

Nature in Welsh Poetry

(A Race with Occasional Stops)

The earliest Welsh poetry is what is called 'heroic' poetry, that is, poetry that recounts the actions of heroes, and praises them. In what is termed 'heroic' in comparative literature, the hero is always a warrior. Our earliest poetry is war poetry. When we hear the word 'Welsh', we think of things in a geographical region that has evolved through centuries into a country in the west of Britain. We shall refer to the poetry of a man called Aneirin. His poems are located in what used to be called 'The Old North', that is, southern Scotland and the north of England; and Edinburgh, or Caer Eiddyn, was an important location in them. That and a battlefield at Catterick, or Catraeth. These early poems were first written down in medieval manuscripts, hundreds of years after their historical period, which is the late sixth century AD. The poems became part of the repertoire of the court poets and were preserved in an oral tradition for centuries. We may assume that any material preserved in this way would be corrupted in the course of centuries – and, indeed, it is clear that the original text may have been corrupted to some degree, but not to the extent that we might think. The reason for this preservation of poems is that they were kept alive by poets whose duty it was to memorize literature, and to memorize it with an exactness that it is hard for us to imagine. Perhaps we may have some idea of the exactness of this memorizing if we learn that an Irish folklorist called J. H. Delargy, in the first half of the twentieth century, met traditional oral storytellers in Ireland and Scotland – men who could not, for the most part, read or write – who could memorize a story that lasted one hour (and, in some cases, six hours) after hearing it recited once. And by 'memorize' I mean a word-for-word recounting.

Thus much of an introduction to this earliest poetry. The poems attributed to Aneirin celebrate the deeds of the warriors of the Gododdin (or Votadini) tribe, whose main court was situated on the hill that looks down on Queen Street in Edinburgh, Din Eiddyn. He praises the unsuccessful and what seems, to us, the kamikaze valour of three hundred warriors gathered by the lord of Gododdin to attack the Anglian forces in Catraeth (Catterick). They came up against more than fifty thousand Anglian warriors – so it can be said that the odds were slightly in the latter's favour. The magnificent valour of the Welsh or British warriors is splendidly recounted in about a hundred short odes. Not to be victorious is entirely acceptable in heroic literature, because the hero need not always win: what is required of him is that he gives his all, including his life, in battle.

How does nature fit into this poetry? It is not an important feature of it, but it is used as a means of magnifying the power and prowess of the heroes, or to convey a sense of

battlefields, and to refer to horses. Because the warriors were horsemen, there are several references to horses in this poetry. Here are some examples:

*Purposeful in battle, Eidef was dazzling;
He went in front of the swift front horses.*

*And in the day of contention he'd perform feats
From the back of a white steed.*

The young hero may be compared to a colt:

*Hero with protective shield, beneath his speckled boss,
And like a young colt trotting;*

The heroes are sometimes called by the names of savage animals – *Bleiddgi* (Wolfhound), *Cadlew* (Battle-lion), for example. And it is a convention in the poetry that the warrior-hero is portrayed through images of ferocious beasts, some of them native, like the wolf and the boar, and some foreign and known by hearsay, or from stories:

*He attacked in battle for the herds of the east
Like a wild beast: I admire him.*

*In wolf-warrior's station, wolf of the host,
The war-band's herb garden,
A killing champion:*

Or a hero may be able to tackle a wolf with his bare hands, or to feed wolves:

*He who would hold a wolf's mane without a stick in his hand -
He'd feed the [wild] wolves with his hand.*

Here are some descriptions of the heroes:

*It was usual to have in his court
Swift horses, dark armour and blood,
Before the bull of battle.*

A bear, terrifying,

*Savage gate-keeper
You'd stamp upon spears
On the day of the fighting
In the alder-grown ditch.*

The death-hounds went forth.

*A serpent with a fearsome sting
In the front of an army.*

*A lord over bloodshed making haste to the border
[Was] the grey-haired who sustained us in the front line –
A lively horse, rugged of shape, an ox, gold-torqued.
The boar pledged himself before the treacherous border,
Worthy of rights, confronter in battle.*

The battlefield is evoked by referring to carrion and animals or birds that fed on carrion:

*A dear friend to me, Ywain,
It is a great shame that he
Is now under crows.*

*Sooner he to be flesh for a wolf than a wedding,
Sooner gain for a crow than to any altar;
 In the onslaught of warriors
 He put down food for eagles!*

*In front of an enclosure,
Before a victorious hill
He admired ravens soaring,
To clouds sky-ascending.*

*And before the barrier of Aeron was lost
Beaks of grey eagles glorified his hand;
In fury he made food for carrion birds
For the good of Mynyddawg, horseman of hosts*

*He fed black crows on the rampart of a fort –
Although [his name] was not Arthur*

[this is probably the first extant reference to King Arthur].

But in the midst of the usual savagery, we find occasional lines of longing and tenderness – that is why this poetry is touchingly elegiac as well as savagely heroic. The following lines evoke the sad death of a young friend:

*But before he was left at the fords
With the fall of the dew, and beside the wave's spray
On his breast, he was an eagle, graceful of flight:
World's bards assess great-hearted men.*

By pure chance a song that is entirely out of place in this vigorous war poetry was included in the manuscript. It seems to give us a glimpse of the more human side of the world of heroes, and it may – as I think – have been composed probably in the seventh century, by a court-poet for the lady of the court, and sung to her in her chamber, so as not to disturb the men dealing with their important and bloody business! It seems to be a hunting poem or, maybe, a lullaby, as sung by a mother to her young child, who seems to be upon her lap. The mother describes to the child, called Dinogad, what it was like when his father went hunting:

*Dinogad's smock is dappled, dappled –
Of skins of martens have I made it.
Wheesht! Wheesht! Whistling!
I used to sing, the seven slaves sang
When your dad went [out] a-hunting,
A spear on his shoulder, a club in his hand.
He'd call the dogs, as swift as each other,
"Giff, Gaff, catch, catch, fetch, fetch!"
In a coracle he'd kill fish
As when a lion kills a creature.
When your dad went to the mountain
He'd bring back roebuck, wildboar, stag,
Speckled grouse from the mountain,
Fish from the Falls of Derwennydd. [Derwent]
Of all that your dad could reach with his flesh-hook
Of wildboar and foxes and things in the bushes
Not one would escape unless very well-winged.*

We'll proceed with our whistle-stop tour by referring to what is, probably, the poetry that was once a part of a tale or, more accurately, tales that were prose narratives with sections of poetry. The prose has been lost, but the poetry remains. One main story is that of an old man called Llywarch Hen, and the other main story of a princess called Heledd. Both stories or cycles of tales belong to the border country that was called Powys – with its main court at Pengwern, or modern Shrewsbury. A fair portion of the stories is set in territory that has been stolen – by conquest – from the Welsh, a long time ago by the army of Mercia. The ninth century would be an appropriate background for the action in these tales, but some of the characters are historical figures of the sixth century who had, evidently, become dramatic or fabular figures. Our concern, of course, is with the role of the natural world in these fragments of tales.

But before we discuss that topic, we ought to know that there is a body of Welsh poetry from the Middle Ages whose main topic is nature. In this poetry we have lively evocations of the seasons and particular occasions. You could say that some of this poetry is descriptive and some of it is what has been termed 'gnomic'. (A gnome, as we were told a long time ago by Kenneth Jackson is a "sententious statement about universals".)

An example of a nature-gnome would be: 'The vegetable garden is green' because a vegetable garden is always green. As an example of nature description we can quote: 'Mountain snow, the roofs of the houses are white'. Mountains and rooftops are not always like this, so this is description. Let's look at a few examples of this kind of poetry:

*Sharp the wind, and bare the hill, it's difficult/ hard/ to be cosy;
The ford is fouled up, the lake freezes:
A man can stand on a single stalk.*

*Cold the fish-bed in its shadow of ice;
The stag is spare /thin, and stalks are bearded; [heavy with ice]
Day's end is short, the trees are bent.*

*Snow falls, its skin /surface/ is white;
Warriors don't go about their business;
Lakes are cold, their colour has no warmth.*

A cold winter time is presented here by referring to telling and significant details. But in the last stanza or 'englyn' quoted, the second line seems to pick on a topic about men and, in particular, about men who do not go to battle. There are more such lines in this string of verses, so that we may have here the debris of a dialogue, a dialogue that fits into a structure

of nature poetry. There are other lines that proffer advice or comments on the condition of men:

*Snow outside, stag on the shore;
The old ones miss their youth:
Bad eyesight makes a man a slave.
[OR An ugly mug makes a man a slave.]*

*The top of the willow's delightful, fish in a pond are frisky;
The wind whistles over the tops of little boughs /reeds/;
Nature is stronger than instruction.*

We ought to bear this mixture of nature and comment in mind when we now examine the saga poetry. Consider, for example, this conversation between the old Llywarch who, like all old warriors, claims that he was a great hero in his day; he urges his son, Gwên, on to battle. In this dialogue these lines occur:

*A wave runs along the shore [of the sea].
After a while an aspiration is broken.
In the shadow of battle the talkative flee.*

What Llywarch is doing is talking in riddles, nature riddles. The wave does not stand its ground, as it were, and the hint here is that neither will Gwên. Gwên responds by saying that though he does not say he will not flee, there will be shattered spears where he will be. But Llywarch goes on with his goading:

*Marshes are soft; it's a slope that is hard;
Because of the hoof of a white [horse] the edge of a bank will shatter:
A promise not fulfilled is of no use.*

The implied taunt is that his son is soft like a marsh, that he is like the bank that shatters under duress. Then Gwên begins to respond in kind:

*Brooks spread out about the rampart of a fort:
And I intend
To have a stained and shattered shield before I shall retreat.*

He intends to face up to the enemy, like a rampart against which the water splashes, having little effect upon it. Although some have claimed that in a poem such as this, as well as others, there seems to be no relevance between the lines about nature and the dialogue, I hope that I have shown that, in this instance, there is. And I think that, whatever happened later, the original purpose of lines of nature poetry in dialogues was to provide some comment on the topic discussed – the original purpose may have been misunderstood later on, so that the nature lines became meter-fillers.

The classic example of the state of the natural world being used as a parallel to highlight a given situation is the ‘Song of the Old Man’, where Llywarch laments his lost youth and berates his present condition. For example, he talks to his staff or walking stick, and refers to the time of the year:

*Curved staff of wood, it's early summer,
The furrow's red, the young shoots curled:
It is sad for me to look at your beak.*

In the following verse it is another season:

*The wind is boisterous, the colour of the tops
Of trees is white; the hill is without growth:
The old [one] is weak, his movement slow.*

Another season, but Llywarch is still old, still ill at ease. Then we have what is probably the outstanding stanza of this cycle, where the old man sees his own condition reflected in a dying leaf:

*This leaf that the wind shifts here and there,
Woe to it [her] for its [her] fate –
It [She] is old; was born this year.*

The two sections of the saga of Heledd where we have references to the natural world, are probably duplicates. Heledd's home has been destroyed by the enemy, and she has lost her family, and laments, especially, the loss of her brother. In her pain and sorrow she hears the screeching of an eagle in the woods, and this eagle becomes a superb symbol for the savagery of her experience:

*Eagle of Pengwern [Shrewsbury], with grey-ruffled head [tonight],
Very loud its screech:*

A glutton [gluttonous] for flesh that I loved...

Eagle of Pengwern, far it calls tonight;

It feeds on men's flesh.

Tren used to be called a shining town/ homestead.

We move on to the period that is referred to as that of the Poets of the Princes, who composed poetry in a distinctive style, a style that was common between the first half of the twelfth century and the second half of the fourteenth – that is, beyond the death of the Last Prince in 1282. Their poetry is mostly austere and highly stylized praise and lament – with some love poetry and gift-seeking poetry. Their poems are intricate orchestrations on a restricted number of topics. On the whole, nature has a formulaic role, especially in the opening lines of some poems, although it seems to have meant more to some poets than others. Here is such a formulaic and splendid opening of a poem by Llywarch ap Llywelyn to threaten Dafydd the son of Owain Gwynedd:

First of autumn, time of declining day[s],

[Time] of white reeds, [time of] a high moon that shows [all] pathways,

[Time] of turbulence in estuaries, high sea-tides,

Wide-ranging, far, resolved-on-winter sea.

One example of a poet – and a prince at that – who appreciated the joys of nature, and the joys of love was Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd. His two joys come together in the following poem:

In Gyfylchi, I love a fort well-built and splendid,

Where she, of dazzling shape, disturbs my sleep.

One who is bothered, who is famous visits there

Where the loud, wild wave weeps [there] against it,

The chosen place of her, beautiful, [and] bright of nature,

Shining, rising radiant by the sea.

The brightness of the maid and of the fort are interwoven in these lines.

The most well-known poem by the Poets of the Princes is the famous lament for Prince Llywelyn son of Gruffudd, the Last Leader, as he is called, by Gruffudd son of the Red Judge. Llywelyn was killed on 11 December, in 1282. In this majestic, organ-like lament Gruffudd imagines that the order of nature has been disturbed by the death of his prince. This is combined with a medieval preoccupation with the signs of the Last Things that would bring

on the Day of Judgement. This is a quotation from this poem, in a translation by the eminent modern poet Anthony Conran:

*See you not the way of the wind and the rain?
See you not the oak trees buffet together?
See you not the sea stinging the land?
See you not truth in travail?
See you not the sun hurtling through the sky,
And that the stars are fallen?
Do you not believe in God, demented mortals?
Do you not see the whole world's danger?
Why, O my God, does the sea not cover the land?
Why are we left to linger?*

We have no time to linger longer with these majestic song-makers, but shall move on to one who inherited some of their craft, but was – very definitely – his own man, Dafydd ap Gwilym, who can be called one of the earliest of the Poets of the Gentry. He lived in the fourteenth century, and was of a noble family. He travelled extensively, composed poems to several persons, but is famous as a love poet, a nature poet, and a poet who ponders on the wretchedness of old age and death's grim power. Dafydd's favourite month was May, and May was regarded as the beginning of summer. Here is a poem by him to that month:

*God knew it was the right time
For the gentle growth of May.
Fresh, unfailing reeds would grow
On the first day of the gentle month of May.
Unwithered treetops would detain me:
Yesterday, God on High gave us this May.
Poets' jewel which won't cheat me,
Good times came for me with May.*

The poet's world becomes magical in May, and he creates its freshness and greenness on our senses with a childish wonder and tenderness. Here is his impression of summer:

*It is our woe, weak seed of Adam,
(Surge of grace) how summer's short.
Ah God!, truly the worst thing -
Lest it end - is summer's coming
With its mildness, clearest sky,*

*Its joyful sun with summer colour;
Its languid [and] most gentle air:
The world's all delightful in summer.*

*Out of its old, unblemished flesh
The earth bears fruit in summer.
Summer's come to leave the trees,
To grow them of the comeliest green.
It makes me laugh with joy to see
How fair the hair on a bright summer tree.
Paradise! To this I'll sing -
Summer's beauty: who's not laughing!
Ah, summer, I shall praise it
Persistently and pleasantly and - whoopee!*

Here summer's joy becomes a kind of theological Paradise, but, as the poet is so aware, it is a Paradise that will soon be lost, for all men are the weak seed of Adam. Dafydd's awareness of the passing joy of summer sharpens his pleasure and enjoyment.

Although the next poem is, in some ways, a stereotyped conversation between the poet and a garrulous magpie who with its down-to-earth common sense tells the love-struck poet to face facts and behave with a decency that matched his years, nevertheless, it is full of Dafydd's unceasing wonder at the burgeoning world of spring:

*I, ailing for [my] golden girl,
Was in a grove [and] singing of love's sorcery -
A snatch of fervent song - one day*

*When the sky was sweet in early April
And the nightingale on green young branches
And the blackbird beautiful on battlement[s] of leaves
(A woodland poet, in a wood-house will abide),
And the thrush was on a green tree-top,
Before rain, singing fervently
Her golden notes in draperies of green,
And the lark, with [his] still voice
(Grey-hooded bird [and] dear to me) was wisely calling
And taking, in pure rapture,
His song to heaven's heights*

*(From bare fields, this prince of birds, obeisant,
He climbs home, ascending backwards);
And I, poet of a slender maid,
Was full of joy in a green grove
(But broken-hearted and remembering)
And my soul was green within me
So gentle was it to see trees -
A lively joy! - showing off new dresses,
And [to see] new vine shoots and new wheat
After shining rain and dew,
And green leaves on the valley top
And thorn-trees [there] white-nosed [and] fresh.*

(These translations of Dafydd's poetry are taken from: Gwyn Thomas, *Dafydd ap Gwilym, his Poems*, University of Wales Press.)

We won't stay too long with the more regular Poets of the Gentry, although some of them could conjure up various aspects of the natural world, and create extremely effective descriptions of natural objects, especially in poems requesting gifts, where invention and fancy were given a free rein. We'll just look at Tudur Aled's well-known poem petitioning the Abbot of Aberconwy for a stallion, on behalf of Lewis son of Madog. The stallion, which is requested, is conjured up in a series of images:

*Keen eyes has he, that are like pears
Leaping lively in his head;
Two ears slender, twitching,
Sage leaves beside his forehead.
A glazier's polished up his crupper
As if he were shining gems,
His coat is like new-woven silk,
His hair of gossamer colour.*

This is, of course, imaginative pyrotechnics; the more usual images of nature in this professional poetry are images for the lord or his lady. They are compared to natural objects that had a graded valuation in what was called the Great Chain of Being, or a gradation of the value of things in the world: in fact, the exercise is one of picking out, and reiterating, laudatory correspondences. The lord is like a lion, a stag; the lady like a rose or a lily: both are like gold or silver; sun and moon, and so on. The other body of images that appear regularly in this poetry are associated with death, and all these images are negative – for

example, death brings darkness, mists, and flooding in its train. At times the evocation of death's dark and sorrowful power is particularly potent.

Side by side with this official poetry, which was important enough for families to preserve it – partly because it was a kind of warrant for their status – there was unofficial verse (if we may so call it), examples of which come to the surface from time to time. How long some of the verses - that are called *Hen Benillion* (Old Verses) or Harp Verses, or Folk Verses - had been accumulating in the memory of ordinary people we do not know, but some of them belong to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (as well as later periods). Scholars and folklorists have produced collections of such poetry. The most famous collection was made by Sir Thomas Parry-Williams. The folk poet often uses objects in the natural world to evaluate his own experience, or to comment on life in general. (By the way, the lack of the proper rhyming words in English often makes all translation lame, and this is especially true of these verses.)

*The bird is one who has no cares,
He does not sow a single seed;
In his world there are no cares,
He sings all year round;*

*There he sits upon a branch,
And on his wing he's gazing;
With not a penny in his purse
He goes his way, is happy,*

*He eats, tonight, his supper;
He knows not where's his dinner,
And that's the way his life is good,
For he lets God prepare his food.*

The poet obviously thinks that his life, compared with that of a bird, is full of care and bother.

*The little gull can clearly tell
When the weather won't be well,
Prettily she, on her white wing,
Will fly from sea to mountain.*

And every child used to know this verse, which was sung in winter:

*Robin redbreast on the threshold,
His two wings are Oh so cold:
And he says, in his whimsical way,
“It is cold, there’s snow to stay.”*

Most of these verses express, with a fine common sense, the thoughts and emotions of people in a simple way; and what they say is, not infrequently, wise and, occasionally, profound.

And now for something entirely different. The eighteenth century is referred to as the Augustan Age in literature, both in England and Wales. The term is applied to a select group of writers who were learned and well-acquainted with the Classical Literature of Greece and Rome. Instead of the emotional effusions that we associate with the Romantic movement, we have restraint and composure, and well-organized expression of emotion. So when we consider the nature poetry of the most famous Augustan poet in Wales, Goronwy Owen, we shall be looking at something neat and tidy, but powerful. In the section of the poem quoted, nature becomes an incentive to ponder on the life of men. The poem from which the quotation is taken is entitled ‘Invitation’. Goronwy Owen invites his friend, Gwilym Parri, to visit him at Northolt. If he comes, this is what they will do:

*We shall note, from our fair place,
God’s miracle in well-made leaves:
And, there’s no doubt that every flower
Shows a man - as does a finger -
The great and depths of purpose
Of the Almighty Lord – God made it.
Flowers [there are] as hundreds of gold toys,
Some white, all great of glory;
How fair art thou, the pure lily,
Snow-coloured, and better than money:
Recall that you were of more worth
Than Solomon, that wise silk-worm’s riches.
There, my dear friend, you’ll find
A good precept for the civilized observer.
The vain little flowers of the vale
Measure the empty glory of man.
A flower is also like
Our brief joy in a world like this:*

*A flower, today, may be exquisite,
Tomorrow it will be all dead and withered:
Each flower has his ending
And, in like wise, is the end of a man.*

From the eighteenth century on, we shall have to be even more selective than we have been up to now; so we'll choose a few poems that are, if not representative of a period (though some of them are), representative of certain poets' attitudes at certain periods of their lives. One of the most prominent, and one of the most popular poets of nineteenth-century was a man called John Ceiriog Hughes (1832-1887). He spent some time in Manchester and London, before returning to Wales as a stationmaster in Llanidloes; later he was promoted to the position of railway inspector. Some of his poetry hankers after the rural life that he left for the city, and one of the two of his most famous nature poems is also a poem of longing for Wales:

The Mountain Stream

*Mountain stream, so bright and shining
It meanders to the vale,
Amidst the reeds it murmurs, singing:
Oh, that I were like that stream!*

*Mountain heather now in flower,
Looking on it sets me longing
To stay in the hills forever
In the mountain breeze and heather.*

*Little birds, high on the mountain,
They fly high in the fresh air,
From one to crag to another crag flying:
Oh, that I were like a bird!*

*I too am the Mountain's son
Away from home and singing a song,
But my heart is in the high lands
With the heather and the birds.*

This poem is simple and sentimental, but it struck a chord with many others in the same situation as the poet, and with others who could imagine what it was like to be away from home. It is a poem, as I said, that is full of longing, 'hiraeth', an emotion which has always

appealed to the Welsh. Put all this to music, and have it sung by David Lloyd, and you have chart-topping material.

Another very popular poet was Eliseus Williams, more well-known by his bardic name, Eifion Wyn (1867-1926). He was a walker in the countryside around Porthmadog, and a keen fisherman, and he frequently wrote about his environment and its creatures. Like Ceiriog, he composes some poems to an idyllic rural life. Among his best-known poems are his Lyrics on the Months of the Year, and many of the poems in this series are full of Eifion Wyn's genuine fondness for the natural world. Here is his poem on September:

*September, welcome, month I love,
Time of purple on the pastures;
When you sound your honey bells
The bees will gather from the vales.
If the first of summer flowers
Have closed their petals in the fields,
Are there not other flowers
That bloom now on the mountains?*

*September, welcome, month I love,
With black berries on the bushes,
When ripe nuts make hazels yellow,
When the days all long for night-time.
Your moonlight's fair upon the sea
Moving on the moving waves;
Fair is your moonlight on the meadows
In the wedding of the sheaves.*

*September, welcome, month I love,
Clear as crystal are your mornings –
Clear as crystal, though God
On the hills is burning incense.
On the heather there's no cloud,
And no shadow on the fern:
When you sound your honey bells
I'll be seeking out the bees.*

In one of the lyrics on the months, October, he touches on a kind of archetypal ritual on the dying year:

*"I'll keep to my appointed time," life says,
"And I'll call back my green;
I'll gather all my flowers home
From garden and mountain and meadow".*

Many of Eifion Wyn's poems are simple and straightforward stuff, and their appeal is easy and immediate. At times, the poet ladles too much sugar on his porridge. The best example that I know is a poem by him about a little lambkin, 'A Maid and a Lambkin' – this is as near to the natural world as we'll come in this poem. We are told that the hero of this poem observes a maid with her lambkin on a seashore – a curious place to find any lamb.

*And in her train, like a loveable thing,
With a garland of flowers about its neck
Was a little and lame lambkin
Which she called to by its name.*

A little lamb – 'lame' to add to the pathos – garlanded with flowers and called by its name: this is not exactly Porthmadog realism! In the midst of this honeyed joy the lambkin loses its footing and falls into the deep and moving water. The poet dives into the sea and rescues the lambkin. This is how the poem concludes:

I did a daring, foolish thing –
But the maid was Oh so pretty:
And before I left that shore
I got more than the worth of my bother.

The italics are the poet's. After the emotion of wailing violins comes a bit of – unintentional – agricultural realism.

R. Williams Parry (1884-1956) was deeply interested in the natural world, and composed poems to various animals and flowers, but although he catches the essence of an animal, like the fox, say, his poems are, almost invariably, concerned with other matters as well, with the state of man or the state of the world. The following translation of 'The Fox' is the work, once again, of Anthony Conran:

*A furlong from the crest, when the bells' cry
Of hillbreast churches called us villageward,
And the sun, bright and unsetting in July,*

*Invited to the summits – suddenly stood
By step unwitting and delicate mute tread
A rare wonder before us, a red fox.
We did not move, even our breath stopped dead,
Paralyzed utterly. Like three cold rocks
We stood. Then, at a careless crest of his stride,
He too froze dead, stunned for a moment there.
Above his poised foot, two flames, unflickering wide,
Gleamed of his eyes. Then, without haste or fear,
His dry red pelt slipped over the rock scar,
And was; and was not – like some shooting star.*

The poet catches the unique moment of an encounter with a fox, and makes us consider the startling, important, fleeting moments of our own lives.

*Bluebells [literally, ‘Cuckoo Bells’]
They come when the cuckoo comes,
And go when she, too, leaves,
That wild, memorial perfume
That old enchanting paint:
Arriving, and then departing,
Departing – Oh that they would stay!*

*Under the woods on the hills
In the deep recesses of rock,
In meadows, on walls and slopes
Apart from the bare and harrowed land
These blue flowers grow,
That grow to the cuckoo’s song.*

*Sweeter than the evening carol
From the bellfry of Llandygái
Stirring upon the breeze
Are the mute bells of May
That, with their song, pervade the mind:*

Oh, would that it would never ebb!

For when the essence of the honeysuckle comes

*To the night air on its way,
And a host of harebells comes
To the grass as they have done before,
The cuckoo and her bells won't be
[Here] stirring in the wind.*

Interwoven here with the beauty and the appeal of the bluebells is a sense of longing for all things that pass away.

Saunders Lewis (1893-1985) did not write many poems, but among those he did write are a handful of exquisite nature poems. Here is one of them:

*The Dance of the Apple Tree
The apple tree dances under its flowers,
The bride of the perfumes of May;
A lamp singing an enamelled carol
And pink-coloured in a flame of crystal
Like snow; sweet conjurer
That draws the swarms of bees and their golden agitation
To crown her hair with their music
Gushing between the emerald and the cambric white.
The September apple tree's enticing;
I see, under it, the daughters of Atlas
Raising their hands, Erytheis,
Hespera, Aegle, Arethusa,
Towards the green round lanterns
Like moons or the hidden breasts of the shining maids
That shepherd the winterless gardens;
It is the dance of goddesses under apples I see.*

This is a poem that is full of joy and full of beauty, and deliciously sensuous. We'll look at one more of his poems:

*The Pine
The lake of night is still in the valley,
In its windless trough;
Orion and the Dragon sleep on its leaden face,
The moon rises slowly and swims drowsily on her way.*

*Behold now the hour of her ascension.
Immediately you shine before her with the lance of your leap
From root to tip under her journey
Shooting to the heart of darkness like the Easter Candle under its flame:
Hush, the night stands about you in the cool chancel
And the bread of heaven crosses the earth with its blessing.*

The sensuous and lovely presentation of a very special night moves the poet to religious awe.

I shall refer to one poem by Alan Llwyd (born 1948), a man who can present the world of nature with a wonder and awe that is sometimes magical. He has written several poems about snow, and this is one of them:

*There's Snow, There's Snow, Late in the Day
(A meditation through the eyes of a child)
There's snow, there's snow, late in the day,
silken feathers - they're lattices on hills,
are frost-webs between the pathways of trees.*

*The moon, from her lap, at the end of the day
sows abroad new pennies,
there's snow, there's snow late in the day.*

*There's snow, there's snow, late in the day,
like a headful of the pine-trees' scales,
thick as confetti on trees.*

*A white moon like a pillow,
feathers from a bag make pale the trees,
there's snow, there's snow, late in the day.*

*There's snow, there's snow, late in the day,
like the tongs of winter trees,
white sparks at the end of the day.*

*The pine-trees – they're champagne, champagne;
moorland mists are wine distilling,
there's snow, there's snow, late in the day,
there's snow, there's snow, late in the day.*

And so is the magic of childhood and snow created in words.

Now then, to fulfil my requested obligations I have to say something about some of my own nature poems – poor things, but mine own. I'll just quote two poems that are meant to accompany photographs by an eminent Welsh ornithologist, Ted Breeze Jones, one of Bill Condry's many friends:

Heron

*With his feet deep in the waters
Of life he meditates on wonders,
And at times he fishes out deep thoughts
With the sharp thrust of his mind.*

*Perplexed, above life's waters,
He thinks one-legged thoughts,
He is the banks' philosopher,
Dawn's prophet, sunset bard.*

*At even tide, the hour of ending:
In life - have you found in it any meaning?
You do not utter, bird,
Are mute, and have no words.*

Barn Owl

*Ballerina of the dusk,
In the deep dark of night
She's flour-white, a blossom,
A clean splash of light.*

*Port de bras en haut, and
On to an entrechat,
And the trails of her movements
Are white on the night,
Indeed a visible and colourful music
Between heaven and earth.*

She pirouettes, like petals,

*There's a bright moment of a
Dance, unwithering, of flowers, but then
She is not seen again.*

Gwyn Thomas, Hydref 2009