Review of *Uncharted* by Jon Gower

[Gomer, Llandysul (Ceredigion) 2010, pp 235]

Uncharted began life as a response to a call for prose writing with an urban theme for the Welsh National Eisteddfod. The urban theme is there, in its portrayal of low life in Buenos Aires, Oakland California, and especially Cardiff, where it concludes. But this is anything but an exercise in cross-cultural comparison or a statement about globalization. It is the story of a woman put to rest in a boat made of paper and pushed out into the South Atlantic along the estuary of the River Plate. Escorted by unknown sea creatures, including a Pleistocene leviathan half a mile long, which surfaces for the first time in twenty years, and beneath the eye of a friendly but long-suffering albatross, immune to raging tempests and marauding whaling vessels, the boat carrying Flavia, lovingly constructed by Horacio, her partner in life and tango, wafts gently across the oceans of the world before drifting into port on the Western seaboard of the US some 19 months later. But the body in the boat shows no sign of death; rather, the woman-who-sleeps (as she is called) seems to be breathing at the rate of one breath per day. She is between states. Science has no explanation. Religion steps in; Marina (as she is now known) is claimed across the world as a goddess, and a new religion is born.

So *Uncharted* owes a lot to magic realism (appropriately, since the boat which carries the narrative originates from Buenos Aires), and not a little to science fiction in its discussion of the woman who is the first observable specimen of life-in-death. But it is much more than a mish-mash of genres. It offers insights into the workings of the global media (Jon Gower is a former arts and media correspondent for BBC Wales) and reflections on the printed text, starting with the boat itself, made from crisscrossing pages of the *La Nacion, La Prensa,* and *Buenos Aires Herald* ('like the higgledy-piggledy story of the city itself'). It offers the vision of a Canadian philanthrope whose idea is to provide the street urchins of Argentina with the world's great literature printed on recycled paper and bound in recycled cardboard. It takes us into the *Room of Ashes*, a museum of the world's books burned 'out of rage or outrage' which has become an ante-chamber for viewers queuing up to see the goddess, now housed on board the decommissioned ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth 2* (the former British Royal Family having grudgingly agreed to the deal).

As a result, *Uncharted* seems at times like a novel turned in upon itself, an apologia for Gower's own version of the canon (favourite burnt book: the *Buru Quartet*; candidates for the Great Library of Argentina: Shakespeare, Calvino, Brodsky, Muldoon, Ted Hughes, Elias Canetti; Caradog Pritchard and Patrick White). Allusions, acknowledged or not, are everywhere: the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, The Master and Margherita, The New York Trilogy, and The Life of Pi are some of the most obvious, to this reviewer at least. But it also needs to be seen from a more local perspective – as a novel written in English by a Welshman, in Wales, and about Wales. In other words, as an example of Anglo-Welsh writing. With a difference; Gower (who read English at Cambridge) is mother tongue Welsh speaking, and *Uncharted* is his own rewriting of his novel *Dala'r LLanw* ('Catching the Tide'). This is the version which Gower took to the Eisteddfod in 2008 (and which ended up in second place to Mererid Hopwood's *O Ran* 'The accompanist').

As such it is tempting to see, even in the first lines of the book, a lyricism and a surging forward movement reminiscent of the opening of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood:*

> Listen! Like a million small, slippery wet kisses on muddy shore and hard escarpment, on pebble beach and marshy reaches, the enormous river meets the land and sings to it, a song of life, water to earth. (p 7)
>
> Listen. It is night moving in the streets, the processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation Street and Cockle Row, it is the grass growing on Llareggub Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds in Milk Wood. (*Under Milk Wood*)

Thomas's famous description of the small town of Llareggub ('starless and bible-black') is echoed again in the 'Bible-black' water of the ocean into which the sea monster disappears

unseen as Flavia drifts past. The only Welsh writer in Gower's world canon mentioned above, Caradog Prichard,– like Gower, a Welsh speaking journalist - has also been compared to Thomas in his 1961 masterpiece, *Un Nos Ola Leuad* translated only in 1995 as *One Moonlit Night*.

But the Wales we reach at the end of the book, with Marina lying in state and feted 'in a touching ceremony involving a massed choir with children from every school in the land', does not have much in common with the rural backwaters depicted in these works. It is Cardiff; not the showcase capital of post devolution Wales, but the seedy takeaways in Caroline Street, the hard-drinking pubs where the furniture is bolted to the floor to stop it from being used in brawls, and the sewers beneath the shopping area of Queen Street and St. Mary's Street where an unlikely entrepreneur by the name of Strimmer searches for rats to put into kebabs. It is also the scene of the first martyrdom in the name of Marina, the result of a pavement punch-up. Gower delights in the low-life description, but the narrative seems to lose its thrust in the fragments; until, in a timely rescue operation, the news breaks in the world's media - Marina has a worldly past, she has been identified as Flavia, she will have a proper place to lie, alongside Horacio, and Argentina will have a New Jerusalem on the River; and all this on the day that Wales embraces the new religion. The lyrical mode returns, and we are given a more familiar picture of Wales, a nation of villages, green hills and puffin-haunted coastline, the backdrop to the final inexplicable phenomenon – shrines to Marina which start mysteriously start appearing across the country:

> From Moelfre to Cwmrhydyceirw, from Garnswllt to Penmaenmawr, little shrines, mushrooming, in all their frail and fragile architecture. (p. 235)

The poetry is in the place names, linking languages as well as the four corners of the nation, and Gower does not forget a passing tribute to the great medieval master, Dafydd ap Gwilym, whose grave in central Wales is adorned with a shrine full of snowdrops.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Uncharted* is that Gower felt the need to write it in the first place. After all, he had already written it in Welsh, inspired by a British Council trip to Argentina, and wanting to prove to himself that he knew his mother tongue well enough to take it with him to California (his wife's home town, and Flavia's first port of call, is Oakland). To rewrite in English offered a challenge. Gower addressed some of the criticisms made of *Dala'r Llanw*, which entailed rewriting the ending, but for the casual reader comparing the two books the most obvious difference is in the length; *Uncharted* has sprouted an extra fifty pages. So this is a rewriting, not a translation.

Gower is in good company, part of a growing band of Welsh writers who have chosen to rewrite in English – another recent example is Fflur Dafydd's *Atyniad* (2006), rewritten as *Twenty Thousand Saints* (reviewed in *Il Tolomeo* XII:1). This is a new departure for creative writing in Wales; up until the end of the last century, Welsh language writers, and Welsh authors writing in English, occupied two parallel universes, and, it seemed, never the twain would meet. But, as Gower himself points out, there is a new mood of 'confident bilingualism', which comes perhaps from the relative stability of the Welsh language (a 2004 survey showed a slight increase in the percentage of Welsh speakers over the 2001 census figures), and institutions such as the Welsh language media and Welsh medium education. So English is no longer an immediate threat to the survival of Welsh; rather, it offers writers 'two bites at the cherry', 'a chance to revise, winnow or expand' as Gower puts it. Behind it all, linking the two languages, is a new idea of Welsh nationhood itself.

Uncharted gives us a whimsical glimpse into the future of republican Wales. The first step is to liquidate the British royal family, victims of the Marina cult:

> Now that they were confined to their only palace at Balmoral, and Republican anger at their profligacy and arrogance had resulted in them losing their salaries from the public purse, the changing of the name of the ship was just the latest insult. For as a new religion built up around the woman, taking root in the United Kingdom as in so many countries, the King saw his role as Head of the Church dwindle and diminish, and eventually he had to abdicate his throne. The

> Royal Family could afford to employ only a handful of servants, but as one acerbic commentator suggested in a newspaper column, surely the King could learn to wipe his own arse? (p 145)

The next is to cut free from the Church of England:

> Now that it's had its formal independence there are those seeking to underline the difference between Wales and its imperious neighbor, England. They can keep that tired Anglicanism, and its High Church antics. Here, in a country which went from being one of the most religious on earth to the most secular in three generations, there's a spiritual vacuum to match an imploded dark star. So, Marina has a role to play. (p 166)

It's a fair comment. Gower claims that he made the novel end up in Cardiff to please the judges at the Eisteddfod. Perhaps he also had the judges in mind when he makes up a spurious etymology for Cardiff in the story of one Josiah Cardiff, who begins life an orphan and becomes one of the greatest engineers in the kingdom and the designer of the biggest ever warship, HMS Cardiff. The story is a four page interlude within the greater Marina myth, but it reinforces Gower's idea that stories can 'whisper themselves' into myth.

So a novel which began with an elderly Argentinian couple dancing the tango to the strains of an ancient gramophone in a dust-filled apartment in Buenos Aires has come home to Wales; and even if this means an imagined future republic with a reinvented past for its capital, Gower is taking his place in a long line of 'anglo-Welsh' writers who, in the well-known definition of Glyn Jones, are 'Welsh men and women who write in English about Wales.' And if, as he premises at the start of the book, 'Every story is a love story' – the love of Horacio and Flavia, in the first place - this love extends to the city where he has lived 'more or less happily' for more than twenty years, and to the old country which lies beyond it, to its spiritual heritage, and to its capacity for renewal.

David Newbold, Venezia 23.10.2010