Ifor Part 7

One of the aspects of poetry in Welsh which has always appealed to me, is that it has more of a social dimension... and a political dimension with a small 'p'...

And this connects us with the roots of the poetic tradition in Welsh... when we today still think that it's important to mark social occasions with poems, such as when someone dies, when someone is born, when someone gets married, that a poem is something that then should be offered, to crystallise and sum up our thoughts about that occasion...

...when we do that, it links us with the very roots of our Welsh poetic tradition. 1500 years ago, poets were there to sing praise, to the noblemen mostly, to the warriors, to praise their generosity and their valour in this world and to wish them well in the next world...

But the poetic tradition was not just about praise poetry, it was also about entertainment, poems were entertainment, and we still see that today in the fact that we have our popular radio series, the Talwrn, that two teams competing against each other with poems in Welsh is entertainment...that the poetry tours which happen occasionally, and the nightly literary events and readings are entertainment, and still a popular way for rural and urban societies to come together to divert themselves, mostly in the winter but in the summer too...

The traditional format for Welsh poetry is composition in the strict metres, poems that follow 'cynghanedd', rules regarding internal rhyme and... consonantal chiming... alliteration! That was the word I was looking for. This was established at least 700 or 800 years ago in its present form, with its roots going back further to the earliest poetry, fifteen hundred years ago. Strict metre poetry is still very popular, indeed it's enjoying something of a renaissance at present.

It's a format in which I felt I had to immerse myself, to learn the rules, and indeed cynghanedd does have some influence on the way I write poems...but on the whole I generally write in vers libre...

In Welsh we have the strict metres; we have 'free singing' as we call it, that is, poems in metre and rhyme but not in cynghanedd, and not so freely constructed as to turn into vers libre... and then there's vers libre, my usual format of choice, though I do write the odd englyn and cywydd in strict metre to mark special occasions...

And it's interesting how Welsh poetry has developed over the centuries. One of our earliest poets was Taliesin, a real-life figure who flourished at the end of the sixth century, but there was also a mythological character called Taliesin. It seems that Taliesin the poet became so famous

that a mythology subsequently grew up around him… so on the one hand we have poems attributed to Taliesin the bard, and on the other, we have the myth, the story…

And in this myth, Taliesin had acquired wisdom and powers which enabled him to transfigure himself, to avoid death… and so, in the best known version of the tale, in order to avoid someone who sought to kill him, he turned himself first into a hare, to outrun them… but they transformed into a greyhound and just as the greyhound was about to catch the hare, Taliesin changed himself into a bird and flew up away from the jaws of the greyhound – but the greyhound transformed into an eagle and as the eagle was about to crush the bird, he swooped down towards the river and turned himself into a salmon; but his enemy turned into an otter and pursued the salmon until he jumped clear of the water, turning himself into a seed and thus gaining a temporary respite…

I love the symbolism of all this – the tale of Taliesin could be seen as something which could represent the Welsh experience in its entirety - we've had to transform ourselves, our poetry has had to transform itself and hopefully we can continue to do so for many years to come.