

**Review of *Twenty thousand saints*, a novel by Fflur Dafydd Talybont (Ceredigion), Alcemi, 2008, pp 251**

Why should an award-winning young Welsh writer turn to English for her third novel? To reach a wider audience, according to conventional wisdom. But for Fflur Dafydd, who won the prose medal at the 2006 Eisteddfod with her Welsh language novel *Atyniad*, the answer is not that simple. It is about finding her voice:

'Writing in Welsh is completely different to writing in English; because fewer writers are writing in Welsh, there is so much more to be done, and there is real opportunity to be innovative with the way that you use the language. English is different; less vulnerable as a language and therefore more robust and exacting, so that when writing in English I'm less concerned with language innovation and more concerned with finding my own voice and identity within that language.'

The novel, 'Twenty Thousand Saints', (Alcemi, 2008) is set on the tiny island of Bardsey, off the north east coast of Wales. Today Bardsey is known (if at all) as a bird watching paradise, but in the 6th century it was an established centre of pilgrimage on a par with Lindisfarne and Iona; three visits to Bardsey were worth a pilgrimage to Rome. There are Arthurian associations, too, as there are almost everywhere in Wales: Merlin is alleged to be buried here (along with twenty thousand Celtic saints, hence the title of the novel), and one theory at least identifies Bardsey as the Isle of Avalon, the last resting place of Arthur and Guinevere.

Dafydd's novel is set firmly in the present, in an unusually hot August, as islanders and temporary visitors interact, each in their own personal quest for the truth. Vivien, a Welsh nationalist turned hermit nun (deluded by the results of the 1979 referendum on devolution, in which 80% of the population voted against a Welsh assembly) prepares to host a mini conference of fellow hermits; an S4C (Welsh language) documentary film maker has come to look for the truth behind the disappearance ten years before of Vivien's companion and fellow nationalist Delyth - Vivien's son Iestyn (suspected of murdering Delyth) has just been released from jail and she wants to film his return to the island; a writer-in-residence, Mererid can't get the inspiration for the poetry she has come to write, but instead finds Deian, Delyth's son (and erstwhile playmate of Iestyn), now an archeologist, who has come back from his home in England to dig, ostensibly, for the bones of Celtic saints but possibly to unearth the truth about his mother.

There are elements of black comedy and thriller, lots of casual sex fuelled by alcohol and the summer sun, and (not unconnected with the sex) plenty of new beginnings, as if Bardsey were a turnstile to self discovery. Writing in *The Guardian* Catherine Taylor calls it a 'wild' novel, but feels it necessary to add that the novel never 'dips into farce', because farce never seems far away, and disaster always just around the corner.

But the imagery is powerful and holds the novel together well. For a start, there's the island. In the grand tradition of island novels (*Lord of the Flies* comes to mind) there is an intensity to the characters which borders on insanity, adding realism to the relationships. Bardsey is very small - about 2 kilometres long by 1 kilometre wide, half of it taken up by a rugged peak, Mynydd Enlli. At the other end of the island stands the only square lighthouse in Britain, built in 1821. Between the two points there is little room for privacy, especially in the presence of a roving camera and a determined film producer. Fellow islanders glimpsed at a distance, seen and not seeing, unavoidable encounters, boats which get held up for days even though the mainland is tantalizingly near, all add to the hothouse atmosphere.

Then there is the digging. In the dark ages, according to legend, pilgrims came to Bardsey to die, which should have made the whole island a charnel house. Hence the excavations organized by Deian, who keeps his female team of diggers excited, in spite of the lack of

bones, by burying a few fake relics for them to unearth. But Deian is really delving into his own past. He wants a clue to his mother's disappearance.

Twenty thousand saints is a novel about loss. But more than the loss of Deian's mother (whose brooding presence is felt throughout the novel, and who has a plaque erected to her memory by Vivien, to stake a permanent claim to latter day sainthood), the novel is about loss of language - the ancestral language of Bardsey, 'Bard's island' in the Norse name, Ynys Enlli, 'the island of tides' in Welsh. Deian was brought up speaking Welsh, but has lost it. At the age of 18 he had left the island to go to live in Preston with his father. Talking to Greta, the assistant film producer, he reflects:

'I suppose it's no wonder that my Welsh just ... faded.'

'Why do people let that happen?' Greta let out. 'For someone just to lose a language like that... happens all the time with Welsh, it's like they think it isn't really important.'

'It wasn't, after a few years in Preston. I just sort of forgot about it. It's amazing what you can get used to, you know, when you have such little choice.'

'*Ond ma'n rhaid bo chdi'n cofio chydig?*' Greta said, trying to prompt him. He recognized all of these words on their own, but strewn together they seemed a little overwhelming. *Cofio* was to remember. He'd forgotten what to forget was.

When Iestyn turns up he cannot believe that this is true. He has just spent ten years in a Cardiff prison - an environment, presumably, where he would have heard as much, or as little, Welsh as Deian in Preston:

'Are you sure you've got, you know, *dim Cymraeg o gwbl?*' Iestyn stared at him with disbelief.

'*Tipyn bach*'

'You are joking? How the fuck can you manage to lose your Welsh after a few years over the border and mine stays intact after ten years in Her Majesty's Service?'

Ultimately, the theme of language loss, and recovery, is an exploration of the fate of Welsh in the post-assembly Wales of the new millennium, and is central to the whole novel. Indeed, the other threads of plot and subplot can all be seen to sustain this theme through the extended metaphors of the island (linguistic isolation), personal relationships with outsiders (linguistic contamination and language loss) and digging (scratch the surface and the language will return).

After the 1979 referendum, and the resounding 'no' to devolution, Wales went back to the polls in 1997. This time a majority, albeit an extremely slim one (50.3%), voted in favour. The following year the assembly came into being through the Government of Wales Act. One of the more visible consequences of the Act was the rapid development of Cardiff Bay as the administrative capital of Wales, and a noticeable side effect the return of Welsh to the streets of Cardiff as a new breed of civil servant moved in.

Back on Bardsey, Viv has not yet fully realized what is happening in the principality, and how the *hen iaith* - the old language - is experiencing a renaissance. Deian, though, hears the new Cardiff Welsh in the mouths of film producer Leri and her assistant, and isolated bureaucratic words jangle in his mind, clashing with his memory of a simpler tongue:

Leri and Greta used words like *strwythur* and *cyfarwyddo*, *esblygiad* and *goblygiadau*, officious lingo that made his head turn once more towards the simpler vernacular of the soil.

The few explicit references to the language, and the odd Welsh phrase thrown in here and there, beg an interesting question about which language is being spoken on the island, in a

novel which has lengthy chunks of dialogue. There are more Welsh speakers than non Welsh speakers in the book, and although we know, for example, that Deian and Iestyn are speaking in English, we have to infer that Iestryn and his mother use Welsh. This is a dilemma common to writers using English to depict a non-English reality. Dafydd puts it like this: 'Ideally, I would like to be able to recreate the rhythm and feel of the Welsh language in the way I use English, though I'm yet to discover if my readers will recognise that in the writing itself, or whether English is inevitably always just English.'

One wonders what R. S. Thomas would have made of this idea - or what he would have made of the motley and irreligious crew which Dafydd scatters across the island. The reflection is not unwarranted. Thomas was vicar just across the water in Aberdaron, and, a keen bird watcher, the first chairman of the Bardsey Island Trust Council in 1979, which steered the island towards its status (achieved in 1986) as a national nature reserve. He soon resigned, apparently concerned that the island was going to attract English tourists. Dafydd, who lectures in creative writing at Swansea University, wrote her doctoral thesis on Thomas ('The Uncanny and the Unhomely in the poetry of R. S. Thomas') and probably has a lot of sympathy for the morose cleric and birdwatcher who used to stride the island's footpaths, binoculars in hand. His brooding presence, never explicitly acknowledged, hangs over the novel, as Dafydd establishes an ironic link between birds and poetry. In a central event in the story, hundreds of disorientated birds are dashed to death against the lighthouse, in a phenomenon known as an 'attraction'; Mererid, poet in residence, tries to capture this in verse, but three weeks into her stay on the island she has only 'four half poems, stumbling along a white screen'. The irony comes in layers. We sit with Mererid toying with a beginning: *A ring of feathers/like unfinished poems/streak the sky's page*, a faint echo of another greater poem about love, death, and bird feathers, which begins *We met/under a shower of bird-notes...*

Mererid is writing in Welsh, or should be. Thomas repudiated English, and yet was chained to the language for his poetry. Meredith can't find the words in Welsh; Thomas was condemned to find them in English.

But the Wales that R S Thomas knew, of protests organized by the Welsh Language Society and the torching of holiday cottages owned by the English, belongs to the past. Dafydd seems determined to convince us that a renaissance is in the making, or rather, is already there to be seen. At the end of the novel Viv's self-imposed exile comes to an end. She breaks her vows and returns to the mainland, to Cardiff. Sitting in the back of Greta's car as she arrives in the capital, she notices the bilingual road signs, with the Welsh above the English - 'a small yet colossal feat'. The street scenes of a lively city in the orange glow of dusk unfold all around her, causing wonder at every turn, until the final destination, the place she had known as Tiger Bay, the Bronx of Wales, now developed as the hub of Welsh cultural and political life. First she catches sight of the Millenium Centre, focal point of a musical nation: 'a slumped golden creature on its haunches, with light bursting forth from its body. *In these stones horizons sing*, it said, *gwir fel gwydr o ffwrnais awen.*' Then they round a corner and Viv has to catch her breath before the Welsh Assembly:

There it was, right in front of her. Above the water, its glass panels gleamed at her. It was as wholly transparent as they had all said, the light inside inviting and warm. Here was the building that she never thought would be possible, the building that had only ever existed in her mind.

Viv has come home to a brave new Wales. In the next and final chapter Deian makes a parallel journey, back to Preston in Lancashire, the English town where he grew into adulthood and lost his mother tongue. On the way, along the north Wales coast, he savours the place names, Pen y Clip, Pemnaenmawr, Abergele, Rhuddlan, experimenting with the language, saying them out loud, listening to the DJ on Radio Cymru, thinking about Mererid. When he arrives in Preston, and finds his (English) partner and fellow archeologist Fran has moved into his house and changed the furniture,

strewing the place with scatter cushions and installing a dimmer switch 'to bring things into gradual, artificial focus', he makes his decision.

He couldn't stay here. Not in this cul-de-sac so far from the sea, this red-bricked house without a garden; with this woman and her dimmer switch.

Deian isn't quite sure where home is, but it isn't England, and it isn't English. Overtaken by a sense of urgency, he gets back into the car, with Fran following him out into the road, confused and alarmed. For Deian, just as it is for Viv, the future is a revelation in glass. Fran, outside, breathes frantically on the car window and the condensation leaves a parody of a map of Wales. Deian makes out the Welsh coastline greeting him like welcoming arms; 'And all around it was a new, clean, sea of glass, which reflected only himself.'

David Newbold, Venice, January 2009