

# HAIKU IN WALES<sup>1</sup>

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Haiku have been composed in western languages for about a century, but relatively few Welsh writers, in either language, endeavoured much in the form and its relations before the 1990s.

While it is true, as Robert Hass suggests, that ‘What is in [haiku] can’t be had elsewhere,’<sup>2</sup> the haiku—and haiku culture—are by no means as foreign to the Welsh as is sometimes assumed. The parallels between aspects of the early Welsh nature gnome and those of both the haiku and the tanka are almost uncanny. Take, for instance, the thirty-six three-line (occasionally four-line) linked verses of *Englynion Eiry Mynydd* (lit. ‘The stanzas of the mountain snow;’ twelfth century, author(s) unknown), a selection of which appears in (unrhymed) translation in Tony Conran’s *Penguin Book of Welsh Verse* (1967)<sup>3</sup> as ‘Gnomic Stanzas,’ and which, as a sequence, is akin to the linked form of Japanese *renga*. Here are two of them:

Mountain snow, stag in the ditch;  
Bees are asleep and snug;  
Thieves and a long night suit each other.

Mountain snow, bare tops of reeds;  
Bent tips of branches, fish in the deep;  
Where there’s no learning, cannot be talent.

There are significant differences, of course, between the Welsh and the Japanese forms—the haiku’s absence of regular rhyme, for instance—but they have much in common. There’s the three-line stanza (although a Japanese haiku traditionally appears as a single vertical line, it is divisible normally into three sections or phrases). There’s the strict syllable count (7-7-7 syllables per line in this particular form of *englyn*, the *milwr*; 5-7-5 in a traditional, strict-form haiku). There’s the clear seasonal reference—the *kigo* that is a significant characteristic of

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1. This essay reprises the author’s Afterword to *Another Country: Haiku Poetry from Wales* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion, Wales, 2011).

2. Robert Hass (ed.), *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, and Issa* (Ecco, New York, 1994).

3. Subsequently reissued by Seren Books, in a new edition, as *Welsh Verse* (1986).

traditional Japanese haiku — and an almost scientific itemisation of natural phenomena. There are the characteristic attributes of brevity, concision, simplicity, presence, sensory directness and present-tense immediacy. There's a quality of profound attention, often to minutiae, and a sharpness of observation mediated by down-to-earth, unembellished language. While the first two lines of the Welsh tercet perform much like a haiku, the folksy sententiousness of the third line would seem to depart fundamentally from the haiku's disinclination to pass comment. But the aphoristic conclusion drawn at the end of a Welsh gnomic stanza — sometimes rather obvious, but sometimes reminiscent of the oblique wisdom of an oriental koan — shares with many a tanka the moralising inclination of its last two lines. Although the haiku, developing away from the tanka and divesting itself of the older form's tendentious final lines, eschews judgemental generalisations, it is nevertheless profoundly interested, as is the Welsh nature gnome, in the conjunction of the human and the non-human, emphasising the single natural reality that underpins all of existence.

Another parallel between the Welsh and the Japanese literary experience, at least in recent centuries, is an understanding of poetry as an egalitarian and communal activity, in which relatively large numbers of people from all sorts of social backgrounds participate, as both writers and informed readers. If the figure of about one million Japanese writing haiku today (out of a population of 128 million) would seem to give the Japanese a numerical edge over the Welsh in terms of popular engagement in poetry, the packed Eisteddfod pavilion on crowning and charring days testifies to a broad-based and knowledgeable interest in poetry which is rare in western countries. The *englyn* writer, like the haiku writer, engages with his or her form through a relationship with its past, the essence of which is transmitted by the teachings of an established practitioner and through face-to-face interaction with fellow poets. The notion of an apprenticeship is important in both cultures. What Mark Morris says about the Japanese creative context, in an essay on Buson (1716–84), strikes a notably Welsh chord: 'Shop owner, priest, samurai, actor, wealthy farmer, or petty bureaucrat, the poet was provided with a vantage point on the old poetry and a style growing from it contingent upon his teacher and his *haikai* ancestry. You belonged to all that and it to you . . .'<sup>4</sup>

English theorists of the haiku such as R. H. Blyth (1898–1964), casting around for intimations of haiku sensibility in their own literary culture, have often lighted on the Romantic poets, Wordsworth above all, for inadvertent haiku moments, particularly in the poets' meditations upon landscape. With landscape looming so large in Welsh literature, it is no doubt possible to mine pre-modern Welsh poetry for accidental haiku snippets. The poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym (fl. 1320–70), a Romantic (of sorts) centuries before 'The Romantics,' might prove fruitful terrain for the haiku prospector. But for conscious and purposeful haiku activity in Wales, we have to look to the second half of the twentieth century — and to endeavours chiefly in the English language. The haiku, so far, has appealed to very few Welsh-language poets, preoccupied as many of them are with the formally more demanding *englyn* and other daunting structures. If all that most 'mainstream' poets 'know' of the haiku is that it calls for a 5-7-5 syllable count, it's small wonder that masters of the intricacies of *cynghanedd*<sup>5</sup> are wont to dismiss the form as being too facile to be worthy of their attention — particularly if even the

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4. Mark Morris, 'Buson and Shiki: Part One', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44, No.1.

5. Literally, 'harmony': an ancient and complex system of sound-chiming within a line of verse, which has been described by the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) as 'the most sophisticated system of poetic sound-patterning practised in any poetry in the world.'

5-7-5 'rule' has been abandoned by most contemporary English-language haikuists: all that's left, it must appear, is a smudge of directionless verbiage. There are other characteristics of the haiku that may not appeal to the exponent of (frequently ostentatious) Welsh word-craft: its innate humility; its plain-speaking lack of literary adornment; the almost complete absence of simile and the apparent paucity of metaphor (there are metaphors in haiku, but they are usually so undemonstrative as to be barely noticeable); the haiku's avoidance of writerly flamboyance, its downplaying of ego, and its foregrounding of the object and moment of its attention. It is perhaps understandable that this seemingly fugitive form of open-ended minimalism – 'the poetry of emptiness,' as it has been described, 'the half-said thing'—should have been slow to make a significant mark in a nation of metaphor junkies, where the exuberant piling on of images, a practice known as *dyfalu*, has been such an admired feature of the *cywyddwr*'s art.<sup>6</sup> But it is disappointing that, to date, relatively few haiku have been written in Welsh, a language whose concrete, grounded character— at the opposite end of the spectrum from a more ratiocinatory language such as French— makes it particularly serviceable.

Wales's first serious haiku poet is Tony Conran (1931), who began writing haiku in about 1966 and whose enthusiasm for the form continues undiminished. In 2003, he published *Skimmings*, a collection of fifty-one haiku, and the haiku, 'as a kind of sketch-pad for ideas,'<sup>7</sup> informs many of his non-haiku poems. At about the time that he was translating the poems that would appear in *The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*—including, of course, those haiku-like gnomic stanzas—he was making his first foray into the realm of haiku by writing what should have been a collaborative *renga* (it appears at the end of the radio ode 'Day Movements' in his *Poems* 1951–67). This, he admits, was not a 'proper' *renga* because, in the absence of informed collaborators, he wrote the whole thing himself. Like any of the few in Britain at that time who were experimenting with haiku, he was working in complete isolation from others with a similar interest. A post-war enthusiasm in the United States for Japanese culture and religion had sparked a serious engagement with Zen aesthetics among the Beats, chief among them Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, the last two of whom were significant pioneers of the English language haiku (although it should not be forgotten that an earlier generation had often fallen productively under the haiku's sway: William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, for instance; and Wallace Stevens's haiku-inflected 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' would in time be echoed by Tony Conran's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Hoover'). Although the haiku news from America was slow to arrive in Britain, there seemed by 1967 to be sufficient interest in the form for the *Guardian* to run a haiku competition: it attracted 3,000 entries, including some, interestingly, in Welsh.

The small-press scene in Britain, with its 'alternative' inclinations and built-in Zen enthusiasms, was considerably more receptive to the haiku (or what purported to be haiku) than most mainstream or 'establishment' outlets. Cardiff's Peter Finch (1947), editor of the eclectic and influential magazine *second aeon* (1966–74), began writing haiku in the late 1960s, in addition to promoting the form in *second aeon* and in the No Walls readings and broadsheets; as a renowned concretist, he would later take the haiku into visual territory.<sup>8</sup> A prominent

6. *Cywyddwr*: the maker of a form of poetry known as the *cywydd* which, composed in *cynghanedd*, has lines of seven syllables, arranged in couplets, the accentuation of whose end-rhymes alternates between the lines' final and penultimate syllables.

7. Quoted from a letter to Nigel Jenkins from Tony Conran (29/9/2003).

8. See his collection *The Welsh Poems* (Shearsman, 2006).

member of the London small-press scene in the 1960s was Edinburgh-born Chris Torrance (1941) who in 1970 settled in Wales. As both haikuist and (crucially) teacher, Chris Torrance has played a vital and underacknowledged role in helping to root the haiku in Welsh soil. If much of what passed for haiku in Britain until about 1990 was somewhat off the mark, Chris Torrance won international recognition as a genuine exponent of the art, publishing 'Seven Winter Haiku' in Mike Horovitz's famous Penguin anthology *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain* (1969) and being hailed in America, in William J Higginson's landmark 'how to' guide, *The Haiku Handbook* (1985), as one of the four most significant haiku poets of Britain. His pioneering extra-mural creative writing classes at the University of Wales, Cardiff (now Cardiff University) introduced scores of venturesome new writers to the haiku and its related forms.

The 1970 to 1990 period in Wales, as in Britain generally, seemed to generate little haiku activity, with mainstream poets tending to dismiss the haiku as some faddy hangover from the 1960s—if, indeed, they paid it any regard at all. But quietly, haphazardly, some sort of foundation was being laid. Tony Conran in the north was persevering with his one-man *renga*-making (see, for example, 'Ten Morning Songs' in *Spirit Level*, Gomer, 1974) and experimenting with tanka ('Six Poems about God,' in the same volume). Peter Finch and Chris Torrance in Cardiff, and Phil Maillard (1948) and Nigel Jenkins (1949) in Swansea were offering the haiku as an essential component of writing courses for organisations such as the Welsh Academy, the WEA and university extra-mural departments, and there was occasional contact with established haikuists from further afield. Bill Wyatt (1942), for instance, another 'Child of Albion' and one of the few English haiku writers at that time to have been noted in America, gave a memorable reading in the early 1980s—of nothing but haiku—to a capacity audience in Swansea's Singleton Hotel.

Since about 1990, the haiku pace has perceptibly quickened. The founding in that year of the British Haiku Society—by the English haikuists David Cobb (1926) and Dee Evetts (1943)—gave haiku enthusiasts their first opportunity to meet each other, and to debate, publish and promote a literary form whose development in the countries of Britain had been impeded by the isolation of its practitioners and by the lack of consensus as to what, in British and European terms (rather than according to the dominant American ethos), might constitute a functioning haiku on this side of the Atlantic. Respecting the integrity of the nations and regions of Britain, the BHS has sought to foster not 'the British haiku' (perish the grotesque thought) but a theory and practice appropriate to the making of haiku wherever in these islands poets find themselves working. Although some sort of definitional consensus—which pays proper regard to Japanese essentials while acknowledging the need to adapt the form to indigenous conditions—seems by now to have been reached, vigorous debate continues on many related issues, with national and regional branches flying the flag for local particularity and diversity. Perhaps only half of Britain's haiku writers belong to the BHS, but all have benefited from its educational and promotional work and from the articulate advocacy of local representatives in Wales who have sought to understand and develop the haiku in Welsh cultural terms.

The first event of national significance in the development of the haiku in Wales was the Welsh Academy's 1991 Japan Festival Haiku Competition, which was the first major international haiku contest to be organised in any of the countries of Britain for twenty-four years. It attracted over a thousand entries in English from all over the world, although only

three of the Welsh entries—one by Marc Evans (1957) of Cardiff, and two by John Rowlands (1947) then of Cardiff—made it through to the ‘highly commended’ category. Part of the prize was publication in the *New Welsh Review*.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of *second aeon*, the *NWR* was therefore probably the first Welsh magazine ever to pay the haiku serious attention.

The winner of that competition was David Cobb who by then was well on his way to becoming one of the most accomplished haikuists in the English-speaking world.<sup>10</sup> He has maintained contact with the developing haiku scene in Wales ever since, visiting Swansea to take part in various haiku events at the Dylan Thomas Centre and Swansea University. On one such occasion, five of Wales’s haiku poets—Ken Jones (1930), Noragh Jones (1936) Peter Finch, Arwyn Evans (1940) and Nigel Jenkins combined with musicians Peter Stacey and Dylan Fowler to present an innovatory programme of haiku backed by minimalist improvisations on flute and guitar.

A more significant innovation in Wales (as in England) since about the late 1990s has been the haibun. While David Cobb, initially, led the way in England, the pioneers in Wales have been Ken Jones, Noragh Jones and Matt Morden (1962). The publication in 2001 by Ken Jones’s Pilgrim Press of a three-man<sup>11</sup> haiku and haibun anthology, *Pilgrim Foxes*, was a milestone.

As well as publishing haiku and haibun, Ken Jones has also been concerned to disseminate his thoughts on the theory of these forms, particularly as there is not yet the consensus about the nature of the haibun as there is about that of the haiku. Another significant Welsh theorist of the haiku is Tony Conran, most of whose invaluable insights on this subject have been confined so far to personal communication in letter form.<sup>12</sup> His elucidation of the three classical attributes of the haiku is worth quoting at length:

The haiku is a sociable but not a social form. It is almost totally unrheterical, having nothing to say to the will. It does not have an agenda of social change, except possibly to persuade other people to write haiku in reply. From all this flow the three classical haiku attributes—loneliness, tenderness and slenderness. A haiku represents a sharing of a moment in a great loneliness; what is shared is centred on the feeling of loneliness itself, however much other feelings are involved with it. Loneliness is the gift the haiku poet prizes above all, because it is the loneliness of detachment, not the bitter isolation of frustrated desire. Within that detachment one’s feelings can grow, not as the ravishers of virtue they normally are, but as Christ says God feels compassion for the fall of a sparrow. Haiku poets like Bashō call it tenderness—fellow-feeling, a gentle acknowledgement that things exist outside yourself, which suffer and have their being in the Tao of enlightenment just as you do. And a haiku must be slender because it makes no claims upon you other than an invitation to share its moment.

Tony Conran acknowledges the importance of a shared understanding of what the haiku is about; he has also stressed awareness of its civilizational implications. Some informal *renga* experiments with friends might have got somewhere had there been poets to call upon who knew what they were doing:

9. *The New Welsh Review* No. 15 (Vol. IV, No. 3; Winter 1991–92).

10. For a profile of David Cobb, see Nigel Jenkins’s essay ‘Batting for Essex, England—and the World’ in *Planet* 173, October/November 2005.

11. The three *Pilgrim Foxes* are Ken Jones and two Irish poets, James Norton and Seán O’Connor.

12. Quoted from Tony Conran’s letter to Nigel Jenkins, 29/9/2003.

If all the poets of Wales could be given prison sentences—say, six months—and told they had to split into groups of five and each group to produce at least 20 haiku a day, gradually increasing to 100, we might find ourselves in a tradition where haiku writing was the norm, and, more important, had standards and a literary aesthetic of its own.

Since the mid 1990s, the universities have played an increasingly significant role in establishing a haiku aesthetic. In 2001, Martin Lucas (1959), studying at Cardiff, completed his groundbreaking PhD thesis, *Haiku in Britain, Theory, Practice, Context*, and the creative writing faculties of most of Wales's higher education establishments have at least one member of staff who is experienced in and enthusiastic about the haiku. (On the other hand, unlike in England, there is no statutory obligation to teach the haiku in Welsh schools; although teachers are free to introduce the form if they wish, one suspects that in most cases consideration of the haiku advances little beyond the counting of syllables.)

The increasing strength of the haiku in Wales was recognised by the Welsh Haiku Millennium Project, initiated by Ken Jones and Arwyn Evans. As a result of invitations being sent to 23 known haiku enthusiasts in Wales, a selection of 14 haiku from Wales formed the Welsh contribution to a celebration of haiku in the four countries of Britain entitled *The Omnibus Anthology of Haiku and Senryū*,<sup>13</sup> edited by Fred Schofield (Hub Editions, 2001). Six years later, in 2007, the editor of *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist* invited Nigel Jenkins, Ken Jones and Lynne Rees (1958) to engage in a discussion about haiku, in the magazine's series of email debates, 'Exchanges.'

As the debate broadens and matures, and as more haiku and haibun are published in Wales, there are encouraging signs that a haiku aesthetic pertinent to Welsh cultural conditions is beginning to be articulated (although it has to be said that by no means all of Wales's haiku writers conceive of themselves as operating in a Welsh literary context). As elsewhere, the haiku has its dedicated specialists who tend to devote most of their energies to that form and its relations, chief among them Ken Jones (whose haiku are informed by, and a function of, his Zen Buddhism), Noragh Jones, Matt Morden, Arwyn Evans, Jane Whittle (1931), Pamela Brown (1946) and Caroline Gourlay (1939). But there are increasing numbers of 'mainstream' poets, in or of Wales, for whom the haiku constitutes an important part of their poetic endeavour, among them Tony Conran, Chris Torrance, Peter Finch, Philip Gross, Lynne Rees and Humberto Gatica (1944). The perceived divide between these two 'communities'—with the specialists sometimes complaining that too many mainstream poets' haiku are distractingly 'literary', if not verging on 'poesy', and the mainstream establishment declining to recognise the specialists as 'serious' (and publishable, therefore, in mainstream outlets)—has tended to retard the haiku's development (on both sides of the Dyke). So too has the fact that until recently few of Wales's serious haiku practitioners have been under fifty years of age. During the early years of the present century, however, several promising young poets with a more occasional but nevertheless knowledgeable commitment to the form have begun to emerge from the growing number of creative writing classes. The haiku in Wales seems at last to be spreading its wings.

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13. *Senryū*: a form of haiku which tends to foreground humour, having a greater interest in human relations and inclined towards the satirical.