garden or back entrance; and leaves were grey, and never green, and berries were black before they were red. The dread of consumption was among the people like an ever-present shadow.¹¹⁹

In this heavily polluted anti-Eden, even the stone frontages of the houses have been discoloured by the dust that spews from the nearby colliery screens. However, it is only when the narrator turns to the gardens that the sense of defilement is truly emphasised. Coombes's clever pun on the 'never green', but 'grey' leaves reveal the extent to which dust has stunted the local flora's growth. Moreover, berries that should exhibit a rich redness are 'black', and appear more like flecks of coal than fruit. The presence of dust has completely degraded this garden into a fallen state of 'denature', as recognisable objects appear distorted and corrupted. In the passage, Coombes skilfully disrupts the reader's expectation of a garden that should literally bear fruit, but instead, the resultant 'denature' bears the mark of death and disease.

Following this description of the polluted street, Coombes's narrator shifts the perspective away from the community and, in the next paragraph, indulges in a lengthy lament on the disappearance of rural space, and the extent to which humanity has defiled the once-natural landscape:

Yet, away from the dirt of the village one had only to walk a few hundred yards and there was a wonderful valley sheltered by mountains that made me gasp with amazement. Trees covered their lower slopes and showed their darker greenness up to where the mountain grass and brown ferns seemed to meet the sky at the summit. The river curved across the width of the valley and coursed slowly along the ten miles that separated us from the sea at Swansea. The sun was warm in a blue sky, and we heard the song of many birds before we had gone from the sound of the Sunday-School singing. It was a grand day in a grand setting.

¹¹⁹ Coombes, 2002, p. 15.

But because Nature had been so kind below ground as it had been above, and had placed seams of coal from eighteen inches to eighteen feet there, as well as beds of coal fire-clay and iron ore, man had come along and defiled the beauty and blackened with his muddling what had been formed so beautifully.¹²⁰

In a similar vein to previously discussed texts, it is only when the narrator is afforded time away from the mining community, that they begin to comprehend the reality of the industrial experience. The rural scene initially appears familiar and, temporarily, order seems to have been restored. However, the narrator's mind swiftly returns to articulating questions about the ethics of mining, and the implications for both people and planet. Significantly, Coombes's narrator uses violent verbs such as 'defile', and 'blacken', which accurately render the process by which nature has become 'denature'.

Coombes's narrator provides a further example of the way green spaces created by humans have become 'denature' through the invasive presence of coal dust. During the earlier quoted episode when the Friday pay-check is collected, the narrator witnesses the polluted gardens of another village:

About two o'clock I arrive at the next village. Here another colliery screen is at work. It shakes the dust into the lower atmosphere, and the sets of coal-trams rattle down towards it between the rows of houses. The dust shaken from the loaded trams covers the windows of the houses, but sometimes a lump rolls off into one of the gardens as some little compensation. The soil in these gardens is coal-dust; cabbages are grey in colour, and are loaded with dust between their leaves; and everywhere one puts a finger, a print is left in that dust.¹²¹

Once more, the garden retains a familiar shape but, on closer inspection, years of dust pollution have ensured that its contents are permanently altered. Soil is no longer fertile earth, but 'coal-dust', which sprouts mutant, grey vegetables – half cabbage, half colliery. This refers back to Alaimo, whose notion of trans-corporeality is not simply about the human body but the absolute permeability of all bodies, and transfer of toxins through the environment, including the 'bodies' of plants, the ecology of the soil, and the human body again through ingestion of

¹²⁰ Coombes, 2002, pp. 15–16.

¹²¹ Ibid, pp. 159–60.

coal-stained food. The subsequent ‘denature’ within the garden setting is familiar, yet somehow distinct. The noxious air that fills the atmosphere has permanently altered the previously natural objects within the garden. Furthermore, the windows of the nearby terraced houses are permanently sealed, and covered in murky dust; they deny natural light to the hapless residents. Like an invading spirit, the dust imprisons the local populace in their overcrowded homes, prevented from venturing far in fear of inhaling the harmful toxins, whilst also unable to see the outside world, as the haze descends around them. In this forsaken village, the boundary between community and colliery is blurred, as dirty, black dust covers everything in human sight.

As well as gardens exhibiting the filth of fallen coal dust in a state of ‘denature’, Coombes is equally preoccupied with the way clothing is altered by the consequences of airborne colliery pollution. As the text progresses, the narrator describes how the ability to complete everyday household tasks is hampered by the effluence of the nearby mine:

[O]ften there was only one day a week on which the clothes could be put on the line – the day when the wind was blowing up the valley and the dust from the colliery-screens did not come our way.¹²²

In Coombes’s Treaclewyd, the daily reality of polluted air disturbs the familiar routines of a functioning community. Over time, as colliery production has increased, local people have been forced to alter their schedules in order to accommodate the all-consuming spectre of black dust. Air pollution is the force that controls the narrative in the industrial community. Then, later in the text, the narrator returns to the contamination of clothing, and at the end of another gruelling shift at the colliery, he notices a woman

[S]elling flags near the entrance. The falling dust was settling on the cream she had used and was making a grey mask of her features. Her light dress was becoming more dingy every minute.¹²³

¹²² Coombes, 2002, p. 61.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 168.

As the filthy ‘falling dust’ slowly mixes with her pristine make-up, the resulting ‘grey mask’ ages the woman. Moreover, the figure’s innocent ‘light dress’ becomes increasingly stained as each minute brings further falling dust in contact with the previously immaculate fabric. Indeed, localised air pollution not only disturbs the community’s daily routine, but distorts images of beauty – in a sense, altering both tradition and aesthetics.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most vivid depictions of dust-stained clothing in *These Poor Hands* feature the swarthy colliers themselves. Like the polluted air that leaves a thick layer of blackness on the village, the miners ensure that the chain of dust – from colliery to community – remains forever intact. Just as ‘denature’ stains the community through air pollution on clothing, dust is further disseminated locally by the coal miners themselves. As they journey home on pay-day, the colliers’ black faces convey the extent to which industrialisation has rendered the landscape a state of ‘denature’:

Then a rattle of steel-shod boots on the roadway showed that the miners were coming. They hurried along, and their groups thinned when one turned into his house, or another stopped to greet a welcoming child. Almost every man had his pay held tight in his left trousers pocket, whilst his right arm was swinging wide to help his walking. Coal-dust rose from their clothes as they moved along, and their gleaming eyes, bright red lips, and white teeth showing from the black faces made me think of nigger minstrels. Each had a tea-jack in one jacket pocket and a food-tin in the other. Some kicked their boots hard against a stone and took off their jackets before they entered the house, so that no more dust than was possible should be carried inside.¹²⁴

As always, the excitement of the Friday evening is palpable, and the sound of the returning miners marching in tandem back to the village – clutching their precious salaries in their trouser pockets – confirms that the evening can finally begin. However, as the passage continues, it is the description of the men that is most striking. As the colliers walk, dust rises from every pore of their being, as their tired bodies begin to rid themselves of the remnants of the mine. Then – using problematic language – Coombes’s narrator compares the miners to the figures of the historical minstrel show. Indeed, the men are highly performative in their actions, with their

¹²⁴ Coombes, 2002, pp. 169–70.

right arms ‘swinging wide’ at their sides as they saunter home to deliver wages to exhausted wives. Yet, this comparison creates another parallel between Welsh and African-American social history referenced earlier in the chapter, in which both peoples were subjugated by an Anglo-imperialist majority.¹²⁵ Finally, as the miners reach home, boots are kicked ‘hard against a stone’, whilst filthy clothes are removed. However, these are only half-hearted gestures as inevitably, the chain of dust from colliery to community will never be broken. Each day, the familiar path trudged by the working men is re-stained with the black dust that lies deep within the earth.

Inevitably, once a miner has enjoyed his precious hours spent at home with family, he must return to a state of ‘denature’, which is the mine. Once more, in preparation for another shift, the collier reacquaints his half-cleansed skin with black coal-dust, as is demonstrated by Coombes’s narrator in the following passage:

I am enjoying those last few minutes before I must change my clothes, for I always leave it until the last minute before I start to don those dusty clothes which carry the hot smell of sweat that is the scent of the mine. A cloth is over the dishes on the dresser to shelter them from the dust, a sack is covering the mat in front of the fire, my pit-clothes are warming in the heat of the coal they have helped to produce. I know exactly how many seconds it will take me to hurry into those clothes, and every minute without them is enjoyable, so I delay to the last.¹²⁶

The melancholic, but unavoidable transition between home and work is – like all other aspects of the Welsh industrial experience – defined by dust. For the collier, a return to the dark and filthy world of the mine is a familiar process in which grubby clothes blacken his skin in preparation for another long shift. In this regard, the miner never truly receives any reprieve from the black dust of the pit. Even as he rests in his bed, his filthy clothes lay ominously downstairs, and as each hour passes, the collier is closer to his inescapable return underground. Perhaps most clearly, the miner’s clothing bears the marks of ‘denature’. In his filthy pile of

¹²⁵ Daniel Williams has published widely on this subject. See *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales, 1845-1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); *Wales Unchained: Literature, Politics and Identity in the American Century* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015)

¹²⁶ Coombes, 2002, p. 179.

overalls, lie the result of years spent damaging the earth for the extraction of King Coal. As much a victim as the defenceless earth, the collier has no choice but to wear his clothes in order to prepare for another shift. In this way, the coal miner bears the mark of ‘denature’ both internally, as well as externally.

CONCLUSION:

Reading B. L. Coombes’s *These Poor Hands* in the light of literary ecocriticism, it is clear that the miner-writer was innovative in his depiction of coal mining’s environmental damage. Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality – ‘in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world’ – provides a useful model with which to explore the text’s presentation of physical labour, and its consequences.¹²⁷ Through the process of extracting coal from the earth, the miner simultaneously gives his body in return. This exchange of mutual damage is painfully realised in Coombes’s description of lung disease in the text, which is often presented as the cost of abusing the earth’s resources. Yet, this exchange can also be viewed in terms of an assimilation as, through the process of mining, the two previously separate entities begin to merge into one; the miner carries the coal dust in his lungs, and the mine bears the mark of humanity at every turn.

Returning aboveground, *These Poor Hands* places as much emphasis on the impact of dust pollution in the community, as it does in the colliery. In this regard, Parham’s notion of a ‘human ecocriticism’ presents a model with which to read the text. Yet, the critic’s existing template requires some adaptation and improvement. Coombes’s anxiety regarding the prevalence of air pollution is a suitable addition that further invites parallels between Welsh industrial writing and Victorian literature. From the act of opening a window to the reality of children developing lung diseases, Coombes’s narrator’s anxiety about dust pollution is easily

¹²⁷ Alaimo, 2010, p. 2.

perceptible in the text. Moreover, this unease is not alleviated once the dust has settled, as the staining of places and objects within the community is a recurrent theme. Coombes emphasises how the pervasiveness of dust pollution alters the essence of the community, and suddenly, the state of 'denature' becomes visible beyond the colliery. What this serves to highlight is that although Victorian English writers might have been the first to articulate proto-environmental concerns, these ideas are both developed and extended by Welsh writers. Consequently, as more ecocritics within the field look back into literary history in an attempt to better understand contemporary issues, it is important to remember that Welsh industrial communities, and the writers that depicted them, are a part of the discussion.

CHAPTER FOUR | BLACK HEAPS

‘Great black bully’: The Spoil Tip in Richard Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley*¹



Figure 20. Footpath descending to Gilfach Goch.²

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: GILFACH GOCH AND SPOIL TIPS

Nothing lies beyond the village of Gilfach Goch.³ The small, secluded community clumsily bisected by the two county boroughs of Rhondda Cynon Taf and Bridgend is quite literally located at the end of the road. Like many other settlements in south Wales, Gilfach Goch is described as a ‘former’ coal mining village, with the marked emphasis on the temporal adjective.⁴ The village feels somewhat detached from the larger communities of the nearby

¹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 146.

² Photograph © Gareth James.

³ In the Welsh language, ‘Gilfach Goch’ means ‘little red nook’.

⁴ ‘Gilfach Goch’, via Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilfach_Goch> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

Rhondda valley. Sam Adams, a Gilfach Goch native, explains in his autobiography that, during industrialisation, the village was always playing catch-up with the more sizeable colliery communities in the Rhondda:

[W]here ribbons of settlement spooled out along the lower slopes of the hills above pits sunk in the valley floor [...] Compared to this sixteen-mile-long anthill with its seventy or more pits, the growth of Gilfach Goch, a minor cul-de-sac, was very modest. It is not a simple matter to calculate how many people lived in its scattered farms and dwellings in 1851, but they could be told in dozens rather than hundreds.⁵

As industrial development increased, the size of Gilfach Goch's population – when compared to that of the Rhondda – only enlarged slightly. In 1871, Adams explains, 'the population of Gilfach was 706', and only reached 'about 3,000' when coal mining was its peak in the early twentieth century.⁶ Consequently, the village certainly experienced the impact of the coal industry but, like Coombes's Resolven, its relatively minor growth in population separated Gilfach Goch from other mining communities. Perhaps it was the seclusion of the village that made for a more appealing location in which to set a literary text, for it was Gilfach Goch that Richard Llewellyn thought about in his attempt to capture the Welsh industrial experience in *How Green Was My Valley* (1939).

The visual legacy of the Welsh coal industry is largely undetectable in the tightly packed streets of this lonely valley village. The hulking headstocks that once occupied the skyline of Gilfach Goch have long since disappeared. A handful remain, in places like Blaenavon's Big Pit or the Rhondda Heritage Park in Trehafod, but even these are now museums – offering bus-loads of tourists 'The Welsh Mining Experience', complete with an underground tour, an authentic café and, of course, a gift shop selling replica Davy lamps.⁷ Like much of Welsh history, coal mining has been absorbed by the heritage industry, and today

⁵ Sam Adams, *Where the Stream Ran Red: Memories and Histories of a Welsh Mining Valley* (Tal-y-bont, Ceredigion: Y Lolfa Cyf., 2016), p. 15.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 16–17.

⁷ This is the current marketing tagline used by the Rhondda Heritage Park:

<<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Tourism/RhonddaHeritagePark/Home.aspx>> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

offers a handful of local job opportunities or – for the less fortunate – a sculpture in the town centre.⁸

For those who venture beyond the long rows of terraced houses of Gilfach Goch, the legacy of coal mining is unmistakably visible in the surrounding landscape. As Adams describes, this topographical legacy is perhaps a result of absence, as the village's dramatic backdrop presents itself as

[C]uriously featureless, as though hollowed out. And that is what has happened. In this part of the valley, for almost a century, coal was mined intensively. In the 1970s what remained of collieries and slagheaps was swept away and the valley floor purged not only of all evidence of industry, but also, inevitably, of its original shape, before the pits were sunk. Then, it must have been beautiful indeed, with natural woodland filling much of the valley floor either side of the winding river, bracken-clad slopes and the rougher, variegated greens of enclosing mountains above to the level of the moor.⁹

Evidently – for Adams – the legacy of coal mining exists in the strange empty spaces that now define this disfigured landmass. Particularly, the ‘slagheaps’ – or spoil tips – have long since been removed from Gilfach Goch, but somehow, their dark presence remains. Elsewhere, these abnormal mounds – markedly different from other naturally occurring hills – are occasionally grassed over, but most preserve the distinctive jet-black tone of yesteryear, existing as visual reminders of the years of industry that have gone before.

The term ‘spoil’ refers to the large amount of waste material that was removed from the underground pits as the miners hunted for valuable nuggets of coal that lay within the earth. As coal extraction increased during the years of unrestricted industrialisation in Wales, spoil tips became a prominent feature of the landscape. Gareth Jones views the proliferation of mining waste in the late twentieth century as part of a wider ‘serious imbalance’ within developed nations, where ‘improvements in technology allowed major changes to the built environment to take place very quickly [...] without opportunity for the natural environment

⁸ This is not to denigrate the importance of community art. However, building a sense of place is about more than memorialising the past.

⁹ Adams, 2016, p. 10.

to readjust'.¹⁰ Jones goes on to elaborate the point that – in the case of spoil tips – the progression of time signalled rapid technological advancement, but widespread environmental degradation:

In the past, the impacts of changes to the built environment occurred on a smaller scale and often took many years to manifest themselves. For example, mining of coal from shallow shaft mines generated only small amounts of waste, but gradually as mining technology allowed shafts to go deeper, then so proportionately more waste rock and shale was generated. Disposal of mining waste became a problem. In the absence of planning laws, mine owners deposited the waste in the cheapest way possible by dumping the spoil near the mine.¹¹

Spoil tips were thus the inevitable consequence of a swiftly expanding industry that was more concerned with profits than the surrounding landscape. Like Jones, the geologist Larry Thomas confirms that: 'historically the dumping of spoil was not regulated and old underground mining areas were easily identified by the characteristic skyline of conical and elongate spoil tips with their attendant dumping systems, usually by tram railway or overhead ropeways'.¹² Predictably, this unlimited distribution of industrial waste inspired some impassioned responses. For the Welsh historian Russell Davies spoil tips remain

[T]he ultimate symbol of nature's devastation and despoliation by industry [...] These brooding giants of slurry and slag scarred landscapes around Wales. From the 1860s these black pyramids became such a prominent part of the landscape that one area of south-west Wales became known as "gwlad y pyramidau" (the land of the pyramids).¹³

However, for others, they were a source of local pride, and in some extraordinary cases, communities campaigned to save their tips from removal by the local council. In 1957, the residents of Abernant – a small village to the north east of Aberdare in the Rhondda – argued that the nearby Ysguborwen spoil tip provided an idyllic summer picnic opportunity, whilst

¹⁰ Gareth Jones, *People and Environment: A Global Approach* (London: Routledge, 2014 [2004]), p. 229.

¹¹ Jones, 2014, p. 229.

¹² Larry Thomas, *Coal Geology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 345.

¹³ Russell Davies, *People Places and Passions: "Pain and Pleasure": A Social History of Wales and the Welsh, 1870–1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), pp. 46–47.

obscuring ‘from public view the ugly spoil-tips of the River Level Colliery and a lot of unsightly opencast operations’.¹⁴ Their appeals were rejected, and the spoil tip was removed.



Figure 21. Spoil tips above Blaenavon.¹⁵

For a very select group of individuals, spoil tips remain a site of special scientific interest. Liam Olds began the Colliery Spoil Biodiversity Initiative in collaboration with Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and National Museum Wales, ‘to raise awareness of the biological importance of colliery spoil tips’.¹⁶ Through his unique research, Olds has surveyed a number of locations in the south Wales area, cataloguing the diversity of fauna at each site, and even

¹⁴ ‘Villagers fight to keep their slag-heap’, *The Observer*, 4th February 1957, available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/04/slag-heap-glamorgan-wales-1957>> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

¹⁵ My own photograph.

¹⁶ Liam Olds, *The Colliery Spoil Biodiversity Initiative*: <<https://collieryspoilbiodiversity.wordpress.com/>> [Accessed 1st March 2018]. Now, available online at: <<https://www.collieryspoil.com>> [Accessed 30th March 2021].

assisting in the discovery of a new species of millipede.¹⁷ His work has also been the subject of a recent BBC Wales television programme, and offers a significant counter-narrative to established perceptions of former industrial sites.¹⁸

From the moment that Welsh writers first began responding to the way coal mining affected their local surroundings, spoil tips play a central role. One of the earliest texts – Allen Raine’s *A Welsh Witch* (1902) – depicts ‘the brown hills’¹⁹ of Glaish-y-Dail, the fictional Glamorganshire town that exists as a stark contrast to the imagined coastal Cardiganshire idyll of Treswnd. Similarly, in Joseph Keating’s *My Struggle for Life* (1916), there are particularly vivid accounts of the changes wrought by industrialisation, and in the following passage, the author singles out the spoil tip in his grim portrait of Mountain Ash – a real-life coal mining village in the Rhondda at the height of industrialisation – where ‘the ancient streets were no longer present and picturesque, but grimy with coal dust. Hundreds of new streets, long and straight and ugly, and terrible hills of pit refuse, filled the streets’.²⁰ Like the nineteenth-century travel accounts discussed in the introductory chapter, these early texts mark a significant moment in the history of Wales as writers continued to reflect the large-scale changes that industrial development was making to the land.

Richard Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley* can be viewed as a descendent of these earlier responses to industrialisation in Wales, at least in its description of environmental degradation. Although the novel was published in 1939, it was actually started many years earlier. As John Harris explains, ‘Llewellyn had begun drafting the novel whilst a soldier in

¹⁷ ‘New ‘Maerdy Monster’ millipede species found at coal mine’, *BBC News*, 27th March 2017, available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-39406086> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

¹⁸ ‘The Miners Who Made Us’, *BBC One Wales*, Thursday 11th January 2018, available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09lt8vp> [Accessed 1st March 2018]; ‘Welsh council allows six million tonne slag heap to stay because it is ‘of historical interest’’, *Mail Online*, 30th July 2008, available online: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1039898/Welsh-council-allows-million-tonne-slag-heap-stay-historical-interest.html> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

¹⁹ Allen Raine, *A Welsh Witch: A Romance of Rough Places* (Dinas Powys: Honno Classics, 2013 [1902]), p. 222.

²⁰ Joseph Keating, *My Struggle for Life* (London: Simpkin Marshall & Co., 1916), p. 269.

India', which he dates as 1927, 'and by the end of 1936 had completed sufficient to show Michael Joseph, the literary agent-turned-publisher who under the wing of Victor Gollancz was now establishing his own commercial list.'²¹ If these dates are correct, *How Green Was My Valley* – despite being published in 1939 – can be considered as a near relative to Raine and Keating's texts. However, unlike these two earlier writers, Llewellyn's novel has become one of the most well-read texts about life in industrial Wales. As well as the actual content of the novel, this pervasiveness is arguably one of the reasons why Llewellyn's text has been so divisive, and problematic, for Welsh readers and critics alike. However, as one of the earliest and most widely exported portrayals of the Welsh industrial experience, *How Green Was My Valley* demands renewed critical attention.

LITERARY BIOGRAPHY: HISTORICAL INACCURACIES AND CULTURAL DISTORTIONS



Figure 22. Foyle's bookshop, Charing Cross Road, London.²²

²¹ John Harris, 'How Green Was My Valley as Bestseller', *Welsh Writing in English*, 3 (1997), pp. 42–62, (p. 43).

²² Photograph courtesy of my sister, Martha Armstrong-Twigg.

Richard David Vivian Llewellyn Lloyd – to give the author his full name – was born in London to Welsh parents in 1906.²³ Despite his persistent assertions of an idyllic childhood in Wales and a fanciful curriculum vitae that included – amongst other things – full-time employment as a coal miner, Llewellyn was in fact raised in the English capital and gained most of his knowledge of working-class Welsh life from visits to the country, as well as discussions with William Griffiths, head of the Welsh book department at Foyle’s bookshop on the Charing Cross Road; a place also frequented by Idris Davies.²⁴ Griffiths had grown up in Gilfach Goch, and again Adams – a former resident of the village – explains this relationship in more detail:

Will, having been for a time a professional violinist in London, became head of the Welsh department of Foyle’s bookshop and published books in Welsh under the Gwasg Foyle [Foyle’s Press] imprint. There, during the 1930s, he was approached by an unknown writer, Richard Lloyd, who for some time had been trying to write a novel about the south Wales coalfield. Will told him about his father’s experiences and introduced him to his family home. The effect on the work in progress was momentous. The author saw how he could shape what threatened to be a sprawling narrative by moulding the story of the Griffiths family into a fiction, taking as much of the history of the 1898 conflict between workers and owners as he wanted, and setting his scene not in the ribbon-like settlements of the Rhondda but in a separate valley, which is recognisably Gilfach.²⁵

Like Llewellyn’s life, the conception of *How Green Was My Valley* as a literary text has been shrouded in mistruths. However, as this passage highlights, the author clearly had source material and a specific location in mind when writing the novel. In that regard, the text may exhibit a number of historical inaccuracies and cultural distortions but, in terms of setting, it is not completely divorced from Gilfach Goch.

Llewellyn’s debut novel, *How Green Was My Valley*, attracted great critical acclaim and public popularity when it was first published.²⁶ By today’s standards, it is difficult to appreciate the immense scale of the novel’s success. As John Harris explains, an initial run of

²³ Harris, 1997, p. 44.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Adams, 2016, p. 24.

²⁶ See: ‘How phoney was my Welsh valley?’, *The Observer*, 5th December 1999: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/dec/05/tracymcveigh.theobserver>> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

25,000 copies was sold out immediately and, following this, 1,000 copies were printed every week.²⁷ However, across the Atlantic, the sales figures were even more staggering and ‘within six months of publication in the USA (on 6 February, 1940), it had amassed sales of almost 150,000’.²⁸ As Harris goes on to suggest, the great commercial achievement of *How Green Was My Valley* could have been helped by external factors, especially given the fact that it was published a few weeks into the Second World War, and book sales were generally expected to rise during times of conflict.²⁹ Yet, even without the presence of war, the sales figures cannot obscure the fact that the novel was adored by its mass readership. It is therefore not surprising that a Hollywood film adaptation soon followed in 1941, with the newly-established movie corporation, Twentieth Century Fox, paying \$50,000 dollars (today, nearer \$1,000,000) to acquire the rights to produce a film based on the novel. However, this was a small fee for a production that would imitate the novel’s success by winning five Oscars – including the much-coveted Best Picture – at the 14th Academy Awards in 1942.³⁰

Without the shrewd business acumen of Llewellyn’s publisher – Michael Joseph – *How Green Was My Valley* would certainly not have been such a global success. However, under the editorial influence of the commercially successful publisher, Llewellyn’s manuscript became a vastly different novel to the one that the author had originally prepared for publication. Knight reminds us that ‘there are no place-names in the finished text’³¹ – indeed, these were removed by Joseph, along with many Welsh idioms, in order to dilute the ‘Welshness’ of the novel. Furthermore, as Harris explains in his 1989 *Planet* article, the now-familiar *How Green Was My Valley* was not the author’s first choice for the title of the novel; it could have easily been published under another name. According to Harris:

²⁷ John Harris, ‘Not Only a Place in Wales: John Harris on *How Green Was My Valley* as Bestseller’, *Planet*, 73 (1989), pp. 10–15 (p. 11).

²⁸ Harris, 1999, p. 11.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Harris, 1989, p. 13.

³¹ Knight, 2004, p. 114.

The eventual choice of the title was inspired; Joseph recalls how he rejected “Land of My Fathers”, which Jack Jones had meantime used (it survives in the dedication) for one which conveyed a nostalgic, biblical note. Llewellyn, on the other hand, remembered his original title as “Slag”, the silent agent of destruction, crushing houses, killing gardens, burying the green landscape.³²

This final disclosure is significant as it offers an insight into the way the author viewed the text as a whole. For Llewellyn, the spoil tip – or ‘slag heap’ as the author prefers throughout – was the principal focus of the novel, whereas the publisher’s choice of an alternative title certainly obscures this fact. Knight argues that the spoil tip ‘is a recurrent feature of the text and a symbol of the dehumanizing force that the novel finds in modern industrialization’.³³ Knight also suggests that much of the vitriol directed towards the novel – at least from Welsh critics – could have been intensified because of the way the publisher presented the text, and that had it been given Llewellyn’s original title, it might have been quite literally a different story. Knight argues that most critics from Wales either viewed the novel as:

[M]ore or less meretricious, more or less exploitative. No doubt the publisher’s packaging had much to do with that effect: Llewellyn apparently wanted “Slag”, a title which would have cast a different light on the overall meaning of the narrative – yet it is also true that the saccharine title finally chosen does mesh with a good deal of stereotypes and sentimental rhetoric in the text itself.³⁴

If Joseph had approved Llewellyn’s first choice for the novel’s title, the text’s preoccupation with spoil tips would have been intensified. Moreover, it would seem that the novel’s title was not the only thing altered during the period leading to publication. As Harris again explains, Joseph was also instrumental in reshaping large parts of the narrative, creating distinct chapters from a lengthy manuscript, and modifying the ending. According to Harris, ‘Llewellyn had originally provided Huw [the novel’s protagonist] with a few more dyspeptic observations on this “age of Muck”, choosing to finish in a slightly recast version of the book’s opening sentence’.³⁵ These redacted reflections would have certainly deepened the text’s anxieties

³² Harris, 1989, p. 12.

³³ Knight, 2004, p. 114.

³⁴ Knight, 2003, p. 74.

³⁵ Harris, 1997, p. 57.

about the despoliation of the land which – coupled with the original title – would have then shifted the chief focus of the novel significantly. However, despite the best efforts of Llewellyn’s publisher to minimise the author’s ecological apprehensions, *How Green Was My Valley* remains a novel with a noticeable concern for the impact of coal mining on the land.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP: ‘IGNORE THIS TRASH’³⁶

Understandably, a novel that achieved so much success on the back of what many perceive to be the misrepresentation of an entire nation and its people was destined to receive a hostile reception from Welsh literary critics. ‘Ignore this trash’, was the impassioned exclamation that resounded from *Wales*, the Keidrych Rhys-edited, English-language literary magazine, immediately following the novel’s publication.³⁷ Later, the poet and novelist Glyn Jones reflected on the text in his seminal work, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* (1968), labelling Llewellyn’s novel a ‘staggering and accomplished piece of literary hokum’, before admitting that ‘much of it I read with absorption’.³⁸ Dai Smith – then David Smith – responded to *How Green Was My Valley* in *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (1976), and was unapologetic in his fervent criticism, condemning the novel as a ‘gargantuan con-trick that parcels out guilt and reduces human history to the emotional level of any tawdry Hollywood “B” picture’.³⁹ Not long after this, the great Raymond Williams famously labelled *How Green Was My Valley* ‘the export version of the Welsh industrial experience’ in *The Welsh Industrial Novel*.⁴⁰ Similarly, Ian Bell, writing in *Planet* (1989), was equally passionate in his criticism of Llewellyn’s novel,

³⁶ Keidrych Rhys, ‘Chorus’, *Wales*, 11 (1939), p. 305.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001 [1968]), pp. 51–53.

³⁹ David Smith, ‘Myth and Meaning in the Literature of the South Wales Coalfield – 1930s’, *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 56 (1976), pp. 21–42 (p. 40).

⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1979), p. 17.

admitting that the closer he examined the text, the more he began to see ‘an agreeable romantic novel turn into a crypto-fascist defence of racial purity’.⁴¹

More recent criticism has not altered its opinion of *How Green Was My Valley*. Stephen Knight, writing in M. Wynn Thomas’s edited essay collection *Welsh Writing in English* (2003), initially praises the text as a ‘highly skilled piece of bookmaking’, but concludes that the novel ‘basically created a stereotype that could be said to have done significant harm to Wales over the years’.⁴² Expanding on these sentiments a year later in his influential survey of the English-language fiction of Wales in the twentieth century, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (2004), Knight argues that Llewellyn, by

[C]aricaturing and depoliticising the descriptions of industrial settlement to such an extent, [...] created an image of Welsh working-class life which later writers were always going to have to negotiate, and which would dominate the thinking of editors and publishers for some time as an account of industrial Wales.⁴³

In his pioneering exploration of the relationship between Wales and the slave trade, *Black Skin, Blue Books* (2012), Daniel G. Williams makes the valid point that, like many Welsh industrial texts, *How Green Was My Valley* perpetuates the belief that ‘social changes are often linked to changes in the racial composition of society’.⁴⁴ Finally, Aidan Byrne, writing in the *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English* (2013), examines the novel’s attitudes to male and female sexuality, and argues that ‘*How Green Was My Valley* resorts to fascism as a means of recuperating a stable and fixed Welsh masculine identity’.⁴⁵ Building on work by critics such as Kirsti Bohata, Byrne highlights the many problematic elements of *How Green*

⁴¹ Ian Bell, ‘How Green Was My Valley?’, *Planet*, 73 (1989), pp. 2–9 (p. 9).

⁴² Stephen Knight, ‘“A New Enormous Music”: Industrial Fiction in Wales’, in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, vol. 7: *Welsh Writing in English*, ed. by M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 47–90 (p. 74).

⁴³ Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 116–17.

⁴⁴ Daniel G. Williams, *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales, 1845–1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 193.

⁴⁵ Aidan Byrne, ‘“The Male Shoutings of Men”: Masculinity and Fascist Epistemology in *How Green Was My Valley*’, *The International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 1 (2013), pp. 167–90 (p. 167).

Was My Valley, which are further complicated given the novel's publication on the eve of World War II.

As both a response and conclusion to this critical summary, the disturbing elements of Llewellyn's text should be addressed directly. Throughout the novel, there is – as Williams argues – a pervading feeling that in addition to industrialisation, the shift in demographics of the community is to blame for the decline of the village. In one disturbing episode, Llewellyn attaches the blame for a depraved crime to mixed-heritage members of the community, who are referred to using terms such as 'half-breed' and 'beasts'.⁴⁶ As *How Green Was My Valley* is a work of fiction, the author is ultimately responsible for deciding who commits crimes, and so connecting moral depravity with the race of a person is by definition racist. There are other bigoted moments, such as when Ianto – brother of Huw, the narrator – uses a casual anti-Semitic slur, which is left unquestioned by the narrator. At the end of the novel, Dai Bando brutally beats a character described as a 'mongrel', which is viewed approvingly by the narrator.⁴⁷ These episodes are – of course – made more disturbing given the proximity of the novel's publication to the beginning of the War, which was defined by the rise of fascism in Europe. Moreover, there is a further sense that the text exhibits a kinship to British fascism of the inter-war years, which included the normalisation of eugenic 'science' in popular discourse and political anxiety about racial purity and miscegenation.

At this juncture, it would be foolish not to acknowledge both eco-fascism and the connection between right-wing politics and English nature writing from the interwar period. Firstly, 'ecofascism' is defined by Michael E. Zimmerman:

[A]s a totalitarian government that requires individuals to sacrifice their interests to the well-being and glory of the "land," understood as the splendid web of life, or the organic whole of nature, including peoples and their states. The land acquires mystical properties as the sacred source and absolute measure for all things. Polluting the land,

⁴⁶ Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1939]), p. 174.

⁴⁷ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 399.

either by toxins or by admitting the wrong kind of immigrants, not only threatens the state's stability and security, but also affronts the sacred natural order itself.⁴⁸

Zimmerman admits that no such government has ever existed, but 'important aspects of it can be discerned in German National Socialism, one of whose central slogans was *Blut und Boden*, [pure] blood and [pure] land.'⁴⁹ Although given by Zimmerman as 'land', the German word, 'Boden', is frequently translated as 'soil', and this word has proven popular with English fascists. The Nazi party's 'Blut und Boden' was a dangerous ideology because it connected race to land ownership, which as Zimmerman explains, 'had to be protected both from industrial pollution and from the injurious presence of half-breeds. Only pure blood Germans could draw creative energy from the land that originally gave rise to the *Volk*.'⁵⁰ In Greg Garrard's article on ecofascism, the prominent ecocritic provides more detail on the environmental policies of the Nazi government:

One of the most striking examples of Nazi environmentalism was the sustained commitment of the team of architects assembled by Alwin Siefert to design the new Autobahn network [...] Siefert sought to reconcile beauty and utility, as well as ecology and economy, in his designs. He hoped that the highways would act as green corridors, reintroducing a diverse native flora back into Germany's intensively farmed monocultural landscapes.⁵¹

However, as Garrard makes clear in no uncertain terms: to imagine the Nazi party as proto-environmentalists would be a grave error.⁵² Although the 'Blut und Boden' ideology and Siefert's green Autobahn appeared to place environmental stewardship at the heart of the Reichstad, the reality was much different. 'Blood and Soil' became 'a piece of passing electoral rhetoric for most Nazis', and senior members of the party ensured Siefert's ecological

⁴⁸ Michael E. Zimmerman, 'Ecofascism', in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*, available online: <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199754670.001.0001/acref-9780199754670-e-278>> [Accessed 11th March 2021].

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Greg Garrard, 'Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 17 (2010), 251–71 (p. 8).

⁵² Ibid.

objectives for the German road network were swiftly halted.⁵³ It would seem that Nazism was green in theory but not in practice.

From a literary perspective, ecofascism has roots in England. In a *New Statesman* article on the subject, Richard Smyth argues that one of the nation's best loved nature books, *Tarka the Otter* (1927), is tainted by Henry Williamson's fascist sympathies.⁵⁴ Moreover, Williamson's second book, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941), contains an epigraph by one of England's most committed and well-known fascists, Oswald Moseley.⁵⁵ In 1937, Williamson joined Moseley's political party, the British Union of Fascists, whose agricultural advisor and second-in-command, was a man named Jorian Jenks. In 1938, Jenks published 'The Land and the People', which outlined the BUF's agricultural position. In the opening pages to that text, Jenks laments the movement of people from rural to urban areas, announcing '[t]he divorce from the soil is complete'.⁵⁶ As his infuriation builds, Jenks declares:

Is this then to be the fate of Britain, the Britain of Elizabeth and Victoria, of Drake and Nelson? To degenerate slowly into a community of town-bred, under-nourished weaklings, a parasite nation dependent for its very existence upon the charity of international financiers, upon the goodwill and forbearance of other and more virile countries? Or shall we realise in time that there is a way, Mosley's way, in which we can recover national health, security and independence, in short our true nationhood?⁵⁷

Jenks's solution to this problem is to create a 'Land Army' to revive the nation's agriculture, and in the final paragraph of the document, affirms that '[t]he Land is the heritage of the People'.⁵⁸ Reading the propaganda of the German National Socialists alongside that of the British Union of Fascists, it is clear to see how the shared language that shaped their common ideologies reflected a political trend in interwar Europe that rejected the erosion of rural life

⁵³ Garrard, 2010, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Richard Smyth, 'Nature writing's fascist roots', *New Statesman*, 3rd April 2019, available online: <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/04/eco-facism-nature-writing-nazi-far-right-nostalgia-england>> [Accessed 11th March 2021].

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jorian Jenks, *The Land and the People: British Union Agricultural Policy* (London: Blackhouse, 1938), p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 7–8.

caused by industrialisation, and advocated for environmental stewardship based on a connection between race and land. When this political context is combined with the fascism of Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*, depictions of the environment within the text reveal additional layers of meaning.

As a close to this section, I will finish by saying that robust condemnation of Llewellyn's novel has been a consistent feature of Welsh literary scholarship. Moreover, notwithstanding its mandatory inclusion within surveys of the field and the occasional journal article, *How Green Was My Valley* has largely been written out of the Wales's Anglophone literary history. This chapter, then, is not an apology for the text, or indeed a celebration of its technique. I begin from the standpoint that *How Green Was My Valley* is a piece of work which wears its racism and anti-Semitism openly. However, as part of a larger study that examines the ways in which Welsh writing – or at least writing with Wales as its subject – considers the environmental impact of industrialisation, Llewellyn's novel demands inclusion. Moreover, in a chapter concentrating specifically on the representation of the spoil tip, it would be an error not to select this text as its principal focus. This chapter thus undertakes a new, environmentally inflected reading of *How Green Was My Valley*, through a detailed examination of the recurring motif of the spoil tip. However, it does not ignore the relationship between Llewellyn's proto-environmentalism and the fascist elements of the text.

Theoretical Beginnings: Pastoral, Buell and Price

As Peter Marinelli reminds us, ‘the definition of pastoral is no simple matter’.⁵⁹ One reason for this is, given the fluid nature of language, ‘pastoral’ has meant different things for different people at different times and, as Paul Alpers remarks, ‘there is no principled account of it on which most people agree’.⁶⁰ However, Terry Gifford, in his comprehensive study of the mode, considers the contemporary understanding of pastoral as divided into three distinct strands, and can be viewed as a further development of Leo Marx’s notion of complex and simple pastoral. Firstly, according to Gifford, there is the literary tradition of pastoral, in lyric form, with shepherds singing songs on Arcadian hillsides.⁶¹ Secondly, there is pastoral literature in the broader sense, which seeks to represent country life as a contrast to urban existence, and is thus not bound to the poetic form or the conventions of the Classical tradition.⁶² Thirdly, there is the critical use of the term, often applied pejoratively to describe works of literature that seek to idealise country life and ignore the everyday struggles of those who rely on the land to provide a substantial existence for themselves, and their family.⁶³ This idealisation, which Gifford in a later essay links to a sense of nostalgia for a former time, is a suitable way to classify Llewellyn’s depiction of a Welsh mining community in *How Green Was My Valley*.⁶⁴ The writer constructs an idealised image of pre-industrial Wales from an outsider’s perspective, and this presents a dilemma for the ecocritic.

⁵⁹ Peter Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1971), p. 5.

⁶⁰ Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 8.

⁶¹ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 1.

⁶² Gifford, 1999, p. 2.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See: Terry Gifford, ‘Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies’, in *Critical Insights: Nature and Environment*, ed. by Scott Slovic (Ipswich: Salam Press, 2012), pp. 42-61.

Does Llewellyn represent the environment as it actually is, or instead, render meaning in symbolic terms? This is a common issue in ecocriticism, and is acknowledged by Buell, who explains that ‘all inquiry into artistic rendition of physical environment must sooner or later reckon with the meta-question of how to construe the relation between the world of a text and the world of historical lived experience’.⁶⁵ Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley* creates a special difficulty, due to the author’s apparent personal detachment from the landscape he chose to depict. Whereas with other writers, the critic is able to place their representation of environmental degradation within a defined historical context, with Llewellyn’s work, the process is altogether problematic. On this point, Buell argues that ‘acts of writing and reading will likely involve simultaneous processes of environmental awakening – retrievals of physical environment from dormancy to salience – and of distortion, repression, forgetting, inattention’, before concluding that environmental writing ‘can be oneiric and mimetic, self-referencing and referential, partial, obtuse, and prophetic all at the same time’.⁶⁶ It is, therefore, the role of the literary scholar to decide whether to focus solely on the text, or on the historical context, or – as is now most usual – on how historical context informed the composition of the text, and how fresh analysis may transform understandings of the text, and our own context in turn.

Llewellyn’s detached depiction of Wales is challenging in a number of ways. However, this is not to say that nothing can be salvaged from the novel. From a textual perspective, the author’s representation of a landscape altered by the waste of the coal mining industry, and the community threatened by its ever-encroaching growth, offers much in terms of analysis, whilst simultaneously reflecting the historical context of industrial south Wales. Consequently, this chapter will take a multifaceted approach to its ecocritical analysis, examining the representation of the spoil tip both from a textual – or symbolic – perspective, whilst at the

⁶⁵ Buell, 2005, p. 30.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 18 and p. 27.

same time, considering how Llewellyn's depiction can be examined alongside its historical – and literary – context.

In one of the rare examples of criticism that attempts to mount a defence of *How Green Was My Valley*, Derrick Price (1986) argues that the spoil tip is 'the central signifier of the corruption of an old, organic way of life'.⁶⁷ Alongside the aforementioned Harris and Knight, Price is one of the few critics to acknowledge the spoil tip in Llewellyn's text, and even this rare example is all too brief. More recently, in *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (2018), the American critic Heidi C. M. Scott dedicates a chapter to reading the literature of coal mining from an environmental perspective, and includes a detailed analysis of Llewellyn's text. Consequently, throughout this chapter, I maintain a critical dialogue with the research of Harris, Knight, Price and Scott.⁶⁸

The first part of this chapter will take its most significant cue from Price, who presents a starting point with his notion of the spoil tip as 'the central signifier of the corruption of an old, organic way of life'. Corruption is defined as 'the destruction or spoiling of anything', but also the 'moral deterioration', and the 'perversion of anything from an original state of purity'.⁶⁹ In this sense, corruption can be understood as both a literal and metaphorical process. Furthermore, the 'old, organic way of life' to which Price refers is another way of describing pastoral ideology. This chapter, therefore, advances Price's argument by recasting Llewellyn's depiction of environmental degradation in literary terms. This first part will examine how Llewellyn uses the spoil tip to lament the material 'destruction or spoiling' of pastoral landscape, directly embodied in the representation of the mountain. In the second part, I will

⁶⁷ Derrick Price, 'How Green Was My Valley: A Romance of Wales', in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. by Jean Radford (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 73–94 (p. 86).

⁶⁸ Heidi C. M. Scott, *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁶⁹ 'Corruption, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/42045>> [Accessed 6th April 2018].

examine how Llewellyn's depiction of the spoil tip laments the 'moral deterioration' of pastoral ideals by continuing a religious notion that characterised Wales as a sacred land.

'THE GREEN GRASS [...] ALL HAD GONE': THE EROSION OF PASTORAL SPACE⁷⁰

At the heart of *How Green Was My Valley* is a sense of loss. The pastoral landscape of an 'old, organic' Wales has been materially 'corrupted' by industrialisation, signified throughout the text by the recurring motif of the spoil tip. As Sally Roberts Jones argues, it is clear to see how Llewellyn's sentimental description of rural Wales as a prelapsarian Eden prior to industrialisation places the author as a literary heir to Allen Raine.⁷¹ Raine's depiction of industrial Glamorganshire in novels like *A Welsh Witch* presented the coal mining heartlands in stark contrast to the pastoral idylls of west Wales. Llewellyn would have been well aware of these constructions due to the ubiquity of Raine's novels in his formative years; the Cardiganshire author sold two million books in the United Kingdom and even more overseas.⁷² In *How Green Was My Valley*, it is possible to detect the influence of Raine, as the portrayal of pastoral corruption at the hands of industrialisation is a recurrent feature throughout the novel.

Despite the fact that Llewellyn had originally opted for 'Slag', *How Green Was My Valley* is still a significant title, especially in relation to the motif of the spoil tip. At first glance, it appears as if the adverbial beginning is posing a question to the reader, but the lack of any punctuation mark suggests that the title is to be understood as a lament for that which is lost. The past tense of the only verb confirms this sense of bereavement, and the pronoun-inflected ownership of the final two words suggests that the loss is deeply personal. 'Green' is a

⁷⁰ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 98.

⁷¹ Sally Roberts Jones, *Allen Raine: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1979), p. 1.

⁷² Knight, 2004, p. 18.

significant choice, with its associations of ‘grass’, ‘foliage’, and ‘vegetation’; all aspects of life that are able to grow, and also sustain other living things.⁷³ In the Welsh language, the word ‘glas’ usually refers to blue objects. However, ‘glas’ can also be used to describe things that English speakers typically consider as green. For example, one of the Welsh words for ‘grass’ is ‘glaswellt’, which indicates that the Welsh language associates a particular sense of fecundity with the colour green. Yet, this fecundity – by definition – presupposes a lifecycle, and then a vulnerability to eventual death, which suggests the ‘Valley’ was, but is no longer, alive, and that something has brought about this demise. As in Coombes’s *Treclewyd*, one imagines industrialisation, and the dirt of coal mining besmirching the green, pastoral landscape. More recently, the word ‘green’ has come to be synonymous with environmentalism as a political movement, which is obviously not something that Llewellyn or his publisher would have anticipated in the 1930s.⁷⁴ However, reading *How Green Was My Valley* from a contemporary ecocritical perspective, one cannot help but note the aptness of the title, for a text that provides such a damning account of environmental degradation.

The novel begins in a melancholic tone, prompted by the news of an immediate departure. The narrator, Huw Morgan, is ‘going from the Valley’⁷⁵ after many years. This sudden revelation provokes an extended reminiscence that will last for the entirety of the novel. In the opening chapter, brief family histories are juxtaposed with random vivid memories to swiftly construct an image of the world inhabited by the novel. The reader soon learns how Huw’s mother and father first met, a distant – evidently acquired – memory which is then placed alongside the more immediate recollection of men returning from the pit in the evening. Yet, at the conclusion of the first chapter, as Huw wistfully remembers a house full of his siblings, the theme of loss is emphasised, with the narrator sorrowfully reflecting: ‘still, that is

⁷³ ‘Green, adj. and n.1’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/81167>> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1939]), p. 7.

past'.⁷⁶ Immediately, the reader comes to the realisation that something significant has been lost in the village, and this is the reason that Huw is leaving.

As the novel progresses, Huw is required to spend a lengthy period of recuperation indoors following a serious accident. When he is finally permitted to re-enter society, the young boy immediately notes the spoil tip, waiting expectantly outside his front door. As Huw looks closer, near to where the hulking mound hugs the edge of the river, he realises that 'the green grass, and the reeds and the flowers, all had gone, crushed beneath it'.⁷⁷ Despite their absence, Llewellyn makes sure to reference the features of the former pastoral landscape in this new, industrial scene. The violent obliteration of the pastoral renders the process of industrialisation in unforgiving terms, and committed with herculean force. The fecundity of this bygone setting is then starkly contrasted in the next sentence as Huw notices 'cage after cage' emerging from the coal mine, ready to empty more 'dusty loads on to the ridged, black, dirty back'.⁷⁸ This description creates an atmosphere of environmental degradation that is executed with repetitive regularity.

Throughout the novel, the stark contrast between the pastoral, open countryside and the industrial settlement is enacted frequently. Following an episode at Chapel, where Huw insults a minister in defence of Meilyn Lewis – a girl who has become pregnant outside of marriage – he is taken up on the mountain by his father. As they sit in silence, Huw gazes down on the valley below and Llewellyn uses this cinematic perspective to juxtapose the idyllic pastoral scene on one side, with the sprawling industrial settlement on the other. The pastures below are 'full of golds and greens', with further 'yellows and pinks and blues poking from the hedges where the flowers were hard at work for the bees'.⁷⁹ This vibrant description of fecundity and life mirrors the youthful fertility of Meilyn Lewis, and conjures painterly images of bucolic

⁷⁶ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 98.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 98.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 110.

landscapes. Then, Llewellyn peoples the scene, identifying the land as belonging to a farmer, ‘Meirddyn Jones’; a seemingly traditional Welsh name. However, ‘Meirddyn’ is not a Welsh name, and perhaps the author was thinking of Myrddin. The Welsh word for Merlin offers another way of examining Llewellyn’s image of the farmer, as an attempt to locate the figure as part of Wales’s mythical past. Given the author’s form, this clunky passage highlights an uncomfortable attempt to connect a prelapsarian, pastoral setting with notions of race and mythology. In the next paragraph, Llewellyn shifts the perspective, turning to the other side of the valley to deliver his arresting coda: ‘beautiful was the Valley this afternoon, until you turned your head to the right. Then you saw the two slag heaps’.⁸⁰ Once more, the pastoral Welsh setting is presented as a stark contrast to the modern industrial community.

Heidi Scott argues that Llewellyn’s juxtaposition of the pastoral with the decrepit industrial setting has its origins in Victorian literature. She contends that, ‘like generations of Victorian writers before him, Llewellyn plays the pastoral scene against its aesthetic antipode, the industrial wasteland carved out by coal production’.⁸¹ Although unstated, perhaps Scott is thinking of writers like Raine here. However, the theme of the pastoral idyll being physically corrupted by the presence of spoil tips is also realised in other examples of Welsh industrial writing, such as in Lewis Jones’s *Cwmardy* (1937). Early on in the novel, at Ben the Barber’s, the characters, Big Jim and Dai Cannon, discuss the way coal mining has affected the landscape, and again, it is one of the young people – Charlie, the lather boy – who listens intently:

The lad, being more or less a prisoner because of his disability, enjoyed the company of adults, and liked nothing better than to listen to the older wags exchanging reminiscences of the days when the valley was a place of wooded beauty with just one street, Sunny Bank, looking down upon it. Charlie would sigh when the old men lauded the green-plastered slopes now buried beneath monstrous conical masses of pit residue.⁸²

⁸⁰ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 110.

⁸¹ Scott, 2018, p. 149.

⁸² Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy: The Story of a Welsh Mining Valley* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978 [1937]), p. 12.

As in *How Green Was My Valley*, Jones replicates this image of the surrounding environment being physically buried under the waste of the coal industry, with the towering peaks of the spoil tips providing an irreverent headstone. In a further similarity to Llewellyn, Jones spends time emphasising the prelapsarian splendour of the valley – focusing on aesthetic images of fecundity with lush, lengthened vowel sounds, like ‘wooded beauty’ and ‘green-plastered slopes’ – to create a stark contrast before providing an arresting conclusion with harsh alliterative emphasis, and a community ‘buried beneath monstrous conical masses’.

Similarly, in *These Poor Hands* by B. L. Coombes, the physical corruption of spoil tips on pastoral landscape is noticeably present. During an episode in which Coombes arrives at a new colliery to begin work, he notes: ‘the morning greetings were well spiced, and they [the hauliers] rode on to where a huge black tip spoiled the continual brown-green of the mountain’.⁸³ Here, Coombes deliberately switches the noun to a verb, placing emphasis on how the colliery waste tip ‘spoiled’ the landscape. This particular choice of vocabulary suggests that the damage inflicted has rendered the land useless, for both humans and non-humans. Coombes also places emphasis on how industrialisation has changed the shape and colour – from a mountain to a spoil tip, and from green to an all-consuming black.

In T. Rowland Hughes’s later, Welsh-language novel, *Chwalfa* (1946) – which tells the story of the Great Penrhyn Quarry Strike – the loss of pastoral space is a prevalent theme. Towards the beginning of the text, when the characters Idris and Dick Shepherd leave their native Llechfaen – based on Bethesda in North Wales – for the industrial south to find work during the strike, they are astounded by the impact coal mining has had on the landscape. After their train journeys through the rich agricultural fields of Herefordshire, they are greeted by an entirely different landscape:

⁸³ Coombes, 2002, pp. 46–7.

Casnewydd, Caerdydd, newid trê, wedyn milltir ar filltir o lesni caeau a choed a pherthi. Newid trê eto, gwyllo'r cwm yn culhau, syllo'n ofnus ar dai fel pe'n sefyll yn betrus ennyd cyn rhoi naid tros ddibyn, ar dramiau meddwon ar y ffordd uwchben, ar y tipiau glo'n ceisio newid ffurf yn ogystal â lliw y brynau a'r llethrau.⁸⁴

[They passed through Newport and came to Cardiff, where they changed trains; after that the journey lay through mile after mile of green fields, woodland and hedgerows. Another change and then the valley narrowed, while they gazed apprehensively at houses that seemed to stand momentarily poised before flinging themselves over steep bluffs, at trams lurching along the road above them, at the coal-tips trying to change the outline as well as the colouring of the hills and slopes.]⁸⁵

Like Llewellyn and Jones previously, Rowland Hughes begins by accentuating the fertile nature of the landscape, with '[g]lesni caeau a choed a pherthi' [green fields, woodland and hedgerows] flying past the train window, before shifting attention to 'y tipiau glo' [the coal-tips], which disfigure the pastoral landscape. Like Coombes, Rowland Hughes seems aghast at the influence one industry is having on the material composition of the environment.

The spoil tip continues to be used as a symbol for the corruption of the pastoral, even as late as the 1960s in the work of the Ystradgynlais-born novelist, Menna Gallie, such as her novel, *The Small Mine* (1962). However, in this text, with the passing of time, the spoil tips are starting to be reclaimed by the landscape that they once displaced. At the beginning of the novel, as the ill-fated Joe walks back towards his village after a drink in the local pub, he observes the way coal mining has changed the surrounding landscape. Gallie writes:

He walked on towards the village where the mountain and the tips were conspiring together to keep out the last of the light. In the dusk it was hard to tell which was tip and which was rolling mountain, for the village tips were old, gone to grass, and losing the sharp lines that had, in the beginning, been as hard and assertive as a tart in falsies.⁸⁶

Significantly, in this later example, the tips have greened over with time, and the author contrasts this tired image with the spoil's past, forceful appearance. Writing in the 1960s, Gallie observed a landscape that was both rural and industrial; a fusion between old and new, granted

⁸⁴ T. Rowland Hughes, *Chwalfa* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2016 [1946]), pp. 103–04.

⁸⁵ T. Rowland Hughes, *Chwalfa* [*Out of Their Night*], trans. by Richard Ruck (Aberystwyth: Gwasg Aberystwyth, 1954 [1946]), pp. 82–83.

⁸⁶ Menna Gallie, *The Small Mine* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2000 [1962]), p. 14.

by the passing of time. Indeed, the narrator of *The Small Mine* has difficulty distinguishing between rural peak and industrial waste. Furthermore, Gallie's strikingly gendered imagery feminises the scene, suggesting parallels with the maturation of landscape and the female ageing process. With the symmetrical, pointy tips representing false breasts that offer no milk or succour, Gallie's negative reference to the 'tart in falsies' implies a moral condemnation of the spoil tips, in their vulgarity, inauthenticity and corruptive power. The female author assumes the voice of the male character in her use of misogynistic language, and references a literary convention that connects the industrial and colonial exploitation of land with gender.⁸⁷

In the latter stages of *How Green Was My Valley*, the spoil tip's corruptive power becomes more apparent, as the depiction of industrial development increases and the ubiquity of pastoral scenery decreases. Accordingly, when the protagonist learns that his beloved friend Mr. Gruffydd will leave the village, Huw begins a lengthy monologue on the way coal mining has changed his community. As he walks home along the river, Huw notices that there is 'not a light anywhere, except at the pit',⁸⁸ which subtly implies the intrusive presence of industry in the village. Furthermore, the expansion of the colliery has prompted the construction of 'new engine sheds' along the river, so the banks are no longer accessible. As a result of this, 'the bilge' spills into the waters and the noise – 'like a sickness' – is deafening.⁸⁹ Once more, Adams attests to the immense noise of life in a colliery community like Gilfach Goch:

You cannot live close to a pit, as most of us did, without being aware of it. After hooters calling the men to work, in early morning darkness came the crunch of steel-shod boots on the road, followed soon after by the percussion of steam engines, the creaking and clatter of moving trucks and drams, the grating roar of tipped slag and countless unaccountable thuds and clanks that continued all through the day and, during the winter, deep into darkness once more.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See Alexander Cordell's *Rape of the Fair Country* (1959).

⁸⁸ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 377.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 377.

⁹⁰ Adams, 2016, p. 39.

In a similar vein, Llewellyn's narrator continues, lamenting the absence of space – exacerbated by the expansion of the colliery – where new homes are built in rows of tightly packed, identical streets with 'not even a blade of grass for a garden'.⁹¹ However, the final insult is that 'four new slag heaps' have appeared in the village, and now, as Huw describes, 'the slag dropped on to the green pasture and found a level down among the trees'. As the young boy surveys this unsettling scene, he notices a 'big beech', that he 'had climbed not long before', now reaching 'out of a smoking heap like the hand of a spirit entombed'; a sacrificed victim for the colliery profits, and perhaps for Llewellyn, the Wales of his imagination buried under the all-consuming burden of capitalism.⁹²

Shortly after this incident, Huw assaults a local boy, Evan John, for insulting his sister, Angharad, on the grounds of her rumoured love affair with Mr. Gruffydd. Subsequently, Huw is arrested for 'assault and battery', and is summoned to appear in front of a magistrate.⁹³ On his journey to the courthouse, the protagonist surveys the scarred landscape, and notices that 'slag heaps were like the backs of buried animals rising as from the Pit.'⁹⁴ Here, Llewellyn's comparison of non-human carcasses with spoil tips is a powerful simile for the way industrialisation brings death to the natural world. However, as in the preceding paragraph, the scene worsens for the narrator, as Huw notices that 'living trees were buried in them, and in some, gorse was growing with its lamps alight, and grass was trying to be green wherever the wind would let it rest in peace'.⁹⁵ In this quotation, there is a sense of violence in the process of industrialisation, and the environment's attempt to resist destruction is limited and under threat.

⁹¹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 377.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 381.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 383.

⁹⁵ Ibid.



Figure 23. Hills above Gilfach Goch.⁹⁷

In *The Welsh Industrial Novel*, Raymond Williams considers how the ‘very distinctive physical character of the Welsh industrial areas’,⁹⁸ creates specific narrative opportunities for the fiction writer. Elaborating on this idea, Williams explains how:

At any time in any Welsh mining valley, there is the profoundly different yet immediately accessible landscape of open hills and sky above them, of a rising light and of a clear expansion, into which it is possible, both physically and figuratively, to move.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 41.

⁹⁷ My own photograph.

⁹⁸ Williams, 1979, p. 12.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

From the mining valleys, the hills and mountains above are often viewed in reverential terms. The pastoral, upland space provides characters with the opportunity to quit the frenetic tension of the industrial settlement. Positioned high above the village, there is space to reflect on life in the community below. From a literary perspective, this allows the characters to become omniscient narrators, and as they look down on the community sitting quietly in the valley, they are suddenly able to see aspects that are imperceptible from within. This device is used to great effect by Rhys Davies in his earlier short story, 'Blodwen' (1931), and later by Alun Lewis in 'The Housekeeper' (1942).¹⁰⁰ In the former, during an episode in which the eponymous protagonist journeys up to the mountain with her impotent suitor, Oswald, the unique vantage point of the elevated ground is used to highlight the industrial impact on the former pastoral landscape below, whilst also contrasting the personalities of each character, and thus emphasising their differences:

Not until they got to the mountain-top did [Blodwen] seem to regain her good spirits. She loved the swift open spaces of the mountain-tops [...] They could see all the far-flung valley between the massive different hills. Some of those hills were tall and suave and immaculate, having escaped the desecration of the coal-mines [...] some were shapeless with great excrescences of the mines, heaps of waste matter piled up black and forbidding [...] Blodwen felt eased, gazing at the massed hills stretched along the fourteen miles of the Valley. She felt eased and almost at peace again. Oswald glanced at her and saw she wanted to be quiet, though the storm had left her brow. He sat back against the rock and musingly fingered his heavy gold ring. He did not care for the mountain-tops himself. It was dull up there: and he seemed to be lost in the ample space.¹⁰¹

Davies uses the unique perspective of the mountain to survey the impact of industrialisation on the land. Yet, the distance between the characters is accentuated by the difference in their respective experiences of the mountain. For Blodwen, the pastoral, upland space provides freedom and an opportunity to regain calm, but for Oswald, the mountain is tedious and the vastness of space is overwhelming. Davies uses the mountain to emphasise this difference

¹⁰⁰ Alun Lewis, *Collected Stories*, ed. by Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 1991), pp. 94–105

¹⁰¹ Rhys Davies, 'Blodwen', in *Collected Stories*, Vol 1, ed. Meic Stephens (Llandysul: Gomer, 1996), pp. 81–93, (p. 84).

between the two characters because the bucolic, upland space is home to the semi-wild Pugh Jibbons who, despite making crude advances at Blodwen, offers an appealing version of brute masculinity, in stark contrast to her dull, son-of-a-solicitor suitor, Oswald.

In Glyn Jones's poem 'Merthyr' (1954) the mountain once more provides the ideal pastoral setting for the speaker to survey the landscape of their youth. In a tragi-comic tone typical of Jones, the viewpoint from the upland peak provides an opportunity to assess the impact of industrialisation on a town that was so instrumental in its development. The speaker is imagining his own funeral:

It would be best if it could happen, Sir,
Upon some great green roof, some Beacon slope
Those monstrous clouds of childhood slid their soap
Snouts over, into the valley. The season,
Sir, for shooting, summer; and love the reason.
On that hill, varnished in the glazing tide
Of evening, stand me, with the petrified
Plantations, the long blue spoonful of the lake,
The gold stook-tufted acres without break
Below me, and the distant corduroy
Glass of the river – which, a mitching boy,
I fished – flowing as though to quench
The smouldering coalfield in its open trench
Of steamy valley, fifteen miles away.¹⁰²

As the speaker looks back at Merthyr from the lofty heights of the Brecon Beacons, the idyllic, mountain space inspires a sense of contemplative evaluation. It is intentionally hyperbolic, and overly Romantic, but significantly, the poem begins at a mountainous vantage point, where the speaker is afforded the opportunity to view the impact of industrialisation on the land below.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Glyn Jones, 'Merthyr', in *The Collected Poems of Glyn Jones*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 41–44, (p. 42).

¹⁰³ Indeed, this notion of the valley dweller seeking a contemplative solace in the uplands could be said to have its origins in Welsh-language literature, and especially *Gweledigaethau y Bardd Cwsc* [Visions of the Sleeping Bard] (1703) by Ellis Wynne. At the beginning of the first part, 'Gweledigaeth y Byd' [Vision of the World], the speaker stands on a high mountain peak in Wales and, after surveying the landscape below, falls into a vision-filled sleep. For the speaker of *Gweledigaethau y Bardd Cwsc*, the mountain provides an opportunity to imagine life beyond local surroundings, whilst fundamentally, offering a place for peaceful contemplation, and sleep.

In *How Green Was My Valley*, the pastoral hills above the village function in many different ways. As nearby, secluded spaces, they are used to stage political meetings, conduct romantic liaisons, and escape the tensions of the family home. Following a heated dispute over the management of the coal mine between Huw's father and two brothers, Owen and Gwilym, the latter pair announce that they are to 'leave the house', inflicting much sadness and distress on their mother.¹⁰⁴ In search of some tranquillity following the bitter argument, Huw and his father 'go up on the mountain and find peace'.¹⁰⁵ From this elevated space, Huw is able to visually trace the impact of industrialisation on the valley below, and on returning to the village, he sees the space in a different light, afforded by the perspective of the mountain, noting that: 'the slag heap had grown so much it was half-way along to our house'.¹⁰⁶

Throughout the novel, the amount and speed by which the spoil tip increases in size worries the narrator. As soon as Huw returns to the outside world following his prolonged recovery at home, he sees the mountainous spoil tip and remarks on how 'big it had grown'.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the heap has dramatically increased in size, to the point at which it has become difficult to delineate the boundaries of the community and the colliery, and to identify the difference between the surrounding hills and the spoil tips. This anxiety concerning the growth of spoil tips is also echoed by B. L. Coombes, who vividly recalls his astonishment at the workings of a newly opened colliery, where he has recently been employed:

This was a new colliery, for it had not been working two years. The engine-houses were roughly made, and the cabins for the outside workers were simply broken trams pushed up on their ends. A great amount of rubbish had been brought out already, to judge by the size of the "muck tip". They tipped nearly two hundred tons of rubbish every night.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 48.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 98.

¹⁰⁸ Coombes, 2002, p. 47.

In addition to the poor engineering work, the conditions for the workers are equally substandard. For Coombes, this is then worsened by the colossal spoil tip that grows to startling new heights with every shift completed. In these accounts of the coal industry, the immense scale of spoil production is something that is consistently noted by those who witnessed its inner workings and, in Llewellyn's case, those who did not.

In the coalfield, the physical manifestation of a colliery's output was the spoil tip. The elevation of the conical summit was a material representation of the extraction rate at which the mine was operating, but with every day that work continued, the local community were forced to accommodate greater amounts of spoil. In Llewellyn's text, Huw fails to understand the logic of this process, and thus turns to his elders in order to make sense of the perceived act of violence. Mr. Gruffydd offers an impotent – but truthful – response: ““nowhere else to put it, my son””, echoing the inevitable reality of life in a colliery village.¹⁰⁹ However, this reality is too much for Huw, and Mr. Gruffydd – detecting a deep sense of melancholy is about to consume the boy – quickly shifts the focus to something more pleasant – ““daffodils”” on the mountainside. Here, the threatened pastoral mountain with its fecund soil, is presented as a pleasant, distracting alternative to the unproductive mound of dirt that is the spoil tip. This is a common feature of Welsh industrial writing, as once more, Williams argues in *The Welsh Industrial Novel*:

The pastoral life, which had been Welsh history, is still another Welsh present, and in its visible presence [...] as the slope, the skyline, to be seen immediately from the streets and pit-tops [...] – it is a shape which manifests not only a consciousness of history but a consciousness of alternatives, and then, in a modern form, a consciousness of aspirations and possibilities.¹¹⁰

However, due to the increasing speed with which the spoil tip encroaches on the village, the diminishing presence of the pastoral hills above the village is no longer a consolation for Huw,

¹⁰⁹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 98.

¹¹⁰ Williams, 1979, p. 13.

and despite Mr. Gruffydd's best efforts to distract the young boy, the minister's actions simply remind the narrator of that which has been lost.

Throughout the novel, the spoil tip is not only portrayed as an object that usurps the status of the mountain, but also one that has the ability to metamorphose into its natural opposite. The ceaseless expansion of the spoil tip creates a constant sense of tension, and when Huw imagines the mound collapsing and burying his house, it is the fact that this act will finally connect the pastoral and industrial spaces that is most troubling. The protagonist explains that soon: 'the slag heap will stretch from the top of the mountain right down to the river in the Valley', and thus there will be no rural alternative for the valley inhabitant to seek, because all pastoral space will be industrialised.¹¹¹ This anxiety is sustained as the novel progresses. When Huw journeys to the other side of the valley to visit his brother and sister-in-law, the narrator remarks that the spoil tips 'looked half as big as the mountain', and 'even grass was growing in some places'.¹¹² Soon, Huw will be unable to distinguish between a mountain and a spoil tip, and thus the process of industrialisation will be complete. Fatefully, this moment arrives at the end of the novel, when Huw refers to the new spoil tip emerging above his own roof as the 'mountain directly behind our house'.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 96.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 158.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 411.



Figure 24. Capel Als, Llanelli.¹¹⁴

Theoretical Beginnings: Environment and Religion

In 1900, the famous Reverend Thomas Johns – of Capel Als, Llanelli – addressed a large congregation as the new president of Undeb yr Annibynwyr Cymraeg [the Union of Welsh Independents], an association of Reformed Congregationalist churches in Wales. ‘The Welsh rural areas’, he proclaimed, ‘are still the location of “Hen Wlad y Menyg Gwynion”, only the southern industrial valleys have been corrupted by the influx of English people and their vicious habits’.¹¹⁵ Translated literally as ‘the land of the white gloves’, but the essence of the

¹¹⁴ Photograph © Gary Davies.

¹¹⁵ Russell Davies, *Secret Sins: Sex, Violence & Society in Carmarthenshire 1870–1920* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 112.

phrase is closer to ‘the land of the pure morals’, ‘Hen Wlad y Menyg Gwynion’ became an influential way to imagine Wales as a sacred land during the nineteenth century. As the historian, Russell Davies, explains in *Secret Sins: Sex, Violence & Society in Carmarthenshire 1870–1920*: ‘during the nineteenth century the custom developed of presenting judges at the Welsh assizes with a pair of white gloves when the Calendar before him contained no criminal business’.¹¹⁶ Accordingly, through the use of this particular metaphor in his sermon, the Reverend Thomas Johns conjured an aspirational image of a morally uncorrupted nation, located in the sparsely populated rural areas of Wales, far from the corrupting influence of the English in the southern industrial heartlands. This notion of locating spiritual purity in Wales has been explored fully by Dorian Llywelyn in his text on land and Welsh spirituality, *Sacred Place, Chosen People* (1999).¹¹⁷ Damian Walford Davies elaborates on the idea in his chapter on ‘Hopkins and the Psychocartography of Welsh Space’, where he skilfully maps a sermon delivered by the poet, in which the Bible lands are transported to The Vale of Clwyd [Dyffryn Clwyd], in the county of Denbighshire [Sir Ddinbych], north east Wales. For Walford Davies, Hopkins’s sermon is a clear example of the ‘sacralization of Welsh space’,¹¹⁸ which – as is evident from the preaching of the Reverend Thomas Johns – is not an exceptional means of imagining Wales as a cultural entity. Consequently, in this second part, I argue that the conception of the Welsh nation in spiritual terms can also be traced in *How Green Was My Valley*, and that the desecration of pastoral space by industrialisation – represented most notably through spoil tips – can be understood in terms of both spiritual and moral perversion.

¹¹⁶ Davies, 1996, p. 112.

¹¹⁷ Dorian Llewelyn, *Sacred Place, Chosen People: Land and National Identity in Welsh Spirituality* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

¹¹⁸ Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture: New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 56.

In addition to describing the material corruption of pastoral space by spoil tips, Llewellyn views this impact on the Welsh landscape as a form of moral desecration. Even the title, *How Green Was My Valley*, has a Biblical, certainly hymn-like quality to its syntactic construction, conjuring up the well-known, ‘How Great Thou Art’, which is sung in Welsh as ‘Mor Fawr Wyt Ti’. Early on in the novel, when Huw and his father look down at the valley from their hilltop vantage point, the latter divides the rural and industrial land in terms of morality, claiming “‘here is everything beautiful by here, nothing out of place, all in order. And over with us nothing but ugliness and hate and foolishness’”.¹²⁰ Through his characters, Llewellyn renders the pastoral land in terms of beauty and order, whereas the industrial settlement is condemned. As the passage continues, Huw’s father creates further links between industrialisation and moral decline, describing the industrial space as replete with cardinal sins: ‘bad thoughts and greediness’, where men ‘want all, take all, and give nothing’.¹²¹ Despite its religious symbolism, it is in this type of language that connections can be made to the ideologies of the far right, and its condemnation of industrialisation and rural decline.

In *How Green Was My Valley*, there are moments when Llewellyn advocates a greater stewardship of the environment. As Huw and his father sit together on the mountainside, the latter remarks that: “‘you will have everything from the ground if you will ask the right way. But you will have nothing if not’”.¹²² This alternative means of coal extraction is not explained, but it is significant that Huw’s father appears to be advocating a sustainable method of mining. As a devoutly religious man, his overarching industrial philosophy is based on the notion of “‘all things are given by God’”.¹²³ However, as he comes to the end of his speech, Huw’s father

¹¹⁹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 47.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

looks forward, and appears in some way to hint at a future in which the repercussions of industrial excess will be felt strongly. He confesses to his son: ““I am afraid what is starting down by there, now this moment, is going to give you plenty of troubles in times to come””.¹²⁴

Following this mountainside realisation, it seems that Huw’s father achieves some sense of peace, as he announces that the pair will ““go home””,¹²⁵ back down into the valley. However, as father and son descend from their elevated vantage point, Huw is more keenly aware of the environmental despoliation. He wonders whether ‘it was through looking at the other valley for so long that I got such a worrying shock when I looked again at ours’. Consequently, back down in the village, he first sees a river polluted with ‘scum’ and ‘colliery sump’,¹²⁶ before describing how ‘our valley was going black’.¹²⁷ Based on the definition of the term, this use of blackness to describe the industrial transformation of the community can be understood as a physical change: ‘deeply stained with dirt; soiled, filthy, begrimed’, but also in terms of moral decline: ‘very evil or wicked; iniquitous, foul, hateful’.¹²⁸ It would also be an oversight to ignore the racial significance of this term, given the disturbing elements of the text. As the passage concludes, the narrator interprets this transformation as a process beyond the physical, remarking: ‘young I was and small I was, but young or small I knew it was wrong’.¹²⁹ Once more, the spoil tip functions as the symbol of this moral corruption, and its rapid growth has precipitated the valley’s decline.

Later in the novel, when Huw turns to his father and asks, ““Will there be any Valley left free of slag?””, the latter replies, ““it was never allowed in my young days,”” and that this change is essentially a result of ““laziness and bad workmanship, and cheapness.””¹³⁰ Again,

¹²⁴ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 47.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 48.

¹²⁸ ‘Black, adj. and n.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/19670>> [Accessed 1st March 2018].

¹²⁹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 48.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 383.

Llewellyn refers to the cardinal sins in conversations about the despoliation of the land. Shortly after this, when Huw finds out that a spoil tip is being built directly above his house, it transpires that this land has a religious connection. The protagonist enquires as to who owned the plot and learns that it was sold by 'Jones the Chapel'.¹³¹ The selling of pastoral space by a religious figure is a bitter pill to swallow for the protagonist, who views the incoming industry as a moral stain on the community.

Finally, at the conclusion of the novel, when Huw's father dies in a mining accident, Llewellyn uses Biblical imagery to personify the earth, which has been ravaged by coal mining. In what Harris describes as 'very green reflections',¹³² the narrator considers: 'there is patience in the Earth to allow us to go into her, and dig, and hurt with tunnels and shafts, and if we put back the flesh we have torn from her and so make good what we have weakened, she is content to let us bleed her'.¹³³ There is an uncomfortable suggestion of sexual violence bound together with the feminisation of the earth, which is developed as the passage continues:

But when we take, and leave her weak where we have taken, she has a soreness, and an anger that we should be so cruel to her and so thoughtless of her comfort. So she waits for us, and finding us, bears down, and bearing down, makes us a part of her, flesh of her flesh, with our clay in place of the clay we thoughtlessly have shovelled away.¹³⁴

In the allusion to Genesis 2:23 – 'flesh of my flesh' – Llewellyn once again returns to the notion of Wales as a sacred land.¹³⁵ Yet, in the reference to a Mother Earth figure, the relationship between land and religion is extended from Christian to pagan. In addition to the suggestion of sexual violence, there is a further uncomfortable element to this gendering of the earth. Fascist ideology frequently depicts the environment using feminine language. As Zimmerman explains:

Hitler Youth, we are told, should be reminded of the inner connection between the landscape and the manners, customs, songs, and practices of the various German

¹³¹ Llewellyn, 2001, pp. 410–11

¹³² Harris, 1989, p. 49.

¹³³ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 445.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

tribes. By partaking in nature festivals, which ‘awaken the feeling of a close, common bond with the mother ground of home [mit dem heimatlichen Mutterboden].’¹³⁶

The notion of ‘Mutterboden’, or mother-soil, exploits the intimate maternal bond for its own political ideology. However, this tendency is not confined to the German language. Following the Second World War, Jorian Jenks went on to establish the Soil Association, and would choose ‘Mother Earth’ as the title for the society’s journal that he edited until his death in 1963.¹³⁷ In response to the passage from Llewellyn’s text, Scott takes a slightly different reading that views the feminised depiction of the land in positive terms:

Llewellyn depicts nature as an injured mother taking revenge for her violation. The slag is her hammer coming down in verdict. This active characterization is a shift from the narrator’s earlier views of despoilment, where nature was passive to man’s activities and Huw’s shame for the pollution and his pity for nature were just liquid emotions easily diverted by the mine machine.¹³⁸

However, Scott does not acknowledge that this passage highlights the long-standing eco-feminist rejection of imagery depicting Mother Earth as either innocent or vengeful. As Dennis Jelinski explains, ‘the concept of Mother Nature began as deification, typically benign and organic. It gradually evolved into a more metaphor-like meaning such that by the Victorian era she was seen as often being capricious, vengeful and ruthless.’¹³⁹ Llewellyn’s simple characterisation of a vindictive Mother Earth appears to transfer blame to women for acts committed by men.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Michael E. Zimmerman, ‘The Threat of Ecofascism’, *Social Theory and Practice*, Special Issue: The Environmental Challenge to Social and Political Philosophy, 21, 2, (1995), pp. 207–38 (p. 217).

¹³⁷ See: Richard, Moore-Colyer, ‘Towards “Mother Earth”: Jorian Jenks, Organicism, the Right and the British Union of Fascists.’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 3, (2004), pp. 353–71. Also, there is no mention of Jenks’s name on the Soil Association’s website.

¹³⁸ Scott, 2018, p. 151.

¹³⁹ Dennis E. Jelinski, ‘There Is No Mother Nature: There Is No Balance of Nature: Culture, Ecology and Conservation’, *Human Ecology*, 33, 2 (2005), pp. 271–88 (p. 276).

¹⁴⁰ Some ecofeminists, such as the Indian scholar, Vandana Shiva, have sought to reclaim terms like ‘mother earth’ in an Indigenous and traditional context. See: *Reclaiming the Commons: Biodiversity, Traditional Knowledge, and the Rights of Mother Earth* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Synergetic Press, 2020).

‘LYING ALONG THE BOTTOM OF THE VALLEY’:
THE SERPENTINE SPOIL TIP AND A WELSH EDEN¹⁴¹

In Kate Roberts’s novel, *Traed Mewn Cyffion* (1936), the sinister slate quarry tip is represented as a snake. At the beginning of the text when the protagonist, Jane, is out on a walk with her young children

Edrychai ar y pentref draw yn gorwedd yn llonyddwch y prynhawn. I fyny ar y chwith yr oedd y chwarel a’i thomen yn estyn ei phig i lawr y mynydd fel neidr.¹⁴²

[She gazed up at the distant village lying in the stillness of the afternoon. Up on the left was the quarry and its tip which thrust its snout down the mountainside like a snake.]¹⁴³

Like Roberts, Llewellyn uses similar imagery to describe the spoil tip in *How Green Was My Valley*. Early on in the novel, Huw describes the spoil tip as ‘long and black’, and ‘lying along the bottom of the Valley’.¹⁴⁴ The serpent is one of the oldest symbols in global mythology, and in a western context, much of its significance comes from the Book of Genesis, in which the appearance of the serpent foreshadows, and ultimately brings about, the fall of humanity.

In Llewellyn’s novel, the serpentine spoil tip is similarly used as a device to foretell tragic episodes within the narrative. When Huw takes a basket of food to his brother Gwilym and sister-in-law Marged, Llewellyn uses the spoil tip to foreshadow an impending tragedy. As Huw reflects on the walk to his brother’s house, he remarks: ‘I have not liked that road since. That way, I had to pass the two heaps of slag’.¹⁴⁵ As Huw finally arrives at his destination, he finds only his brother’s wife, Marged, in a darkened room, clearly suffering from a mental illness. When Huw becomes frightened and exits the house, Marged becomes crazed and follows after him. Up on the mountain they run, but in the frenzy, Marged falls and smashes her head on a rock. Distraught, Huw stops and soothes her to sleep, before resolving

¹⁴¹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 98.

¹⁴² Kate Roberts, *Traed Mewn Cyffion* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 2014 [1936]), p. 37.

¹⁴³ Kate Roberts, *Traed Mewn Cyffion* [Feet in Chains], trans. by Katie Gramich (Cardigan: Parthian, 2012 [1936]), p. 25.

¹⁴⁴ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 98.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 158.

to leave her and seek help. He makes a small fire to keep her warm, but as he is halfway down the mountain, he hears a deathly cry. Just then, he meets his brother and a search party coming up the mountain, and they hurry back to Marged, only to find her ‘lying in the fire, and burning, with smoke’.¹⁴⁶ Here, Llewellyn uses the motif of the spoil tip as a narrative device to foreshadow the horrific death of Marged.¹⁴⁷

The serpent in the Book of Genesis is an embodiment of Satan, and undoubtedly viewed as a threatening, devilish figure.¹⁴⁸ As *How Green Was My Valley* progresses, Llewellyn uses demonic, menacing imagery to describe the spoil tip. When Huw sits alone in the family home during his long years of recovery, the young boy senses the serpentine spoil tip ‘moving again’, evoking the words of Idris Davies, who wrote in *Gwalia Deserta* of ‘crawling promontories of slag’ in the upland village of Fochriw, near the poet’s native Rhymney.¹⁴⁹ Then, Huw hears the tip ‘whispering to itself’, before finally denouncing it as the ‘great bully’ – like the serpent of Genesis – ruthlessly preying on innocent victims in times of weakness. Llewellyn’s personification of the mound captures the menace with which the spectre assaults the young boy’s emotions. The satanic tip whispers to itself, silently plotting a deathly attack on the houses of the village. This description is an important reminder of how, as well as the physical presence of the spoil tip in the village, the sound of the wind whistling in its mounds of displaced dirt was a defining characteristic of many mining communities. In Caradog Prichard’s later masterpiece, *Un Nos Ola Leuad* (1961) [One Moonlit Night], the Bethesda-born writer expresses a similar sentiment:

A’r ochor arall i Lôn Bost, ar y dde draw’n fan acw, oedd y llechi’n symud yn hen doman Chwaral, a gneud twrw run fath â ma nhw’n neud rwan.

¹⁴⁶ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 161.

¹⁴⁷ This is a technique later used by Menna Gallie in the aforementioned, *The Small Mine*. As Link – the novel’s outsider – tries to approach Cynthia – the former girlfriend of Joe, a young collier whom he surreptitiously killed in a mining accident – Gallie includes the image of spoil tips, amongst other illustrations of industrial decline, to influence the mood of the ensuing tense interaction.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Serpent, n.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, available online: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176538>> [Accessed 11th April 2018].

¹⁴⁹ Davies, 1994, p. 14, l. 5.

[And on the other side of Post Lane, on the right over there, the slates were shifting on the old Quarry Tip, and making a noise like they are now.]¹⁵⁰

In both *Un Nos Ola Leuad* and *How Green Was My Valley*, the narrators are preoccupied by the physical appearance of spoil tips, but at certain moments, their sound is perceivable. In Llewellyn's text, Huw cannot escape the presence of the spoil tip, even in his confinement.

Huw anticipates that the 'great black bully' will collapse and engulf his home, an image with which Llewellyn plays throughout the novel.¹⁵¹ Like the serpent instigating the fall of humanity, the spoil tip foreshadows its own literal fall, by first destroying the innocence of the village below. Personifying the house and then addressing the structure personally, Huw carefully enacts his own death: 'your windows will break, and your doors, and slag will fill your rooms. Your roof may fall, and this room and the others may become filled with slag'.¹⁵² Here, Scott argues that Huw is:

[H]aunted by destiny, clearly perceiving that his fate is to be crushed by coal or slag – he seems to acquiesce. His brothers (other than Ivor) fled from the valley to seek other lives, ones that consumed coal rather than produced it. But Huw, his brother Ivor, and his father Gwilym [sic] stay at the pick. As their picks do violence to the coal seam, the face in the coal bears witness to their debt. The glittering black face mimes: death is near.¹⁵³

Throughout the novel, the spoil tip is constantly on the cusp of burying the village below, and as the preceding passage demonstrates, this entombment fantasy – or nightmare – is occasionally explored in morbid detail.

This threat of the spoil tip to the village below – hinted at in previous passages but made clear in the above – is also found in other examples of Welsh writing. In Jack Jones's *Black Parade* (1935), a large spoil tip rises menacingly over the less-affluent residents of the town.

¹⁵⁰ Caradog Prichard, *Un Nos Ola Leuad* [One Moonlit Light], trans. by Philip Mitchell (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 228 and p. 229.

¹⁵¹ Llewellyn, 2001, p. 146.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Scott, 2018, p. 50.

When Glyn – husband of the novel’s protagonist, Saran – visits his sister on the other side of town, the spoil tip is used to delineate the disparity of wealth:

He went on his way, and soon he was looking down on the row of cottages threatened by an oncoming slag-tip which towered above them. His sister lived in the second of the six cottages, in front of which he could see his good-for-nothing brother-in-law sitting with a baby in his arms. He was singing joyfully.¹⁵⁴

Likewise, in *Chwalfa* by T. Rowland Hughes, slate tips function in the same way, threatening the village below. When Llew and Glyn arrive back at their village, Llechfaen, after having been lost in the mountains, the peril of the quarry’s spoil tips is made abundantly clear:

Daeth Llechfaen a’i chwarel fawr i’r golwg o’r diwedd. Ymguddiai’r rhan fwyaf o’r chwarel tu ôl i fryncyn coediog ar y chwith, ond gwelid rhai o’i chreigiau llwydilas bob ochr iddo ac un domen hir yn ymgreinio tua’r pentref.¹⁵⁵

[Llechfaen and its great quarry came in sight at last. The greater bulk of the latter was hidden behind a wooded hill to the left, but some of its bluish-grey crags were visible on either side of it, and one long rubbish-tip nosed its sprawling way towards the village.]¹⁵⁶

There is definite serpentine quality to Rowland Hughes’s description, as the tip noses its way downwards towards the village. This image is continued later in the novel, when another character, Dan, returns by train from his job in town, and notices how the colossal spoil tips impose themselves on the vulnerable village below:

Ac fel y nesai’r trê at Llechfaen, gwgai ar y niwl tragwyddol hyd y mynyddoedd uwchben ac ar dawelwch llwm, sarrug, creigiau a thomenni’r chwarel ar fin y pentref llwyd.¹⁵⁷

[And as the train approached Llechfaen he would scowl at the mist that perpetually shrouded the mountains above, and the stark, lowering stillness of crag and quarry-tip abutting on the drab village.]¹⁵⁸

As is evident from the frequency of the motif in *How Green Was My Valley*, and other works of Welsh writing, representing the spoil tip in terms of its demonic threat to the village below,

¹⁵⁴ Jones, 2005, p. 62.

¹⁵⁵ T. Rowland Hughes, 2016, p. 34.

¹⁵⁶ T. Rowland Hughes, 1954, p. 25.

¹⁵⁷ T. Rowland Hughes, 2016, p. 237.

¹⁵⁸ T. Rowland Hughes, 1954, p. 191.

through its size and proximity, is a powerful means of depicting the reality of environmental degradation. Furthermore, these passages are particularly haunting, given the fact that they all appear many years before the Aberfan disaster of 1966, in which 116 children and 28 adults were killed following the collapse of a spoil tip. These works of literary fiction uncannily pre-empt some of the haunting images of the south Wales village in the aftermath of the tragedy.¹⁵⁹



Figure 25. Aberfan Cemetery.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Llewellyn could have been drawing on historical events in his allusion to a spoil tip collapse in Gilfach Goch. In *Where the Stream Ran Red*, Sam Adams hints at a real event in Gilfach Goch's history 'where a farm, a school and a row of houses were buried under pit waste' (Adams, 2016, pp. 24–5). This is a startling revelation, and if only Adams could provide more information on the incident, then it would go some way to connect Llewellyn's narrative to historical events. There is no evidence of this event in newspaper articles, but it would seem that the author intended to base the narrative on what he considered as historical fact.

¹⁶⁰ My own photograph.

CONCLUSION

Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* is a popular but deeply problematic text. Throughout the novel the impact of industry on the environment is represented by the spoil tip, and I have traced the development of the image from a textual perspective, whilst also placing the novel's depiction of environmental degradation in its historical context. As Price argues, the spoil tip is 'the central signifier of the corruption of an old, organic way of life',¹⁶¹ and within the text, this corruption of pastoral ideology can be viewed in both literal and metaphorical terms. In the first part of this chapter, I briefly considered how Llewellyn modelled his construction of the Welsh landscape on earlier romantic narratives – by the likes of Allen Raine – who entrenched distinct divisions between the imagery of pastoral west Wales and the industrial south. Llewellyn's subsequent commentary on the impact of industrialisation on this bucolic Eden establishes a rigid dichotomy between the industrial, urban settlement and the pastoral, rural idyll. This contrast is then illustrated by the tension between the mountain and the spoil tip. In the second part of this chapter, I shifted the focus from the literal to the metaphorical, and began by establishing how Llewellyn, in addition to responding to romantic narratives in his construction of Welsh landscape, also continues an established cultural notion that sought to render pastoral Wales as a sacred land. For Llewellyn, the defilement of sacrosanct space – exemplified by the spoil tip – is a clear act of sacrilege and throughout the novel, described in terms of cardinal sins and moral deterioration. This is developed through the use of serpentine imagery to represent the corrupting spread of the spoil tip, which by connotation, assumes a more demonic threat. Read as a proto-environmental narrative that rallies against the industry that transformed Wales, Llewellyn's novel is a reflection of other works of Welsh industrial writing. However, given the text's depiction of nationalism and its

¹⁶¹ Price, 1986, p. 86.

casual treatment of anti-Semitism and others forms of racism, this proto-environmentalism becomes eco-fascism, in a reflection of the political context of the late 1930s.

CONCLUSION

I. TOWARDS A REASSESSMENT OF WELSH INDUSTRIAL WRITING

This thesis was constructed on an elemental foundation. At its beginning, I focused on the image of fire as a symbol for the beginnings of industrialisation in south Wales. The first chapter then concentrated on the pollution of local water sources, and the second examined the destruction of trees. The third chapter assessed the depiction of industrial air pollution – both above and below the surface – and the final chapter focused on the coal industry’s mismanagement of land. It was crucial to highlight how these key elements – fire, water, wood, air and earth – had each been compromised by the expansion of industry. In addition to this approach providing a structure to the project, the elemental framework defined the analysis in environmental terms, ensuring that an earth-centred approach remained consistent throughout.

The principal focus of this thesis has been the reassessment of literary texts from an environmental perspective. Prior to my research, Welsh industrial writing had largely been read from a socio-political viewpoint and given the historical importance of these concerns, this way of reading is both understandable and valuable. However, as a result of earlier research assuming a particular emphasis, much ground has been left unexplored. This thesis, therefore, reflects the ways in which the contemporary perception of culture has been altered by the environmental crisis.

For the twenty-first-century reader, it is difficult to ignore the consistent depictions of environmental degradation in Welsh industrial writing from the 1930s. In any examination of an historical period using terms created subsequently, accusations of presentism are inevitable and reasonable. However, this thesis does not argue that Welsh industrial writers were conscious environmentalists, but simply that they were aware of their surroundings, in which pollution, waste and deforestation were an everyday occurrence. The aim of this thesis is to

foreground information that has always existed but has previously been overlooked. Thus, over the course of the preceding four chapters, I have proposed a new way of reading industrial writing from Wales, whilst advocating further ecocritical revisions of Welsh writing, both in English and Cymraeg.

Although my approach is initiated by the contemporary moment, my research also responds to a tradition in literary criticism. From a cultural perspective, the latter part of the twentieth century can be defined by an increase in revisionism. Critics adopting a wide range of perspectives – from feminism to post-colonialism to ecocriticism – have questioned established viewpoints of canonical works of literature by highlighting and exploring previously overlooked elements. This thesis – through shifting the focus from the socio-political to the environmental – can be viewed in the same revisionist tradition. Building on work published by feminist, post-colonial and environmental critics of Welsh writing – such as Katie Gramich’s *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (2008), Kirsti Bohata’s *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (2004), and Matthew Jarvis’s *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* (2008), this thesis establishes the environmental impact of industrialisation as a noteworthy concern for contemporary and future critics of the literatures of Wales.

Although the texts examined in the previous four chapters were published in the 1930s – generally viewed as the heyday of Welsh industrial writing – it made chronological sense to return to the beginning of industrialisation in the nineteenth century, in order to outline an introductory context for the main body of the thesis. In this period described in the prologue, the ecological disaster of Merthyr’s iron industry prompted a dramatic shift in many aspects of artistic production, from fine art to literature. Travel accounts of Wales depicted a nation in flux, with writers expressing a sense of shock at the rapidity with which the previously rural economy was being transformed by the extraction of raw materials. Within these non-fiction,

tourist narratives – largely written from the perspective of writers from England – the environmental impact of industrialisation is a prevalent theme. Despite the many disparities between nineteenth-century visitor travel accounts and twentieth-century industrial writing from Wales, this one similarity is critical.

The shift in artistic production evident in the accounts discussed in the prologue can be characterised in three ways. Firstly, there is a change in the way natural landscape is viewed, as a result of industrialisation. In a potent example of recurring imagery, previously untouched, green space becomes mounds of fire that continue to glow once the sun has set. This writing sets a new precedent for Wales, as never before has there been evidence of such a destructive transformation of land, as a result of human intervention. Following this alteration of the natural, there is a shift in the emotional tone of the narrative, as writers express a consistent sense of disorientation at the flaming chaos of the iron industry. From the perspective of cultural history, this results in a forced modification of the literary language used to describe this new reality, as writers turn to Classical and religious imagery in order to render the unreal spectacle in recognisable, literary terms. However, this new mode of description arguably distances the writer from reality, and the true destructive impact of industrialisation becomes diluted.

By the 1930s, when writers found an audience for fictional accounts of industrial south Wales, new modes of description were being established. In the first chapter, I argued that Jack Jones's *Black Parade* – with its return to Victorian Merthyr Tydfil – provides a unique vantage point from which the problems of the 1930s can be subtly confronted. I found that Lawrence Buell's notion of 'Toxic Discourse' – although typically a modern literary feature – was a useful theoretical tool with which to analyse the text's preoccupation with waterborne contamination, as a result of human intervention. Furthermore, Jones's emphasis on the sanitary inequalities experienced by Merthyr's populace places the text as an unintentional

precursor to environmental protest literature. Read alongside writers from North America working within the social realist form, Jones deftly communicates a sense of fury at the negative correlation between class and quality of life.¹ In both parts of this first chapter, my critical approaches demonstrate that ecocritical concepts developed in response to contemporary phenomena can be usefully marshalled to analyse literature of an earlier period, by writers who would not have consciously considered themselves environmentalists.

In the second chapter, I examined an established literary convention that connected the loss of trees to the suffering of Welsh people, continued and reimagined by Idris Davies in his 1938 poem, *Gwalia Deserta*. Judging the poetic sequence as a whole, I considered that anthropomorphism – as a theoretical approach – was a useful means of analysing the relationship between people and place. Subtly, Davies mirrors the sorrow of the local people in the desolation of the nearby trees, creating a space in which human and non-human suffer on equal terms. As a result, the deforestation of the rural, local landscape is paralleled with the dehumanisation of the jobless, local people during the Depression. In the second part of the chapter, I assessed the post-industrial ecology of south Wales, and posed the question: what does a place become when it loses its trees? This prompted a deeper reflection on language for, as the poem's title suggests, loss of woodland renders land *deserted* – or, derelict – which can be understood from an exterior, literal perspective and an interior, figurative viewpoint. Davies's identification of humans as trees suggests that with their loss comes a dispossession of Welsh identity.² Devoid of its identity, the resultant nation resembles a derelict and depraved wasteland, both literally and figuratively, a *Gwalia Deserta*.

¹ In this regard, Jones can be read as a companion to North American writers that viewed writing as a form of social protest. Authors such as John Steinbeck spearheaded this movement. Vic Golightly's essay, 'Gwyn Thomas's American "Oscar"' (*New Welsh Review*, 22 [Autumn 1993], pp. 26–31) is an important analysis of one instance of this American influence on Welsh writing.

² The Welsh philosopher, J. R. Jones, and his concept of 'cydymdreiddiad' – which emphasises the deep connection in Wales between people and land and language – would be useful in further understanding this sense of dispossession. Although Idris Davies is not writing in Welsh, he did speak the language, and *Gwalia Deserta* provides a strong case for the ability of the English language to successfully capture the complex relationship between people and place in Wales.

After considering the ways in which rivers and trees were affected during industrialisation, the third chapter examined the impact of airborne pollution on mining communities. B. L. Coombes's *These Poor Hands* was an obvious choice, due to its innovative depiction of the extent to which contaminated air is engrained within the process of coal extraction. Through reading the text closely, it became clear that this depiction of air pollution could be understood from two perspectives: the mine and the community. With regards to the former, my intention was to explore theoretical approaches that drew attention to the bodily nature of labour and disease. I chose Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality, as it highlighted how the process of extracting coal from the earth reveals a mutual damage, where the miner removes fuel, but gives his body in return; a process that is painfully realised in Coombes's description of lung disease. Yet, this exchange can also be viewed in terms of an assimilation as, through the process of mining, the two previously separate entities begin to merge, with the miner carrying coal dust in his lungs, and the mine bearing the mark of humanity at every turn. In addition to this, *These Poor Hands* places equal emphasis on the impact of dust pollution on the local community. Thus, for the second part of the chapter, I adapted John Parham's notion of 'human ecocriticism' as a means of exploring the societal impact of widespread air pollution, which – in Parham's own words – 'might in itself engender consideration of humanity's own environmental impact'.³ Parham's work builds on a firm foundation of Victorian literary ecocriticism, which examines the prevalence of airborne pollution in nineteenth-century society, often with particular reference to London's smog. It was important to position this chapter as a response to the existing research, and as a reminder that although analyses of literature from the centres of consumption are valuable in

³ John Parham, 'For you, Pollution'. *The Victorian Novel and a Human Ecology: Benjamin Disraeli's *Sibyl* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton**, *Green Letters*, 14:1 (2011), pp. 23-38, (p. 24).

constructing our understanding of industrialisation, it is imperative that literary works from the regions of production are also recognised for their contribution.

In the final chapter, I chose to examine perhaps the most critically maligned – but certainly most widely read – text in the canon of Welsh industrial writing, Richard Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley*. Although I share the misgivings of those who condemn the novel’s social and political commentary, previous scholarship has overlooked the relationship between these issues and the environment. This chapter was an attempt to discover new meaning through the development of existing work. Throughout the text, the impact of industry on the local environment is represented by the spoil tip, and its corruptive power can be viewed in both literal and metaphorical terms. In the first part of the chapter, I argued that Llewellyn establishes a dichotomy between the industrial present and the bucolic past, which is represented by the divergent forces of the mountain and the spoil tip. In the second part, I considered how Llewellyn’s depiction of the spoil tip continues an established cultural trope that sought to render Wales as a sacred land.⁴ For Llewellyn, the defilement of sacrosanct space – exemplified by the spoil tip – is an act of blasphemy and throughout the novel, described in terms of cardinal sins, moral deterioration, and serpentine imagery. However, it is difficult to disentangle this vision from the indubitable right-wing, fascist politics of the text.

The texts discussed in the preceding chapters all share a common concern for the degree of environmental change experienced in Wales during industrialisation. From this perspective, Welsh industrial writing from the 1930s can be understood in terms of a cultural warning against industrial modernity’s abuse of the earth. These texts deserve to be read and remembered because they endure as early articulations of the manmade changes that have contributed to the contemporary climate crisis.⁵

⁴ See Dorian Llewellyn’s *Sacred Place, Chosen People: Land and National Identity in Welsh Spirituality* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

⁵ Given the absence of female voices in prominent positions during industrialisation, I use ‘manmade’ deliberately.

In concluding this thesis, I wish to advocate a new model of reading industrial writing for future studies. Within the preceding chapters, I have identified various tropes in literary texts that could be explored in others, both from within the Welsh canon, and beyond. I consider this model of reading to be most appropriately used in the analysis of literature from minority communities, or smaller nations – like Wales – that have historically occupied a subservient role to larger, neighbouring powers, such as Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Brittany.⁶ Although such models and other structural considerations are essential for the shaping of an extended piece of research, limitations are inevitable. My model of reading is intended to be wide ranging, but a trope-focused mode of analysis means that other aspects of texts may be ignored. However, this is the case for the majority of approaches to literature, and as I am highlighting aspects that have hitherto been overlooked, I am completing the picture, as opposed to wilfully neglecting other facets of the text.

In addition to this, as my model requires the reader to look specifically for environmental elements within a text, I was initially concerned that I might lose sight of the text as literature. Consequently, I modified my approach to one that embraced close reading as its principal starting point, in order to avoid viewing the texts purely as historical documents. The model of close reading helps to identify a range of literary tropes that would not be obvious if one were examining these texts as historical documents. This approach allows for an exploration of the text's subconscious, including the psychological effects of pollution, both on the narrators and other characters. Finally, whilst this thesis presents an extensive consideration of the environment in some canonical works of Welsh writing, there remains a great deal of future scholarship to be done.

⁶ In these types of texts where authors write from nations subservient to larger colonial powers, questions of environmental justice are heightened.

II. FUTURE WORK: WELSH WRITING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

I am excited by the potential for future research on the representation of the environment in the literatures of Wales. The extracts of travel writing examined in the prologue to this thesis were unfortunately restricted due to word limit. Each excerpt was chosen with an archivist from Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives, but even when doing so, it was apparent that much more relevant material could have been included. As a result, a further research project could be undertaken on the wealth of material contained within these archives, with a particular focus on depictions of environmental transformation as a result of industry.

With regards to further ecocritical reassessments of Welsh industrial writing prior to the 1930s, the work of Joseph Keating would provide a particularly firm foundation, from which other earlier works could be examined.⁷ Since the 1930s, there have been many Welsh writers who have produced industrial writing with environmental concerns, some of which I have discussed within this thesis. However, further in-depth scholarship could be undertaken on Ron Berry's writing, as well as more contemporary writers such as Christopher Meredith, Catherine Merriman and Niall Griffiths.⁸

Although I have endeavoured to include a selection of Welsh-language texts within the thesis, I have not been able to include enough material to truly define this project as an examination of Welsh literature. In this regard, a further study focusing on Welsh-language depictions of environmental degradation would be very useful. An analysis of the work of Kate Roberts, who wrote extensively about the slate-mining communities in North Wales, and a deeper exploration of Gwenallt's poetry would be particularly fruitful. Finally, there has been

⁷ Such as those explored in a recent article by Rosalyn Buckland, published in the *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, available online: <<https://ijwwe.uwp.co.uk/article/id/380/>> [Accessed 1st February 2020].

⁸ Research on Ron Berry would build on the valuable scholarship of Dr Sarah Morse, and Catherine Merriman's novel on open cast coal mining, *State of Desire* (1996), would provide a noteworthy starting point.

a great deal of Welsh-language poetry written on the Aberfan disaster, and a careful consideration of the environment in this discussion would be welcome.⁹

Beyond literature, a deeper exploration of the ways in which environmental transformation is understood through film and music is long overdue. From films such as *The Proud Valley* (1940) and indeed, *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), to the Byrds' rendition of Idris Davies's 'The Bells of Rhymney' (1965), the environmental transformation of Wales caused by industry has been represented in many forms, and an extended project exploring these cultural representations would be particularly illuminating.

III. THINKING FORWARD: WALES AND THE ENVIRONMENT, TODAY



Figure 26. Spoil tip landslide near Tylorstown.¹⁰

⁹ See the poetry collection, *Dagrau Tost: Cerddi Aber-fan*, golygwyd gan Christine James ac E. Wyn James (Llandybïe: Barddas, 2016).

¹⁰ Photograph © Matthew Horwood.

In the winter of 2019–20, Wales experienced a succession of storms that affected several parts of the country and left many towns with severe cases of flooding. The increased levels of rainfall also disrupted the former industrial landscape in south Wales, which had been left untouched for many years. As the above image illustrates, the nation’s industrial legacy once again made itself visible, after lying dormant for years. Hillsides were exposed to reveal the waste coal that had been greened over, evoking traumatic memories of Aberfan. The storms reminded Wales of its precarious position with regards to the environment, as the people looked towards figures of authority for guidance in these perilous times.

Like many administrations around the world, the Welsh government and its regional councils are torn between the often-opposing forces of delivering on their promises of growth, infrastructure and prosperity, whilst tackling the worsening environmental crisis. In January 2020, Cardiff City Council launched a white paper entitled ‘Changing How We Move Around a Growing City’, which detailed major infrastructure changes in the ten-year build-up to 2030.¹¹ In the introduction to the paper, the promise to ‘tackle climate change’ was the number-one priority for the city in the future, but a few months after publication, the coronavirus pandemic struck. Although environmentally destructive in a number of ways, the pandemic has forced national governments and local councils to consider an alternative future in which green issues such as active transportation take precedence.¹² It is essential that the coronavirus pandemic is viewed as a turning point, after which the consideration of humanity’s impact on the planet is the sole priority. Studies that assist with this momentum towards environmental recovery are required from all departments within the academy. Literature and the arts have a

¹¹ ‘Changing How We Move Around a Growing City’, Cardiff City Council, available online: <https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/resident/Parking-roads-and-travel/transport-policies-plans/transport-white-paper/Documents/White%20Paper%20for%20Cardiff%20Transport%202019.pdf> [Accessed 1st February 2020].

¹² The global upsurge in the production of single-use personal protective equipment (PPE) and a decrease in public transportation usage in favour of the private car are among some of the environmentally destructive consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. On a positive note, modes of active transportation, such as walking or cycling, have been provided with the requisite infrastructure in some parts of the United Kingdom.

major role to play as they can communicate complex issues in engaging terms. I hope that this thesis and my work in education can contribute to a growing awareness about the way we view and use our planet – the change must come now, not later.

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