

—Essay

Growing up in Ardudwy

Philip Pullman looks back with nostalgia on one corner of Wales in the 1950s and 1960s

My family moved to north Wales when I was ten or eleven in the mid 1950s. My stepfather was a pilot in the RAF, and he was posted to a little airfield in Llanbedr, near Harlech. He'd been trained in Woomera, the RAF establishment in Australia, to fly pilotless drones called Jindiviks. What they did with the Jindivik at Llanbedr was to pull a target for the fighters from Valley, in Anglesey, to shoot at. As a Jindivik expert, he came to Llanbedr and the family naturally followed.

When we first moved there my parents hadn't found a house to live in, so we camped in a couple of caravans on parts of the RAF establishment that weren't within the main airfield but scattered around the village. I think the place had been quite busy during the war, because there were a lot of decaying buildings lying empty. The hit song at the time was a skiffle tune by Johnny Duncan and the Bluegrass Boys, called 'Last Train to San Fernando':

*Last traaaiiin to San Fernando
Last traaaiiin to San Fernando-o-o
And if you miss
This one
You'll never get another one
Beedy beedy bum bum
To San Fernando.*

That is a chorus of genius. Once heard, never forgotten. So my first genuine 24-carat memory of being in Wales is singing that song at the top of my voice in one of the old empty RAF buildings, beside the road from Barmouth into Llanbedr, because the echo was perfect.

Pretty soon my parents found a house for us to rent about a mile above Llanbedr, right where the two rivers, the Artro and the Nantcol, joined together.

What I remember best was the road up from the village, which led through woods and along the river and through a little hamlet called Gwynfryn, where there was a tiny shop that sold those Curiously Strong Peppermints among many other things such as leather bootlaces to string your conkers on. There was also a chapel in Gwynfryn. I can't remember the denomination, but it had a handsomely varnished door that used to shine exactly like toffee in the evening sunlight.

Going home on winter nights, on that road under the trees towards Gwynfryn, I used to gaze across the river at the light on a farmyard wall down below and across the river. For some reason I thought it was intensely romantic. It was on that road, one winter afternoon coming back from school, that I saw a dead body. I was about eleven or twelve. I was walking home on my own, looking forward to the farmyard light so I could pretend again that there was a beautiful girl there who'd been kidnapped and was waiting for me to rescue her, and I was about to go into gathering darkness under the trees where the road sloped up a bit. A man on a motorbike went past me, and a couple of minutes later he came back down again and stopped.

"Listen," he said, "I don't want you to be scared, but there's a dead man on the road up there. I'm going down to call the police. But if you don't want to see him, right, you better wait or find another way."

It was good of him to stop and tell me. And as it happened there was another way I could have taken, because a path led away from the road and up through

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Philip Pullman in February 2011 in Cardiff at the 50th anniversary dinner of Yr Academi Gymreig/The Welsh Academy - now Llenyddiaeth Cymru/Literature Wales –at which an Honorary Fellowship was bestowed on him. This article is based on what he had to say on that occasion.

the trees and behind the grand house called Plas Gwynfryn, where lived a rich man with a Sir in front of his name.

So I could have taken that way and avoided the dead man. But I thought, well, the light's going, it's getting darker, and I've never seen a dead body, and it would be a pity to miss it; so I went up the road and walked past. The poor chap had just been walking along and had a heart attack and died on the spot. When I got home and told my mother she was so shocked she had to have a glass of brandy, and she thought I was cold-blooded for not being in a state of shock as well.

That road up from Llanbedr saw a lot of mischief. You might remember those little fireworks called bangers you could buy for a penny. All they did was go bang. Well, one year, Derek Dobney and I bought a dozen bangers and hid in the trees beside the pub car park, where there was a public lavatory. We waited till we saw someone go in, and then we'd light a banger and chuck it on the

roof and watch them come running out. That was immensely enjoyable.

Derek was an enterprising boy. Before his family moved to Llanbedr they lived in Barmouth, and one winter evening he and I and a couple of others went down to the shelters along the sea front, where the loving couples went to snog privately. We crept along till we found a couple at it, and then we'd just go and stand in front and watch them till they chased us away.

When I was about fifteen, I started learning to draw. I didn't do art at school because it was timetabled against Latin, and I had to do Latin because ... well, the clever kids got directed towards Latin and art was left to the others, which was a bad thing in very many ways.

So I did Latin, which was taught by Miss Lewis. She was very small, very small indeed. She was known as Ma Lew, though never to her face. She was intensely fierce and highly dangerous. There was a story, in which

I fully believe, about a bad boy in one of her classes who was being cheeky or fooling about or something. She told him to come out to the front and bring his chair. He thought he was going to be made to sit on it, and came out with a swagger and put his chair down. "Now help me up," she said, and he helped her up to stand on the chair. Then she hit him.

I liked Latin, but I do regret not doing art. With the aid of a book about the history of painting that I bought with a book token I got for my fifteenth birthday, I was falling in love with the visual arts, and becoming obsessed with the difficulty and the delight of making marks on paper with pencil or charcoal that sort of corresponded with what you could see out there. There was a field opposite our house with a ragged and untended fence going up the hill. I tried that field over and over with pencil and with charcoal, and still I couldn't get it right. A little later, when we moved to Llandanwg, where we could see the sea, I found myself in a landscape of utter delight which I wrote about many years later in a book called *The Broken Bridge*. I gave my passion for drawing to the heroine, Ginny. In this passage I describe exactly the place we lived in:

"Inland, on the far side of the main road, a range of great grass-covered hills, not quite mountains but as high as hills could get, rolled endlessly away out of sight; but on this side, the seaward side, there was a space of magic and beauty, Ginny's realm.

It was a mile wide: all the land between the main road and the sea. There was a grassy field below the road, then the lane with her house in, then more fields, then a railway line, then another field and the sand dunes and the beach. To the left was an estuary where a little river, which only a few miles back in the hills had been tumbling swiftly among rocks, spread itself out wide

and slow through a tidal lagoon. Beyond that there were more dunes and, at the very edge of the horizon, an airfield from which tiny silver planes occasionally took off to skim over the sea and vanish. Everything from the main road to the sea was Ginny's.

She owned it because she'd drawn it, from the insects on the dry-stone walls to the crumbling church half-buried in the sand-dunes, to the little bridge that carried the railway line over the estuary ..."

My sentimental education took place when I was least expecting it. One autumn afternoon when I was in the first or second year at Ysgol Ardudwy my class had to skip our normal lesson because the teacher was away and there wasn't a supply. We had to go to the hall with a book and sit quietly while the music teacher dealt with another class. So we all trooped in, and I imagine we were pretty languid because it was one of those warm afternoons when the autumn sun seems to hang in the sky for ever. Certainly the sunlight was coming through the big windows and warming us all.

And because of that sort of warm languid golden light, and because I was in that sort of mood, and because the sunlight caught the hair of a girl from the other class called Carol Powell, and because she was pretty, and because my romantic mind was always running that way, and because the music teacher was playing one particular tune, which I'd never heard before and which struck me suddenly as the most beautiful melody I'd ever heard, almost as if it had been written especially for me, especially for this mood and for this occasion... Anyway, this is the music that I heard for the very first time, not knowing what on earth it could be:

*Voi che sapete
Che cosa è amor,
Donne vedete
S'io l'ho nel cor ...*

And the result of hearing that astonishing, lovely, heartbreaking melody for the first time, in adolescence, when you're not expecting it and you're just sitting around and the sun is warm and glowing on the hair of Carol Powell – well, it hit me like a thunderbolt of golden perfume. I fell in love. There and then. At once. In love with that beautiful tune, and in love with Carol Powell.

I didn't understand the words, and it didn't matter. The melody did it all by itself. But when much later I discovered what the singer is singing about, I was even more astonished at the utter genius of Mozart, in giving such a melody to words in the voice of an adolescent singing about love:

*You ladies, who know what love is, see if that's what I have
in my heart; I'll tell you about the feeling I experience, for it's*

*new to me, I don't understand it. I feel a longing that's full of
desire, but now it's a delight, and now it's death! I freeze, and
then I feel my soul burst into flame, and in a moment I go
back to freezing again; I search for a blessing outside of me,
but I don't know who holds it, I don't know what it is ...*

And so on. Every word is true.

Rhyddid Williams, the music teacher, had no idea that that would happen to me. Why would he? It was private and secret, and I would never have confessed it to a soul. Nevertheless, that unplanned lesson in how to fall in love was one of the three or four most important things that ever happened to me in my youth. And that in turn taught me that we must give our children, our pupils, our students, the chance to encounter all kinds of things unexpectedly, and we must never ask them what they think it means.

I've written and spoken before about my English teacher, my dear friend Miss Enid Jones. One of the great things she did was to produce the school play every year, and that was always something I was set on being part of. I realized something then that I have never seen contradicted: for every play that is produced, love will be fallen in by someone. The intensity of feelings that are evoked all round, the glamour of the costumes, the power of the language – it all stirs the soul. And the heart. And the body.

The most soul-stirring thing for many an adolescent in the years when I was one was the existence of Bob Dylan. He called himself after the Welsh poet, and of course the Welsh pronunciation of that name does not rhyme the first syllable with Jill. Dylan Thomas himself said that the name rhymed with *chillen*, as in all God's chillen got wings. He was probably trying to prevent Americans from calling him Dai-lan.

Anyway, Bob Dylan or Dillen came upon us like a revelation. I took off the nylon strings from my old guitar and fitted it with steel strings instead. I sat in our garden bashing away at chord after chord, and I still remember where I was sitting when I realized *why* there was such a thing as a seventh chord, and what it does in relation to the tonic. When you discover it for yourself, it's amazing.

My great friend Merfyn Jones, who later became a distinguished historian and academic, was going through a highly political phase then, and that aspect of Bob Dylan's music appealed to him greatly. Merfyn had about as much musical ability as ... well, he had none. But that didn't stop us. One summer – it must have been 1965 – he and I decided to give the world the benefit of our genius, and we set off to Pwllheli. You have to start somewhere. I had my guitar, and I also had my harmonica holder. Now the big difference between Bob Dylan and me – the only difference, really, the reason for his greater musical success – is that his harmonica holder was better than mine. I'd made mine out of a wire coat hanger, and tied my slippery chrome-covered harmonica on with string.

Well, Merfyn and I decided on the Seashell Café as the



"I'll never forget the evening light – those long calm summer evenings that you thought would never end, when you've had your tea and done your homework and there's nothing to do but play or wander along the beach with the sea quietly folding its neat little waves over on the sand one after the other. That light that fills the world, from the far horizon of the still sea to the estuary and the dunes of Llandanwg, of Mochras, of Morfa Dyffryn, all the way to the slopes of Moelfre, that perfect round green dome of a hill, and all the great hills beyond."

stage for our first performance, and we went in and asked the lady behind the counter if we could sing. "Well, all right," she said dubiously. So I struck up with *When the ship comes in*:

*Oh the time will come up
When the wind will stop
And the breeze will cease to be breathin'
Like the stillness in the wind
'Fore the hurricane begins
The hour that the ship comes in.
And the seas will split
And the ship will hit
And the sands on the shoreline will be shaking
Then the tide will sound
And the wind will pound
And the morning will be breaking ...*

I was going great guns, bellowing away at the words, and Merfyn was clapping somewhere approximately close to the beat. Then came the harmonica bit. I blew and sucked like crazy, and then I realised to my horror that the harmonica was becoming detached. Out of the corner of my eye I saw it slipping out of the right-hand piece of string. So I tried to grip it with my teeth, and it shot out and dangled contemptuously just out of reach. There was a certain element of ignominy in the way I finished the song.

Then it was Merfyn's turn. He was going to make a speech. He began in fine style.

"You people, you holiday makers, with your cups of tea and your buckets and spades – it's all very well for you. Enjoy your holidays, go on. But in the jungles of South-East Asia the poor people of Vietnam are fighting for their lives against the US imperialists. *They* haven't got cups of tea. *They* haven't got buckets and spades ..."

But that was too much for the owner. "Go on, get out," she said, "the pair of you, go on, clear off."

So we cleared off and had an ice cream. It felt like a victory. We'd been suppressed by the tyrannical forces of reaction. That was something to be proud of.

There is so much I could say about the debt my soul owes to that part of north Wales, and the chance that brought me there, and gave me these experiences and many, many more. I'll write about them at greater length one day. But as long as I live, I'll never forget the evening light – those long calm summer evenings that you thought would never end, when you've had your tea and done your homework and there's nothing to do but play or wander along the beach with the sea quietly folding its neat little waves over on the sand one after the other. That light that fills the world, from the far horizon of the still sea to the estuary and the dunes of Llandanwg, of Mochras, of Morfa Dyffryn, all the way to the slopes of Moelfre, that perfect round green dome of a hill, and all the great hills beyond. I remember it with a warm benevolent clarity in which every detail is precise and calm and perfectly placed, as if it had been destined to be there from the beginning of time.

I owe that to Wales. I owe the education of my feelings to that landscape, and to every kind of music I listened to, and to all my friends, and to those teachers who taught me whether they knew they were teaching me or not.

Philip Pullman is a best-selling author, most notably a trilogy of fantasy novels *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), the first book of which was turned into the film *The Golden Compass*. More recently and controversially he has written a fictionalised biography of Jesus, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010). Born in Norwich in 1946, he was educated from 1957 at Ysgol Ardudwy, Harlech. In 2007 he was made an Honorary Professor of Creative Writing at Bangor University.