

Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet

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On The Shores Of Light: Waldo Williams (1904 - 1971)

It was only when Ann and I had returned from our holiday in a remote cottage in the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire that I realized that we had been walking in the footsteps of the wonderful Welsh language poet, Waldo Williams. Williams was just seven when his family moved to the Preseli area and he had a lifelong love for this beautiful part of west Wales. He developed a mystical attachment for the landscape with its hills and fields and heather clad moors which slope to the sea. One of his greatest admirers is the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams who stressed the deep unity of Waldo's poetry:

What comes first in the universe is connectedness - recognition. In that sense, the enterprise of poetry is taking us to the level of primordial language, primitive language; ultimately, the Word of God - the speech which underlies our humanity, indeed our very being.

Although Waldo Williams only published one volume of verse, entitled *Dail Pren*, (*Tree Leaves*) his poetry has had a considerable influence on the Welsh language and, through translation, on the wider world.

After he graduated from the University College of Wales, he trained as a teacher. During the Second World War, he was a conscientious objector due to his belief in the brotherhood of all mankind.

For Williams, war was essentially a form of murder and he didn't want to have blood on his hands. He was also appalled to see the British army occupy land in his beloved Pembrokeshire to be used for military training. (A year after the war, the army drew up plans to occupy sixteen thousand acres of the Preseli hills for permanent military training but mercifully, this didn't come about due to

protests from Williams and from many others.) In 1944, Williams moved to England for seven years to teach but, in mind and spirit, he never left the lush hills of Pembrokeshire with their grazing sheep. One of his best loved poems was written while he was living in England and it's simply called *Preseli*.

Wall of my boyhood, Moel Drigarn, Carn Gyfrwy, Tal Mynydd,
In my mind's independence ever at my back;
And my floor, from Witwig to Wern and to the smithy
Where from an essence older than iron, the sparks were struck.

And on the farmyards, on the hearths of my people
Wedded to wind and rain and mist and heathery livrocky land,
They wrestle with the earth and the sky, and they beat them,
And they toss the sun to their children as still they bend.

For me a memory and a symbol - that slope with reaping party
With their neighbours' oats falling four-swathed to their blades.
The act they took for fun at a run, and straightening their
bodies,
Flung one four-voiced giant laugh to the sun.

So my Wales shall be brotherhood's womb, her destiny she will
dare it.

The sick world's balm shall be brotherhood alone.

It is the pearl pledged by time to eternity

To be the pilgrim's hope in this little crooked lane.

And this was my window - these harvestings and sheep
shearings.

In 1950, Waldo returned to Wales and in the same year, he expressed his objections to both conscription and to Britain's involvement in the Korean war - one hundred thousand British soldiers served in Korea. In protest, Williams resigned from his teaching post and he refused to pay his income tax. As a punishment for this action, he was sent to prison for six weeks on two occasions. Not only that but almost all his possessions were removed by bailiffs.



Although his finest poem, *Between Two Fields* was written in 1956, it had been germinating in his mind since he was a teenager. In the following translation by Rowan Williams, we glimpse the poet's powerful vision, *on the shores of light*, even though we cannot hear the soaring music of the language in which it was originally written.

Waldo died in 1971 and, fittingly, a monument in his memory has been erected amid the Preseli hills he loved and did so much to preserve unspoiled to this day.



from **Between Two Fields**

These two fields a green sea-shore, the tide spilling
 radiance across them, and who knows
 where such waters rise? And I'd had years
 in a dark land, looming: where did it, where did he
 come from then? Only he'd been there
 all along. Who though? Who
 was this marksman loosing off bolts
 of sudden light? One and the same the lightning
 hunter across the field, the hand to tilt
 and spill the sea, who from the vaults
 above the bright-voiced whistlers, the keen darting plovers,
 brought down on me such quiet, such

Quiet: enough to rouse me. Up to that day
 nothing had worked but the hot sun to get me going,
 stir up drowsy warm verses: like blossom
 on gorse that crackles in the ditches, or
 like the army of dozy rushes, dreaming
 of clear summer sky. But now: imagination
 shakes off the night. Someone is shouting
 (Who?), Stand up and walk. Dance. Look.
 Here is the world entire. And in the middle
 of all the words, who is hiding? Like this
 is how it was. There on the shores of light
 between these fields, under these clouds.



Island of Jura Writing Retreat

I'm considering leading another writing retreat next year to the beautiful and remote Barnhill on the Hebridean island of Jura where George Orwell



wrote '1984'. The probable date for the week long retreat will be the 11th of June. Anyone interested in coming along should email me at president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk and I'll send an information sheet.