

National Eisteddfod of Wales, Carmarthenshire 2014  
The President's Address (9 August 2014)

*Sir John Meurig Thomas*

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an enormous pleasure for me to stand before you today for several reasons. Firstly, I appreciate most deeply the honour which has been bestowed upon me by being selected to be President of the Eisteddfod for this year. I wish therefore in the first place to express my thanks to you, Gethin [Thomas], and your fellow-members on different committees for this honour.

Secondly, because I consider that the National Eisteddfod is an essential part of being Welsh, I am happy, I am proud, indeed I rejoice in the fact of my being a Welshman. The National Eisteddfod emphasizes and gives us an opportunity to celebrate our identity as Welsh.

Thirdly, we know that in 1176 AD – some forty years before the University of Cambridge was established – Lord Rhys held an eisteddfod in Cardigan castle. So the eisteddfod tradition is ancient. But we, the Welsh, are an ancient nation – ‘This is the Gododdin; Aneirin commemorates them’. The poet Aneirin composed his poetry in the sixth century AD. The Gododdin were a tribe living in the north of England and the south of Scotland. So, Aneirin and his contemporary Taliesin were composing poetry eight hundred years before Geoffrey Chaucer, the most famous English poet of the Middle Ages. In his authoritative volume, *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse* (1962), Sir Thomas Parry states, ‘... a sixth-century Welsh poem can, with a little annotation, be made intelligible to an educated speaker of the language’. This is a miraculous fact and gives us the right to rejoice in, to be glad of, and indeed to wallow in our Welshness. In addition, the fact of the very existence of the Black Book of Carmarthen, which was compiled no later than 1250 AD, reminds us of our inheritance as a nation.

Fourthly, I am a man of this area. Llanelli and its environs are my patch. I was born only about seven miles away and here, too, I was raised. To me, as a boy, Llanelli was the centre of the whole world. It is a matter of pride that its residents are so deserving of praise in promoting Welsh culture through their diligence, in their spirit of adventure, and in their kindness. Throughout this week, we have all felt the kindness of the people of Llanelli and the surrounding region. My wife, Jehane, who is from Egypt (Cairo), has mentioned to me on several occasions how much she has appreciated the welcome she has received from everyone on the *Maes* (the eisteddfod field), the welcome of the people of Llanelli and district and indeed all people of Wales.

For over a century this district was the centre of the world with respect to the production of tin (*alcam*). Between Cydweli and Hendy – only about 25 miles apart – there were 18 tin works; six were in Llanelli and two in the small village of Llangennech. Much more can be learned about the industry and its relationship with the local residents in an interesting book, *Tinopolis*, edited by John Edwards, a local historian, who also made contributions to its contents.

Let me now expand upon Llanelli and some of its people. Llanelli was the first

Local Authority in Wales to establish a Welsh-medium school for children. It is a happy thought that it is Gethin Thomas, today's chairman, who is the headteacher of Ysgol Dewi Sant, Llanelli. It is also good to note that the local Welsh-medium comprehensive school – Ysgol Y Strade – has more than 1000 pupils and with plans for further expansion.

About 100 years ago, here in Llanelli, a branch of the Workers Education Authority (WEA) was established; it continues to flourish. I take pride in the fact that I have been its President for almost twenty years. It was in one of the WEA lectures that I first heard of popularizing science. On that occasion my teacher of English at Gwendraeth Grammar School, Mr Ralph Davies of Felinfoel, brought me to listen to a pharmacist from Swansea speaking about space travel. This was in 1949, some 65 years ago.

We ought also to rejoice in, and show our appreciation of the work of the chapels of Llanelli and their contributions to the nation. There is a list of superb, notable ministers in this town, among them significant men of literature, commanding poets and some Archdruids (a ceremonial title among distinguished poets). Think of Gwyndaf, Jubilee Young, I. D. E. Thomas, Maurice Loader, and many others. This aspect has been thoroughly discussed by Huw Edwards in his most interesting book, *Capeli Llanelli*, which was published in 2009 by Carmarthenshire County Council.

Think also of the contribution of (the late) Right Honourable James Griffiths, who was the Member of Parliament for Llanelli for a long period. Not only was he the first Secretary of State for Wales – as Emyr Price and D. Ben Rees have reminded us – but he was also one of the architects of the Welfare State. Is it not a delight to ponder on the fact that Welshmen such as David Lloyd George, Aneurin Bevan, and Jim Griffiths were so prominent in establishing the Welfare State? Contemplate this in the light of the fact that the United States is today – 100 years after Britain – still debating whether it is a good thing to offer a pension to old people, to help the sick, the infirm, the disadvantaged, the needy, the unemployed. President Obama is trying to emulate the work that was done by these three pioneers – two of them Welsh speakers.

With reference to politicians, let us remember (the late) Lord Elwyn Jones, one of the most talented sons of this town. He was a distinguished lawyer, becoming the Lord Chancellor of Great Britain. His brother, Walter Idris Jones, was a famous scientist; he became Head of the Research Centre of the Coal Board in Cheltenham (where Jacob Bronowski was answerable to him as a member of staff). Like his brother Elwyn, Idris won a scholarship to Cambridge University, and each had earlier been a student at Aberystwyth. Idris was a rugby player of distinction, being captain of Llanelli, of Cambridge University, and of Wales. Any reference in this context to rugby has to include several players of the local team of Llanelli – the Scarlets – and of Wales. In this gallery of excellence are Carwyn James, Barry John, Phil Bennett, Clive Rowlands, Jonathan Davies, Delme Thomas, Ray Gravell, the Quinnell family, Ieuan Evans, Stephen Jones, and Dwayne Peel – all boys of this district. They are famous throughout the world. Indeed, they conquered the world.

I would like to share a story about Ray Gravell and Bert Peel, Dwayne's grandfather. Bert and I opened the batting for the Upper Tumble cricket team more

than sixty years ago – he was thirty years older, I hasten to add. After he had served as physiotherapist to the Tumble rugby team he came to hold the same post for Llanelli. In the 70s, a team from Cambridge University came to play a game against the Scarlets at Stradey Park. At one point in this encounter, a speedy winger of Cambridge, with the ball under his arm, was in full flight towards the Llanelli line. He was floored by Ray Gravell in an awesomely effective tackle. The young winger, apparently a medical student, in considerable pain shouted to Ray and to Bert Peel, who had come on to the field to offer help, 'It's my patella and my tibia and my fibula. I think I've broken them all.' 'Good grief,' said Ray to Bert, 'we'd better get a doctor.' Bert replied, 'We don't need a doctor; we need a dictionary.'

There is much more that I could relate about the residents of Llanelli and district; some became famous in different spheres. We can delight in their successes, many of them former pupils of Llanelli Boys' Grammar School, such as these three, all members of the House of Lords: the Reverend Leslie Griffiths of Burry Port, who was a minister in Wesley House London and accomplished much in social work on the island of Haiti; Michael Howard, former leader of the Conservative Party; and Ivor Richards, formerly Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, who came from Ammanford.

Mention must be made of another former British ambassador to the United Nations in New York, namely Sir Emyr Jones Parry. He, like Gethin and myself, is a former pupil of Gwendraeth Grammar School. Sir Emyr has recently been selected to be President of the Learned Society of Wales, succeeding Sir John Cadogan, who, by the way, was born in Carmarthenshire.

I should like to draw your attention to the fact that a Welsh-speaking Welshman from Bynea, namely Professor Roger Owens, also a former pupil of Llanelli Boys' Grammar School, is one of the foremost experts in Europe in the field of computational engineering. Three of his contemporaries, like himself, are Fellows of the Royal Society of Engineering; they are Ken Morgan, Ken Board and Vernon Morgan.

Lastly, with reference to former pupils of Llanelli Boys' Grammar school, I wonder if you know that one of the leading authorities on Egyptology is Vivian Davies from the village next to this Eisteddfod Field, namely Pwll. At one time he was Head of the Department of Egyptology and Archaeology of the Sudan in the British Museum in London.

But we must not forget former pupils and teachers of Llanelli Girls' Grammar School. I will refer to just two of them. Miss Irene James (of Llangennech) was my physics teacher at Gwendraeth Grammar School, and it was she who referred me to Michael Faraday. She was present in the Royal Institution in London in 1986 when I delivered my first lecture there as a successor to Michael Faraday. Miss Margaret Edwards (also of Llangennech) graduated in Semitic Studies at University College Cardiff and later gained her M.A. for a thesis on Hindu Philosophy. In due time she became my wife and mother of our two daughters.

In closing my address I would like to refer briefly to four different subjects. Firstly, my career as a pupil at Llechyfedach Primary School in Tumble and also as a member of the Sunday School and Band of Hope in Bethania Chapel, Upper Tumble. I am truly thankful that I had the privilege of being born and raised as

a Welsh boy in the Gwendraeth Valley. In Llechyfedach, Welsh was the main language of instruction. It was here that I learned several beautiful sayings of our language, including these:

Trwy ofer esgeulustod y gwyliwr ar y tŵr  
Aeth clychau Cantre'r Gwaelod o'r golwg dan y dŵr. (J.J.Williams)

Because of lack of vigilance of the watcher at the tower,  
the bells of Cantre'r Gwaelod disappeared under the water.

Os hoffech wybod sut mae dyn fel fi yn byw  
Mi ddysgais gan fy nhad grefft gyntaf dynol-ryw. (Ceiriog)

If you wish to know how a man like me lives,  
I learned from my father the first craft of mankind.

It was in Llechyfedach that I first learned about St David, King Arthur, Caradog, Queen Buddug (Boadicea), Hywel Dda, Owain Glyndŵr, Griffith Jones of Llanddowror, Vicar Pritchard, Thomas Charles of Bala. In the Sunday School I heard wonderful stories from the Old Testament, for instance about Mordecai, Naomi and Ruth, and the hymns of the immortal William Williams of Pantycelyn, another giant of Carmarthen.

My second point is the general importance of religious culture. I am deeply indebted to the religious culture of the Gwendraeth Valley about which I wrote some ten years ago in *Y Faner*. It was in the chapel that I learned to be an academic by listening to and analysing very many powerful sermons. Also in the chapel I first realized the importance of music in our daily lives. Music is the language of the spirit, the heart and the soul.

Just think of 'Finlandia' by Sibelius to which was sung a hymn with the opening line, 'Hedd, perffaith hedd...' ('Peace, perfect peace...'). The Welsh words by Dyfed (Evan Rees) are a version of the original by E. H. Bickersteth. Think also of Schubert's 'Impromptu', for which we have the words of Watcyn Wyn, 'Daeth Iesu o'i gariad i'r ddaear o'r nef...' ('From his love Jesus came to earth from heaven...').

I well remember being inspired by some remarkable biblical stories. I recall, for example, the Reverend Ieuan Davies, later to be one of our powerful preachers, but at the time a student for the ministry, taking as his text verses from Acts Chapter 5, 'Yr oedd rhyw ŵr o'r enw Ananias, gyda'i wraig Sapphira, wedi gwerthu tir...' ('There was a man called Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, who sold a property...'). On this was crafted a stunning sermon. The contributions of the chapels and churches of Wales have been hugely important in forming our morality and giving structure to our communities.

Thirdly, the excellence of our National Eisteddfod. I have been present at the Eisteddfod about twenty times altogether, the first in Ystradgynlais sixty years ago. I have listened to superb lectures, mostly in Y Babel Lân (the Literary Tent), as well as admiring the insight, wit, humour, and quick thinking of the poets. I recall Griffith John Williams, on fire, giving a speech at Ebbw Vale; Meredydd Evans

(Merêd) relating the history of our native folk songs; Gwyn Thomas expounding the features of magic and fantasy in poetry; T. Llew Jones reflecting on his fascinating life; Hywel Teifi Edwards in the Eisteddfod in Meirion in 2009 developing the topic 'Darwin in the Eisteddfod' and revealing many truths. I still recall one of his pearls, 'Let us not forget that a nation needs the literature of science for inspiration; in our Eisteddfod this ought not to be confined to the Science and Technology Pavilion.'

There was a period, lasting about sixty years from 1861 in the Victorian age, when Presidents of the Eisteddfod addressed their audiences in English. In the National Eisteddfod of 1909, held in the Albert Hall in London – when there was a President for each day, not one for the week – addresses were given by H. H. Asquith (Prime Minister), A. J. Balfour (a former Prime Minister), and David Lloyd George. Since the 1930s, as I learned from my friend and former Archdruid, the Reverend John Gwilym Jones, all Presidential Addresses have been delivered in Welsh, as it should be in our National Eisteddfod.

I have also admired the efforts of Cynan, in his time as Archdruid, through imaginative choreography bringing appropriate dignity to the Crowning and Churning Ceremonies and to other events, such as pageants, on the main platform. As an academic, I have greatly admired the ability of some adjudicators to deliver their adjudications in the Pavilion without notes, including recalling from memory dozens of lines of poetry (usually ones of *cynghanedd*, or traditional strict poetic metre) from several competitors. In this context I recall the feats of two former Archdruids, namely Gwyndaf Evans and Dic Jones; I understand from my friend Gwyn Thomas that Sir T. H. Parry-Williams was the first to do this.

Fourthly and finally, I referred a few minutes ago to Cynan, a former Archdruid, poet, and dramatist. In 1960, when Cynan was twenty years younger than I am now, he composed what is, to my mind, one of the most elegant poems in our language. The title of the poem is 'Aberdaron', and I will quote here the opening words in Welsh, with a translation into English:

Pan fwyf yn hen a pharchus ag arian yn fy nghod  
 a phob beirniadaeth drosodd  
 a phawb yn canu 'nghlod...

When I am old and respectable with money in my bag  
 and all adjudication done with  
 and everyone singing my praises...

We need to remember that the meaning of 'old' has changed since Cynan was sixty years of age, as a result of advances in our knowledge of medicine, chemical medicine, and biochemistry. In his poem Cynan is referring to the rebellion in his spirit, soul, and brain as he composed his literary work.

Well, friends, more than fifty-five years have passed since I started my career as an academic scientist, as a researcher, as an author of articles and books, which describe, often with equations, my subject, as a teacher of others, hoping to inspire them. Consequently I feel a close affinity with the ideas that Cynan discusses

in ‘Aberdaron’. I acknowledge that I am ‘old’ but I’m not sure whether I am ‘respectable’. And it is not entirely true that every adjudication is ‘done with’ with respect to my work. In addition, I doubt whether ‘everyone [is] singing my praises’.

Despite this, I feel contentment and excitement, during strolls along the paths of Cambridge and East Anglia, when I recall the wonderful words of Cynan from ‘Aberdaron’, especially the last two verses, given here in Cynan’s own English version of the poem:

When I am old and famous,  
With money in my purse,  
And all my critics silenced,  
For better or for worse,  
I’ll buy me a lonely cottage,  
And at its door shall be  
The rocks of Aberdaron  
And the wild waves of the sea.

For there I’ll stand and listen  
To the stormwind at my door,  
Until my heart recaptures  
Its rebel song of yore.  
And I’ll sing again with passion,  
And all my songs shall be  
Of the rocks of Aberdaron  
And the wild waves of the sea.