

Chwedl Dŵr / The Fairytale of Water

Peter Stevenson and Jacob Whittaker

Commissioned by WOW, c2021

Beneath the west Welsh waters are stories - flood myths - that tell of a time when you could walk across Cardigan Bay to Ireland. Above the sea are forgotten fairytales that tell of dreamers who built utopian lands, old ladies who made love potions with well water, and rivers who were seen as people. Using old methods of visual storytelling that gave rise to the fledgling film industry, filmmaker and sound artist Jacob Whittaker and storyteller and illustrator Peter Stevenson take a journey through time to hear these lost voices in the water. Specially commissioned for WOW.



Chwedl Dŵr / The Fairytale of Water

Chwedl Dŵr is a set of folk tales about water in west Wales, told through the art of oral storytelling, *chwedleua*, where myth, conversation and gossip ebb and flow like streams of thought. The film also tells these tales with the help of another old art form, visual storytelling, that paints pictures with water as well as light.

Afon, Llyn a Môr / River, Lake and Sea,

Water tells tales of the flood myths in Cardigan Bay, of the many mermaids who become romantically attached to the fishermen of Llanina, of a solitary merman from Milford Haven, a lady who lives beneath Llyn Eiddwen and another in the old millpond at Gilfachreda, the Ceffyl Dŵr or white water horse that haunts the coast of Gower, the swan girls of Pen Llŷn and Barry Island, a girl who turned into a gull in Cei Newydd, Willie John who brewed beer from the intoxicating waters of Llanmadoc, conjurers who made charms from lead-poisoned spring waters in the Ceredigion hills, and a mischievous old lady called Beti Grwca who made love potions with the well water at Pistyll y Rhiw.

Flood myths / Chwedlau llifogydd

Back in 2015, a scientific study revealed that aboriginal stories invoked memories of flood inundations in Australia up to 7000 years ago, remembered in a continuous oral tradition. In Wales, there are 13th and 14th Century manuscripts based on oral storytelling that contain glimpses of past flooding in Cardigan Bay. In the second branch of Y Mabinogi, Bendigeidfran walked his army from Wales, building bridges across two rivers, to rescue his sister Branwen from an arranged marriage with the Irish King. In the Black Book of Carmarthen, a short poem praises Seithenyn, drowned when the land of Cantre'r Gwaelod was flooded, and points the finger of blame at the well maiden Mererid for leaving the sluice gates open, although later versions of the story add that he was trying to seduce her. These are the flood myths of the tribe.

Bragu Blodeuedd / Brewing Bloeuwedd

In the fourth branch of Y Mabinogi is the tale of Blodeuedd, an idealised woman made from the flowers of broom, oak and meadowsweet by the conjurer Gwydion for his son Lleu, unaware that she would develop passions of her own. In 2017, we made a short film for Aberystwyth Storytelling Festival showing how Blodeuedd could be conjured from water and flower petals by brewing three wines in demijohns, and filming the process. The resulting taste was appropriately bittersweet.

Iwtopia / Utopia

In 2015, the Cymerau project engaged communities in the Dyfi Biosphere in conversations about water. We were commissioned to make a film about Plant Rhys Ddwfn, the Children of Rhys the Deep, a story from Y Brython in 1906, which suggests there was a memory of a radical agrarian culture just off the west coast, hidden by the mist and rain, and unseen by the mainlanders who couldn't see beyond the ends of their noses. This was a Welsh utopia, concealed by water.

Mermaids / Môrforynion

The small village of Llanina in Ceredigion seems to contain more mermaid stories per square litre of water than anywhere else in Wales. Several of these were gathered by the writer and illustrator Myra Evans from family and fishermen around Cei Newydd in the late 1800s, one of which is the story of Rhysyn a'r Forforwyn, or the Llanina mermaid. In this story, the smallholding of Tangeulan is flooded by a storm caused by the rejection of a mermaid's love for a fisherman, yet it is marked on maps in the mid 1800s suggesting it may have disappeared in the Royal Charter storms of 1859. Stories like this perhaps underline the idea that mermaids may have been metaphors of floods, as well as romanticised saviours of fishermen in distress.

Myra's family were neighbours of the young Dylan Thomas in Sketty in the early 1900s, and by one of those fairytale coincidences, she was living in Gilfachreda in 1944, only a mile from the poet's ramshackle bungalow on the clifftop at Llanina. Our storytelling show *The Crow and the Canary*, explores the relationship between Myra and Dylan, and how her fairytales of submerged land influenced and inspired his poem, *The Ballad of the Long-legged Bait*, and his descriptions of the graveyards beneath the sea.

Potions / Meddygaeth

Myra Evans also told the story of a mischievous old lady named Beti Grwca who lived at Banc Penrhiw, and whose tale is told in the film with a crankie, a moving scroll in a wooden box turned by a handle, which is an ancestor of animation. In the late 1700s they were used to show painted newsreels, depicting 'exotic' scenes from countries few people would ever visit. In the 1850s, Henry 'Box' Brown escaped enslavement in Virginia and fled across the Atlantic where he toured his moving panorama 'Mirror of Slavery' which drew huge crowds to music halls and theatres across Wales and England. These panoramas are now referred to as crankies, and are used across the States to accompany songs and stories. The tradition returned to Wales in 2019 in the exhibition 'Chwedlau, Cwiltiau a Chrancï' at Ceredigion Museum.

Borders / Ffiniau

The ebb and flow of the tide creates ever-changing borders in a world that likes to build

concrete and metal walls between people and countries. Siani Pob Man was a legendary character in Cei Bach, where almost everyone remembers her even though she died in 1917, such is the strength of folk memory. The illustrations in the film were painted by Welsh Quebecois children's book illustrator and writer Valériane Leblond, and the crankie scroll and animated film were inspired by her work. The story is a mirror into the development of visual storytelling.

Paentio / Painting

In Japan, kamishibai is the art of showing illustrations while telling a story. It became popular in Tokyo and Osaka in the 1930s, although the idea is as old as cave paintings or drawing in the sand with a finger. Kamishibaiya rode round on bicycles with a toy theatre attached behind the saddle, packed with watercolour paintings and drawings to entertain neighbourhood children. Kamishibai illustrators like Shigeru Mizuki, developed the tradition into manga comics and anime, and influenced graphic novels and animation worldwide.

A few years ago at Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival, I met Pyonky Nishiziri, kamishibai illustrator and master of the art of Japanese visual storytelling. We had no shared languages so communicated by showing drawings to each other. Pyonky pointed to a coffee-cup ring on one of my sketches and laughed as he pulled out one of his kamishibai drawings, also stained with a coffee ring. Our artwork was not precious, it could be thrown around, used as place mats or for emergency shopping lists, and we understood that Japanese and Welsh visual storytelling were universal languages.

Cân / Song

The Talking Tree was made following a commission by Aberystwyth University and the environmental group DURESS to explore ideas on how to manage the Welsh uplands. We decided to focus on Hafod, the cultivated landscape created by Thomas Johnes in the late 1700s at the heart of the romantic back-to-nature movement. However, little thought or help were offered to the people who clung to the barren landscape outside the Hafod walls and depended on the lead-polluted stream waters.

We filmed around Llynoedd Teifi and the Elan Valley, and spent two freezing January days in a bothy that was once a farm that bred sheepdogs. We were joined by Elsa Davies and Ceri Owen-Jones who have imagined the music for most of our films. Watch the cold breath when Elsa sings, and listen to the music in the cynghanedd that Ceri wrote while walking the moor and listening to the sounds of the landscape around him. Ceri and Elsa's music is that of flowing streams and birdsong that inspired generations of harpers and fiddlers before them. This sense of tradition, y gwerin, is the root of our work, and it has a perfection very different to those of mainstream media.

Reservoirs / Cronfeydd

Dŵr, water, contains an archive of social history. The roads were so bad in west Wales that people travelled along the coast by ship, while fishing communities earned a living through lobsterpots, seine nets, and water mills. Their villages were evacuated and demolished when valleys were flooded to create reservoirs to store drinking water for cities over the border, an issue which came to a head in 1965 with Cofiwch Tryweryn, although there had been similar issues in the Elan Valley and Vyrnwy in the late 1800s. These stories are now the creation myths of post industrial 21st Century Wales, a new Mabinogi, told by witnesses of the floodwaters.

Afon, Llyn a Môr / River, Lake and Sea

I was in Aotearoa in 2017 shortly after it was revealed that the Whanganui river had been poisoned with farm detritus killing many fish. The local Māori iwi persuaded the conservative New Zealand government to grant the river the same legal rights as a human, and so Whanganui was recognised as a living entity from source to sea. Other rivers around the world have been granted legal personhood and a right to flow, but how these rights are enforced is another issue. These ideas are western constructs which require us to see ourselves as part of Rivers and Sea, rather than as commodities for us to exploit. This would require substantial change to our institutional and financial thinking.

I remember an old lady who referred to all rivers in Wales as Afon, lakes as Llyn, sea as Môr. She never called them by their names. It was as if they were her sisters. The solo traveller Catherine Hutton wrote in her diary in 1796: 'Rivers are so numerous in this country that it is not easy to find out their names, or even to be certain whether the bridge one is now passing be over the same stream one crossed ten minutes ago... Even at Barmouth they are ignorant of the name of their river. Ask a sailor, and he will tell you it is the Dolgelleu river, because it comes to him from Dolgelleu. Ask a man more enlightened, and he will say it is the Avon, because it is the general Welsh name for all rivers. You are very fortunate if you find a person who can tell you it is the Maw.'

Reflections / Myfyrdodau

Water is a culture all of its own, not only a place of leisure, a habitat for the creatures who depend on it for life, or a resource to mine and extract on an industrial scale. When Michael Faraday visited the Welsh uplands in the 1830s, he revealed the extent of lead in the rivers and warned that it was poisoning people, creatures, and the water itself. These issues are not new, but the industrial scale and pace of damage is. Our future depends on understanding our relationship with Sea and River, stories that are there in our traditions if only we remember them. For what is a nation that has forgotten her myths?