



**ESSAY**

## **Borth Waters and the Coastal Dreaming of a Midlander**

*Richard Read*

University of Western Australia

### **ABSTRACT**

After a critique of top-down colonizing attributes of water projects in the Arts and Humanities, the essay dwells on the communitarian, environmental, and aesthetic value of a short creative documentary about the raised marshland mire behind the ancient seaside village of Borth on the Mid-West Welsh coast. In a mode of theorized autobiography, it then divagates upon the metaphor of water in the author's recurring dreams about this childhood holiday resort and its complex relations with his home in the English Midlands, an area supplied by Welsh water and that supplies many of Borth's holiday-makers.

### **KEYWORDS**

Borth, Wolverhampton, wetlands, sea defence, place, space, creative documentary, aesthetic philosophy, environmentalism, hydrology, myth, dreams

In North Fremantle, the port city of Perth in Western Australia where I live, I watched a seagull swoop to the top of a streetlight where it alighted, settled, and froze for a while. Full and complete, like a painting in a gallery before another one draws us forward, that movement seemed to stand for a universal transition between place and space, for when it shuffled a little on its temporary perch my attention spread to the banal setting of the coastal suburb where I live and, as emotion morphed into thought, its relation to the rest of the world. If a place is a space with a distinct character, had I not just experienced a visceral and transition from space to place and back again?

Received 2 May 2022

Accepted 20 May 2022

Published online 11 July 2022

© 2022 Richard Read  
[Richard.read@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Richard.read@uwa.edu.au)

---

## Place and Space

The seagull's trajectory from some unknown space to the lamp post had given way to an awareness of the seaboard region on the Indian Ocean within the wider world where we both have our being. But because I was also *doing* something to what I saw, perhaps that is putting it too passively. Yes, it "caught" my attention, but I also invested its arrested journey with feeling and meaning and that localized its landing into a place. When the seagull shuffled in readiness for its next flight, I lost interest, the observed was detached from the observer, who switched to another "frame of mind" where conceptually constructed, personal, local, national, and supranational scales of space subliminally, mixed within individual consciousness, were "serially disaggregated and pondered" (Saar & Palang, 2009, p. 7). I could then move on to related topics of thought, such as the less portentous realization that I had just been editing video lectures that might have prompted me to divide my experience and endow it with significance in this way. But then a transition took place to a larger frame of memory in which I considered the fact that I had always wanted to live near the ocean but having grown up in the Midlands of another country, I had discovered an unexpected downside to living on the coast if you were not, as I was not, a mariner. The possible directions of exploration are cut down by one hundred and eighty degrees F if you live on the coast, whereas in the Midlands of England you could roam in any direction on the compass.

Not that we did. My hometown of Wolverhampton was on the Western edge of the West Midlands industrial conurbation that extends forty miles East towards Coventry and encompasses Birmingham, Britain's second largest city. Our journeys in this placeless direction were largely practical, such as keeping my father company on deliveries of car components to factories in the area—Jaguar, Daimler, Reliant—in his role as sales manager of a light engineering company. But for holidays we always drove west to the ancient village and seaside resort of Borth, built on a long shingle bank which divides the sea from a saltwater marsh. The 2011 census (Nomis, n.d.) recorded a population of 1,399. It was where my parents met and where, along with many Midlanders after the Cambrian railway was opened in 1862 and the roads tarmacked, my grandparents escaped to its "Nine Miles of Golden Sand," as used to be advertised, now advertised as five for some reason. "He promised me the world and showed me Borth," my mother quipped of my father. We spent almost every holiday there, except winter, and many, many weekends from when I was two or three, when my father towed the 22 foot, green and white "Penarth Typhoon" caravan—its over-tall chimney knocked off by the first railway bridge out of Wolverhampton—and installed it at the top of the hill of Y-Fron Caravan Park at upper Borth, which afforded a magnificent view down the one mile village built on a pebble spit stretching due North towards the estuary of Ynyslas, bounded by the Irish Sea on one side and hills a vast bog on the other. The hills on the other side of the Dovey (Welsh: *Dyfi*) Estuary and to the South around this vast plain served as a funnel for "bad" weather, as sun-seekers saw it, including days of interminable rain spent trapped inside the van with elder siblings. After Newtown succeeded Welshpool and Shrewsbury on the typical

---

three and a quarter hour journey (there were other routes), the road began to follow bounding streams and rivers down mountainous valleys before the estuary began at Machynlleth. When motorcycle patrol men travelling in the opposite direction saluted us while keeping one hand on their handlebars if the insignia affixed to your bumper bars matched their company (we were AA, the other was RAC), the romance of car journeys in the 1950s was subliminally connected with the movement of water, and the golden summers spent six weeks at a time with our mother were punctuated on Friday nights by the excitement of watching out for—and finding—my father’s headlights slowly crawling along the horizontal Dovey estuary miles away, then turning sharply with the railway line towards us, and gradually looming larger and brighter as they lit the straight beach road through the golf course and lost themselves for a few minutes of suspense—could it be someone else?—amongst the houses of Borth High Street, before pulling up triumphantly beside the caravan for the weekend. There was not much traffic on the roads in those days. Though the stasis and flow, containment and escape of water is a primary metaphor of the axis between place and space, in my mind at least, it is impossible to disentangle it entirely from the mechanical realm. I fancy it is different for Anthony Morris, native resident and sometimes “philosopher of Borth,” who wrote to me at the beginning of the pandemic:

It is strange how significant physical transformations of one’s daily life create different modes of conscious apprehension. One of the over-riding features of the last two to three weeks has been how silent the world has become, to the point where the lone car travelling through the village becomes an oddly intrusive and unwelcome event. I have been hearing things of late that I haven’t heard for decades—the ticking of the quietest clocks, the distant hiss of the calmest sea. Memory is a powerful force; it quickly slides in to help fill any present-tense void. Hence my involuntary trip back to winter afternoons in carless Borth. (A. Morris, personal communication, April 10, 2020)

I wish to thank him here for writing like an angel, friendship over decades, much information, and allowing me to quote from his emails in what follows. Indeed, I can barely resist holding him responsible for the many errors he may find I have made.

### **“A Language-Transformer with an Obvious Intonation of Sarcasm”**

If any citizens of Borth read what I am about to write, they might call it “science,” not in its usual lofty sense, but in the sense of a nickname given to a Borth mariner who walked in an exaggerated manner: “the term ‘science’ was used when describing an over-elaboration of manner or behaviour” (Davies, 2004, p. 81).

Before I reminisce, and despite my dislike of negative demonstrations, I think it may be salutary for students of hydrology to discover themselves as “unconscious instruments for values they would strenuously reject on a conscious level” (Didion, 1969, p. 113) if they treat the citizens of remote waterfronts as indigenes in need of civilizing instruction from cosmopolitan Culture HQ. We do not like to think that our

philanthropic attention to the dire consequences of the Anthropocene might oppress those most threatened by it. In the case of Borth it could amount to an othering, a Welsh Orientalism, in which an outreach programme alienates some of its intended beneficiaries, even if they are sympathetic towards young people trying to establish a living in the Arts and Humanities.

From 2014 to 2017, the British Arts and Humanities Research Council funded “Towards hydrocitizenship. Connecting communities with and through responses to interdependent, multiple water issues”, a project that investigated and contributed to ways in which communities live with each other and their environment in relation to water in a range of UK neighbourhoods. One such neighbourhood was Borth and the nearby town of Taly-y-bont in Mid-Wales. Under *Community*, the online vision statement declared:

In relation to communities we ask, what does it do to the ways in which we imagine communities, and to the ways in which they imagine themselves, if local water-related environmental issues (both assets and conflicts) are brought more fully into local public consciousness [...] Can narratives of past and current relationships between people, and people and water, help generate new narratives—new relationships? (Connected Communities, 2014)

This quickly brought the tags “patronizing, entitlement, colonialism, condescension, incomprehension” to Anthony’s mind.

In the second of three events in autumn 2015, arranged by a group of artists from nearby universities, a series of films on the theme of flooding, migration, cultural heritage, and the future were projected onto the facades of the terraced houses that line the straight main street of Borth village. The films included ice melting in Greenland, inverted footage of the construction of the new sea defences designed to protect Borth from the waves over the estimated fifty years of its remaining lifetime, and footage from an earlier event at which people were questioned on the lugubrious topic of “how they imagine Borth to be different from now in 100 years’ time when the sea defences have stopped working” (Tew, 2015). At a True Tales evening in the Friendship Inn within Hydrocitizenship’s span of years, Anthony imputed a faux-naive attitude of witless gullibility to his role at that event:

Some years ago, I had occasion to walk a gauntlet of an influx of people from Machynlleth, peppered here and there with local faces, who were milling around on the east side of the road between the butcher’s shop and the Victoria Inn. I had seen a couple of flyers advertising “Dwr Ymhobman Tafluniad fideo nos ar hyd Stryd Fawr Borth, Water Everywhere Night-time video projection along Borth High Street 10<sup>th</sup> October 8–9.30 pm to be followed by story gathering in The Friendship Inn.” It was sponsored by Bath Spa University, Bangor University, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Hydrocitizenship and Cymerau. The millers were now concentrating on images of melting ice sheets projected on to some of the elevations of the buildings opposite, these being accompanied by

a deafening soundtrack urging us to be aware of imminent catastrophe. As I was already familiar with this bleak scenario, I sought sanctuary in the Vic<sup>1</sup> whereupon I was immediately accosted by 3 or 4 locals, the foremost of whom fixed me with his eye and arrowed me with his tongue—“Right Morris, you know most things about this village—What the fuck’s going on out there?” “Do you want the long or the short answer?” I replied, with such vague intonation as to be simultaneously suggestive of an all-embracing familiarity with or complete ignorance of events outside. The follow-up from my interlocutor implied that no evasion was acceptable so I had to explain how Water Everywhere was representative of a much wider project, the vision of which, in part, was to understand how we imagine communities and the ways in which communities imagine themselves if water-related environmental issues (both assets and conflicts) are brought more fully into local public consciousness and can we help generate new narratives, based on past and current relationships between people and people and water. My answer required such intense mental effort that my eyes were quite screwed up, but on opening them I came out with what I thought to be a fitting, concluding remark—“What’s going on out there is for you, for me, for this community!” By the time the sentence ended I noticed that my audience had moved on and were speaking to others in friendly and engaged conversation. (A. Morris, personal communication, 27 March, 2022)

If that applied to narratives of aqueous “conflicts,” then for narratives of continuity with the past (“assets”), Anthony obliged by lapsing into eroticized nostalgia:

Do you remember those long hot summers when the sun dried the sand above high water until it had the consistency of gritty wholemeal flour? And the sound of distant children’s voices floating on the murmur of a mirror sea with maybe a hint of a breeze teasing the sunburnt flesh on your back? Or the times when we used to hold our breath under water to impress the girls staying in Arfor? Do you? Do you remember those times when our world was fishing, swimming, sailing, paddling, sitting, standing, walking, running, playing by, under, in and on water? On it goes—day by day, month by month, year by year, generation by generation. (A. Morris, personal communication, 27 March, 2022)

There is something of Macbeth’s weariness in the second paragraph. As a matter of fact, I remember something like that myself, as does Anthony in another mood, but to dispel my naivety he explained that it “needs to be read out loud to a language-transformer with an obvious intonation of sarcasm thereby (hopefully) demonstrating the existence of a linguistic structure that demonstrates a relationship with water that is organic, historic, adequate, aesthetic, relevant and self-sustaining. But it nonetheless remains a deeply reminiscent substrate” (A. Morris, personal communication, 27 March, 2022).

<sup>1</sup> The Victoria Inn, Borth High Street.

---

What he most objects to is the way in which the transformation Hydrocitizenship wants from narratives about the role the interface of land and water plays in all local lives is conducted in an imperious bureaucratise that sidesteps the experience and expectations enshrined in the shared language of their community. It's hectoring, incurious and alienating. This could well apply to the promotion of a dance performance that accompanied the immersion of a sculpture called *Urchin* on the beach behind the Victoria Inn on 10 October 2015. Billed as "bodies in the water with the extended corporeality of the biosphere, drifting in tune with the primordial elements" (as cited in Payne et al., 2017, p. 122), one supporter's response to the many possible meanings of the performance was written up in an academic article by Tom Payne, one of the organizers and participants in the West-Wales project:

They may be refugee citizens of a post-apocalyptic world displaced by people or a climate not allowed settlers anymore. They may be on a migratory route. They are intrinsically involved with the revolving lament of the tide—to be forever passing, dwelling in nothing other than a succession of movements that complement the landscape, sharpening its contrast, deepening its contours. Are they a herald call to adventure, coming from nowhere and—here now? (p. 122)

This in turn drew breathless acclamation from yet another supporter: "amazing evocative description. Beautiful writing..." (p. 122).

Payne begins his essay by claiming to be "weaving together the voices of artists, academics, and community partners with my own, as a way of [...] revealing some of the water-related concerns in Borth," but exonerates as "productive failure" (p. 103) a later shift "away from collaborative writing, towards exploring the ways in which various contributions of members of *Hydrocitizens* might act as a resource for my own thinking and writing about the Cymerau launch" (p. 125), which plausibly would earn him academic brownie points. Borth's patchy Wi-Fi reception was apparently a greater threat to community participation than any defects in the entertainment level of the performance or indeed rising sea levels. Due to the wonky internet, "discussions such as those from which this writing has been composed are potentially inaccessible to many, counter to the intentions of this participatory exercise and transdisciplinary research more broadly" (p. 125).

For Borth locals, by comparison, "water issues" are more likely to be voiced in urgent late-night emergency emails as colossal waves from the Irish Sea pound the backs of houses, spilling obstructive rubble through alleys between them onto the road. These are snippets from exchanges with neighbours when Anthony was coordinating the flood wardens in his block of houses during Storms Barra and Eunice respectively in December 2021 and January 2022:

"Ben, give Fred a ring and tell him to be available from 8.00 pm onwards. His stretch is from Bel-Air to the Vic. Get him to call in on Diane—I think we're all in for a hard night."

“John! Get back. GET BACK FOR FUCK’S SAKE!! Let it go! It’s not worth saving!”<sup>2</sup>

“LOOK OUT! ----Christ! None of us saw that coming! Jac, Ray. Let’s move as much rubble off the road as we can before the next one hits!”

“Were you out last night?” “No, I stayed in and hoped for the best. I hear Hafan was badly hit—punched a hole through the back—the ground floor’s a write-off they say.”<sup>3</sup>

“The County Council must shoulder some of the blame for this. They haven’t reprofiled the shingle for a few years and now look what’s happened. It’s going to affect our premiums if they claim on the insurance.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point [of] insuring anyway. They say we shouldn’t be here in the first place, and we’ve only got fifty years left.”

Well, some say twenty-five. Fairbourne’s a goner. (A. Morris, personal communication, March 27, 2022)

Many of the Hydrocitizenship performances at Borth in 2015 ended with the provision of drawing and painting materials for locals to express the emotions raised by the day’s attempts to transform their relationship with water. Given the urgency of the environmental perils confronting the community, this struck Anthony as a bit late: “Please say that the time for felt-pens and blank sheets of A4, many of which drifted like giant drunken butterflies along the shingle, has long gone” (A. Morris, personal communication, 24 April, 2022). Anthony’s criticisms are a salient example of the difficulty that Owain Jones, a chief instigator of the entire Hydrocitizenship project, had anticipated: “We readily admit to something of a tension in the approach between top-down intellectual ambitions about developing senses of ecological citizenship, and more bottom up, emergent themes which arise from local conversations” (as cited in Hydrocitizenship, 2015).

### ***Y Gors/The Bog (2016)***

A happier outcome for the Borth local community was another project funded by Hydrocitizenship. This was the experimental documentary *Y Gors/The Bog* (2016) by Anne Marie Carty, Dafydd Sills-Jones and Nick Jones, which I shall discuss in some detail and which readers can watch in full<sup>4</sup>. Jones is an internationally recognized composer and the choir master of Borth village choir, *Côr y Gors* (“Choir of the Bog”), who are heard and seen throughout the film and who live on the edge of Cors Fochno,

<sup>2</sup> This refers to heavy-duty pub furniture and a canoe that was being ripped from backyards, smashed to smithereens and flung as detritus along the storm-tide strand line.

<sup>3</sup> Hafan is a house of that name.

<sup>4</sup> See Carty et al. (2018), duration: 17’ 45”. Numbers in brackets in main text indicate the number of minutes into the film a scene or sound is located at. The film was also funded by Coleg Cenedlaethol Cymru (National College of Wales) strategic development fund.

---

the largest raised peat bog in Western Europe, located on the landward side of the shale spit on which Borth enjoys its precarious existence. The subject of the film is the conservation and history of the bog as presented through a variety of community views and opinions. The research question it addressed in its grant application was this: in consideration of “the impact of farming activities and land drainage on an ancient, raised peat bog, to what extent can processes of music composition enable narrative structures to explore and reflect on the connections between communities and their environments” (Carty et al., 2018). Though the film is informational, it takes the evocative form of a self-sufficient work of art.

Take the unbroken opening sequence, the longest in the film. A long slow pan swivels over the marshland for a full minute and a half from Borth hills on the South over to St. Michael’s Anglican church on Otter’s Island (Welsh: *Ynys Fergi*), a rocky knoll hard by the Leri River on the edge of the bog. At one point the camera’s leftward sweep is challenged by the swifter passage of a bird to the right and underscored by continuous telephone or power lines towards the base of the screen. This grand, encompassing panorama is not 360-degree, but it nevertheless generates an impression of completeness that is both complemented and contradicted by the polyphonic soundtrack, comprising Zen chimes, metal clinking, electronic warbling and conversational hubbub from which overlapping recollections of the bog are kept just on the edge of intelligibility before introducing the gently resigned, female voice of the personified bog, who speaks in Welsh with English subtitles: “I wasn’t always this way, and I won’t stay this way, but for the time being this is what I am” (Carty et al., 2018). She repeats this sentence at the end of the film, encircling it in a mesmerizing present, despite many narrative excursions into the long history of these fens. This accentuates our sensuous awareness of local waters, their natural relations, and human associations.

I have suggested that these two bids for completeness, the panorama, and the polyphonic soundtrack, complement and contradict each other. The camera establishes a tenor of observational realism, while the overtly confected soundscape releases the imagination into memory and myth in a hypnogogic, dream-like fashion. At a metalevel, the discrepancy between the two is mimetic of the bog’s dynamic structure by producing a split consciousness akin to the sphagnum moss floating on the waters, moss forming the matrix of the bog as levels of it die to form layers of peat that reach a depth of twenty feet or so above the clay base. Later, the waters of the bog are defined as a place-made centre, independent of human usage and isolated from the water systems that flow around and through it, since its waters are not fed by rivers or ocean but only by rain that makes it swell instead of breaking its normal boundaries as the nearby rivers, estuary and sea do (Carty et al., 2018, 9:32). Swelling and sinking, reinforced by the voices of the choir rising and falling in roundels of male and female sound that alternate and merge is another mimetic feature of the film. They emphasize stress localizing vertical dimension of pluvial accumulation and loss within the horizontal dimension of marshland extent, and this is reinforced again at various points in the film when human bipeds bob like meerkats (02:50, 02:51) or jump up and down on the spongy, elasticated surface (10:00), and when a close-up segment of the salt marsh hypnotically undulates on its own undulates (12:25).

---

The sense of how the marshland is cut off from surrounding space both by its own homeostatic structure and by the camera is demonstrated when the opening pan comes to a halt on St. Matthews's Church. This succeeds to still footage of the church and its cemetery shot from a higher, transcendental angle (Carty et al., 2018, 2:07), which endows a node of religious community embedded in the deep past of its cemetery with a universal significance that at the same time is independent of the nation at large<sup>5</sup>. Such effects reflect the benign spiritual idealism that the German polymath Alexander von Humboldt (1849) saw in nineteenth-century panoramic displays, which he approved of because he thought they fostered the public's "conception of the natural unity and the feeling of the harmonious accord pervading the universe" (p. 457).

Yet, it also stirs associations of a secular history in which panoramic drawing was taught as a potent instrument of colonial control in military academies from the eighteenth-century onwards.

Stimulated by the needs of British forces for topographic information and strategic assessments of landscape during a century of intermittent wars with France, panoramic drawing was introduced into naval and military academies to increase the technical proficiency of officers. In particular, between 1768 and 1796 the well-known watercolourist Paul Sandby was drawing master at the Military Academy at Woolwich, where he established a tradition of field sketch that enabled soldiers to delineate coastal features, battlefields, artillery sites and other strategic landscape features. In the same way that military mapping helped to "neutralize the dangers of the terrain and eventually assure mastery over it." Landscape sketching provided a key to understanding and asserting authority over the scene. Unlike a detailed military map, the panoramic sketch did not require special skills to interpret and was therefore a highly useful complementary tool. (Gooding, 2007, p. 69)

This hardly reflects the film's conscious intentions, yet inadvertently applies to the distinctive, black-topped white tower seen in the middle of the opening sweep (Carty et al., 2018, 1:05) filmed from the cliffs below the war memorial at the summit of cliffs, whose prominent position overlooking Borth is certainly pervaded by sentiments of national security and achievement<sup>6</sup>. Locals and visitors would recognize this tower as the Nisa local convenience store for everyday groceries, a monument to consumerism whose circular frontage defines an important turn off to Aberystwyth, the capital of Ceredigion. As currently the only postmodernist building in Borth, it is a cause of pride to some who like Anthony see in its overall bulk a reference to a nesting gull and of distaste to those who stigmatize it as "the

---

<sup>5</sup> In bygone times, however, it was not independent of its Anglican congregation's benign contempt for the non-Conformist congregations in chapels in the village and vice-versa. All the chapels have gone, but it may be that the villagers' choice of congregation reflected social divisions between seafarers, land workers, and business owners, with the rest identifying with Annibynwyr, the Union of Welsh Independents (A. Morris, personal communication, 12 May, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Somewhere I have seen a photograph of Concorde flying over it.

toilet roll” as suggested by one of its commodities. Since the tower top is circular as well as central, it subliminally, and no doubt inadvertently, echoes the pivot on which the camera turns. As such it suggests the circulation between Borth and the far-flung commercial networks that supply it. Later, the film will show industrially packed hay bales in black plastic wrappings awaiting collection from fields that encroach the bog<sup>7</sup>. We will hear the voices of the farmers who own these fields extolling the practical ideology of commercial land improvement and land reclamation—dry against wet—that puts them in opposition to the conservationist policies that the local authorities have implemented to preserve the bog. Yet these reclaimed fields are supplying raw materials to the circulating food chains that feed the choir, the villagers, and national markets.

Meanwhile, the camera tracks telephone or power lines at the base of the screen. They are like the base lines of a musical score for the sounds heard on the soundtrack. The electronic components of that soundtrack, together with inaudible human hubbub, hint at collective voices or electrical hum along those wires as they reach beyond local place into the infinite space of international communications or power grids, just as, in its different way, does the bird flying along them in the opposite direction into unbounded natural space outside the frame. These features are merely foreground to the unspoilt marshlands in the middle distance, which are arguably the central subject of a different, colonizing scopic regime.

Voice-overs throughout the film stress the raised mire’s age-old resistance to human usage or affect. You can’t go there. It doesn’t look dramatic or precious. It doesn’t impinge on humans. Its salt waters cannot be used to drink from or swim, wash or grow things in. It owes its very survival to human indifference. Perceived from on high as by David Caspar Friedrich’s painting of *The Wanderer*, the marshlands are prime subjects for the Kantian aesthetic attitude: the distantiated and disinterested appreciation of strictly purposeless objects and vistas.

But after the pan and the higher view, we are arrested by multiple close-ups of the sphagnum moss that forms the substratum of the bog (Carty et al., 2018, 02:05). A closer framing of reality is neither more nor less artificial than a wider or more distant one (Minha-Ha, 1993, p. 100), but these effects invite interpretations from a very different kind of aesthetic theory. We are no longer distant observers but are in and of the bog. Impersonal distance is further shattered when in close-hand footage of choir members carrying equipment into the bog, one of their number briefly waves at the camera. We are amongst friends. Throughout the rest of the film, camera work keeps us in the bog, which consequently expands into a world. Everything is partial, transient, and surprising: little shocks to the system more familiar to us from urban life were it not for their natural content. Though one can never escape the rectangular boundaries of screen images cutting place from space at every frame, the virtuoso medley of different shots at different focal ranges, angles, directions, movements, stops and durations on static and moving subjects of every scale and texture under all weather conditions creates an illusion of freedom from frames and fixed points of view

<sup>7</sup> These are likely to be the farms of Carreg Trannau, Ynys Capel, Llwyn glas and maybe Pen y wern at the foot of the Southern hills (A. Morris, personal communication, 12 May, 2022).

that Ronald Hepburn (1966), in a ground-breaking essay of ecological aesthetics well known in Borth, associates with the enjoyment of nature rather than art. The plethora of jump cuts creates such an unmasterable superfluity of framings that it evokes our freedom to move through unframed nature itself, unanchored from a pictorial viewing point. Instead of standing over and against nature like a painting on a wall, this apparent repudiation of artistic control (for it is only apparent) lets nature envelop and involve us on all sides to enhance spectacles that seem all the more wondrous for the lack of human intentionality to explain them. Apparent framelessness stimulates interpretative creativity, expands the imagination, alerts us to restlessness and change and a wider range of deeper emotions than art does: loneliness, enlargement of the soul, delicacy, frailty, flexibility and resilience, and, according to the qualities peculiar to water, containment and escape within a special litany of movements and sounds beyond the poetic negations of the sound track: “Not a drop, not a drip, not a drip, not a ripple, not a ripple, not a trickle, nor a trickle, no flow” (Carty et al., 2018, 12:34).

And although its (single voice)  
*Damp,* (collective voice)  
 Although it's (single)  
*Sodden* (collective)  
 And utterly (Single voice with double voices answering)  
*Drenched,*  
 And completely  
*Soaked,*  
 There's no  
*Trickling*  
 There's no  
*Running,*  
 and there's no  
*Cascading.* (Carty et al., 2018, 12:52)

Later we do see and hear sensuous trickling, running, and cascading from pipes, weirs and rivers immediately bordering the bog.

If these chants sound partly educational, then so do the alternating single or collective voices of adults and children in Welsh and English reciting the species of plants and wildflowers that grow in the waters of the bog (Carty et al., 2018, 09:09, 12:08). They enact a mnemonic ritual of teaching and learning that potentially spans the generations. For just as serious appreciation of art requires knowledge of art history and theory, so aesthetic appreciation of nature requires knowledge of natural history. This “natural environmental model” of aesthetic philosophy especially applies to relatively featureless tracts of wetlands that are not accommodated in the traditional aesthetic categories of the Sublime, the Beautiful and the Picturesque (Carlson, 2020). Thus, we hear an expert's articulate comprehensive scientific narrative about the geological formation of the bog (Carty et al., 2018, 03:23), and a sympathetic history of the economic reasons why struggling farmers on its edge would want to reclaim it

(06:12)<sup>8</sup>. Even the mythical voice of the personified bog is given scientific vocabulary such as “greenhouse gasses” (08:53) to explain the environmental benefits of her capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and contain water.

At one point, however, the film seems to enact a parting of the ways between lay people’s appreciation of natural beauty and their tolerance of boring scientific facts. The voices of scientists standing beside a Perspex pod of scientific implements in the middle of the bog suddenly descend into overlapping snatches of gobbledygook, which seems to mimic our failing attention: “Heating it passively [. . .] water table [...] temperatures at different depths [...] composition rates [...] methane production [...] lack of transpiration” (Carty et al., 2018, 10:43). But from these esoteric snippets there soon arises a coherent voice offering the general explanation that measurements help to determine the long history of climate change. In this way natural history unites us in a shared sense of natural origins preceding our existence<sup>9</sup>. Conceptually, meanwhile, these scientific narratives pull the film away from its central focus on place to enlist larger scales of geographical and administrative space. We learn that the bog is “important nationally and internationally” due to its status as a RAMSAR site, a special area of conservation within Europe<sup>10</sup>.

However scientifically informed, the films procedures are quite different from those used in Simon Reeve’s TV series on the English Lake District (Bagnall, 2021), which makes similar points about the value of conserving Britain’s rapidly deteriorating wetlands. Reeve employs cogent visual argument in which a drone-mounted camera rises above talking heads entering the marsh as they speak of returning species of plants (close-ups) and birds (soaring shots) leading to generalizations about progress in rewilding the Lake District as a whole (higher shots of the surroundings). The camerawork carves out a lucid path for the argument. As a creative rather than an informational documentary, by contrast, the oneiric effects *Y Gors/The Bog* make it harder to remember but encourage second viewings. Constant reflexive effects never allow us to forget how nature is mediated by film. Twinkling refractions in the lens, glimpses of sound and camera equipment within the frame, the unrolling of a hose like

---

<sup>8</sup> In 1689, John Locke anticipated these views in his conception of wilderness as waste in the *Second Treatise on Government* (Locke, 2005): “For I ask, whether in the wild wood and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage, or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniencies [sic] of life as ten acres equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated” (p. 14). It is echoed in the verdict on the Borth reclamation project in 1878 offered by an English schoolmaster when his school was exiled to the village during the scarlet fever epidemic in the East Midlands when he writes: “You may listen to the puff of a farmer’s steam-engine planted in the swamp, and see the glitter of the steel ropes, with which it draws its ploughshares, resistless as fate, through the oozy fallows. Well, it is come to this, the farmers and their engines will soon civilize away the beauty of this romantic wild. But shall we complain? If they have begun to drain these intractable marshes, there is a chance for other places, where the interest on the cost of drainage will be less problematical than here” (Skrine, 1878, p. 77). The phrase “resistless fate” espouses the doctrine of Manifest Destiny wherein barbarism inevitably cedes to civilization.

<sup>9</sup> The film does not mention that evidence of ancient copper and lead mining has been discovered in the soil beneath the bog before its formation 7,000 years ago (Mighall et al., 2009).

<sup>10</sup> I understand, however, that the Dyfi Biosphere of which Cors Forchno is a part gets no funding apart from small local authority grants to maintain a basic secretariat.

a reel of film, and occasional punctuations by black screens and sudden silences all remind us of the camera, the soundtrack and intensive editing.

Paradoxically, the suturing of the natural and the technological only amplifies water's vitalism. Far from estranging us from the illusions, the pairing of electrical and natural sounds, including birds, insects, the distant clatter of trains, electronic warbling, plucked strings, piano notes and chords, orchestral music, and choral voices—sometimes departing from, sometimes merging with the visuals—turns the film into a hybrid organism that carries the spirit of the bog into the lenses and microphones of those who have built its registrations in our mind.

Measured outcomes of screenings at academic venues across Europe drew a mixed reception. British academic voices were less convinced by its vagueness and ambiguity than European commentators (Carty et al., 2018). An American friend harshly dismissed it when I sent him a link: "I watched *The Bog* and thought it a very twee jumble that made me think of Monty Python, which is its antidote" (A. Michelson, personal communication, 17 May, 2020)<sup>11</sup>. This is Alan Michelson, a Mohawk filmmaker resident in New York. Though his work is capable of generous diplomacy when the context requires it, the polemical nature of his opposition to the exploitation of native Americans and their land rights more often requires polarising stridency in which "jumble" would be catastrophic<sup>12</sup>. The Welsh filmmakers faced quite different political problems. Some form of "jumble" was necessary to avoid polarised political attitudes towards the Anthropocene. Through close attention to the semiotic structure of several contemporary documentaries<sup>13</sup>, they sought to avoid "problem moment narrative structures" whose disadvantage is the production of binary oppositions between the "good" and "bad" voices of divided groups—in our case farmers and environmentalists—whose independent agencies would otherwise be subordinated to authorial intentions. The alternative was a creative documentary that employed "semiotic 'suspension', where the music refused to let any specific voice dominate the 'choir' of perspectives in the whole film" (Carty et al., 2018). Specifically, this entailed the placement of music over the voice of the farmer complaining about the preservation of the bog "so his views are drawn into the texture of the film and act as an introduction to the next scene" (Carty et al., 2018). I do not think this balm on troubled waters would convince many viewers that the film is free from bias. While eliding dissonant points of view (such as the farmers'), the makers are almost certainly aware of their film's overall approval of conservationist, scientific, aesthetic,

<sup>11</sup> *Monty Python and the Flying Circus* was a wildly popular British surreal comedy series that ran on BBC 1 television from 1969 to 1973.

<sup>12</sup> In his 13:05-minute video installation, *TwoRow II* (Michelson, 2005), for example, he juxtaposed panoramas of each bank of the Grand River dividing the Six Nations Reserve from non-native townships in Ontario and set the tour guide's narrative against an indigenous commentary on contending soundtracks to call out the devastating pollution of once pristine waterfronts rested from native American protection by broken treatise. The approach is necessarily polarised and adversarial.

<sup>13</sup> For example: *The End of the Line* (Murray, 2009), *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009), *Suite Habana* (Perez, 2003), *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013), *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor, 2015), *Kotona Kylässä* (Luostarinen, 2012) and *Into Eternity: A Film for the Future* (Madsen, 2013).

and multi-culturalist points of view. Overall, I share these biases, so would hardly object to them, however aware I am of my dependency on industrial farming.

That the filmic representation of the bog is a man-made unity containing different frames of reference within itself, and not simply a tract of untouched nature, is already evident from the Welsh/English split in the title *Y Gors/The Bog*. Alternating languages, genders and ages are carried into the soundtrack and into the English subtitles translated from the Welsh. The cultural positions of all the recorded voices are mostly in harmony but sometimes in tension. The biases I have mentioned are most subtly reinforced by gendering, however. The exclusively elderly, male, Welsh farmers speak of the need to control nature (Carty et al., 2018, 11:40). According to George Lackoff's linguistic theories about the way language frames our ideas, both conservative and progressive thought about the environment is informed by metaphors of family structure. Conservatives tend to idealize a traditionally strict father organized by clear hierarchy, obedience, and discipline—the ascendancy of the dry over the wet in our case. Progressives, including environmentalists, tend to value an egalitarian, nurturant parent, stressing empathy, cooperation, and a sense of interconnectedness (Lackoff, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that the bog is personified in the film as a timeless, gentle female, and equally significant that the film downplays more misogynist personifications of the bog available from Borth folklore. One such is Yr Hen Wrach, “The Old Hag of Borth Bog” that haunted villagers up to the early 1900s when land reclamation had sufficiently reduced the area of the bog to rid the area of malarial miasmas that came at night to afflict local victim with “the shakes” (Stevenson, 2014). For the film this was an inconvenient case of land reclamation *improving* the lives of villagers! Only in the very earliest voices of the film is the bog dimly remembered as a site of old-fashioned superstition, a fearful place with something of the aura of Grimpen Mire in Conan Doyle's *The Hounds of the Baskervilles* (1902), where one false step led man or beast to death: “The bog has a lot of secrets, and I don't want to be one of them...’ ‘Scary. I've always heard stories as a kid of animals being lost” (Carty et al., 2018, 01:33).

In the final segment of the film, we are awoken from the hallucinogenic objectivity of solitary nature, already shorn of malignant superstition. I find it the most puzzling and perhaps the least satisfactory sequence—perhaps. Just before it we are given a sequence of intensely hypnogogic distraction in which the lens is turned so far out of focus that the myriad reflections of light on rippling water are distended into abstract blobs shimmering on the screen whose flattening the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg would have approved of (Carty et al., 2018, 15:07). Day-dreaming trumps observation. Then reality cuts in as a Naiad is personalized. We see a close-up of a handsome woman spinning her hair around as she looks around next to a man in a white shirt (15:26). For the first time the choir is individuated as a group of unselfconscious friends enjoying the bog in slanting, evening light. Their co-presence is real enough, after the choir meeting (if this is not a separate occasion), yet there is still a ritual quality about their sometimes-unaccountable actions, which seem to contradict prior claims about the bog's uselessness. We have been told you cannot wash in it, but the man undoes his shirt to do so; that you cannot grow anything

in it, but plants and bushes are inserted, watered, and measured. As Anthony writes inscrutable notes on a clipboard, it is difficult to know why others pour water through a funnel into moss already saturated in its own waters. The erection of a folding table to celebrate a toast is probably more convivial than sacramental, despite the Christian pairing of wine and water, but it risks appropriating the bog as a recreational area when its mystique formerly depended on human inaccessibility: “It’s foreign to us [...] There’s just places where you can’t go” (03:04)<sup>14</sup>. The diversity of these activities is clearly designed to defeat a single interpretation. They might equally symbolize a return to a primordial Eden or a premonition of future invasion. On enquiry I discovered that the film’s conclusion was not supposed to resolve tensions but was intended as a lightly theatrical counterpart to natural scenes of a world that should remain uncorrupted (A. Morris, personal communication, 24 April, 2022). But I prefer to think of it also as a consummation of the film’s well-established reflexive consciousness. It admits that for the whole film to attend to nature is already to impinge upon it. Henry Thoreau explained the wisdom of such admissions in that founding text of environmentalism, *Walden* (1854): “It may be that even to think of nature, let alone act on it, is to make it a joint product of human and natural activity, so that to come to the pond is already to profane it. But profanation is simply the condition of the world, which is redeemed, if at all, by our deeper apprehension of that condition” (as cited in Purdy, 2015, p. 151).

### Water between Wales and England

My focus broadens. It is perhaps ironic that the preservation of nature on one side of Borth is matched by the massive mechanical transformation of its seaward side in millions of pounds worth of new sea defences and artificial islands to combat that other man-made phenomenon: rising sea-levels. It is obviously beyond the remit of a single film focused on Cors Fochno to do justice to the multiplicity of relations between land and water that shape a coastal community over centuries: its distant origins as a seasonal haven for heron fishing, the daily walks of twenty miles or so by cockle ladies from Ynyslas sands to Aberystwyth and back to exchange their wares for bread, its disproportionate number of cosmopolitan sea captains whose vessels give their names to many of the houses, and the tensions as well as financial interactions between mariners and farmers, who generally enjoyed lower wealth and status but could still invest in local shipping opportunities. These stories are told in the invaluable *Borth: A Seaborn Village* by Terry Davies (2004), from which most of my social history is taken. Davies illustrates the social divide between seafarers and farming families with a telling anecdote about Will Scissors, so called because of his sharp tongue. One report from the 1890s has it that this sea captain

was in chapel on a warm Sunday, totally relaxed, with his eyes closed. A popular young firebrand of a preacher was pontificating about being close to God. Seeing an apparently sleeping member of the congregation, he decided to bridge the

<sup>14</sup> These are views that do not reflect its former uses as peat for home fires before coal arrived in the village, for bee-keeping and other practical activities.

---

recalcitrant by denouncing those who, even in the house of the Lord, were not paying attention or knowing the nearness of Him. As the congregation followed the preacher's stern gaze, Will suddenly opened his eyes. He looked around and instantly understood the situation and, staring straight back into the preacher's eyes, he said "Pah! I have been nearer the Lord than you will ever be in your pulpit. I have seen his great works and how he manifests himself in the wilds of the vast Atlantic. He has always been with me, guiding me through storms you couldn't imagine in your worst nightmares. Whilst I have felt his great comforting presence, you and your ilk hereabouts have merely sheltered under a hedge". (p. 77)

But since technology changes places, the viability of the shipping industry from the ports of Aberdovey (Welsh: *Aberdyfi*) and Aberystwyth from which Borth mariners sailed was ultimately destroyed by the arrival of the railways that shifted Borth's economy towards tourism, so that by comparison with other coastal towns it is now untypically anglicized, serving also as a dormer suburb for students at Aberystwyth University. Still, in the 2011 census (Nomis, n.d.), 43% of the residents of Borth were largely Welsh speaking, and locals of all kinds harbour dislike of thoughtless Midlanders making nuisances of themselves through inconsiderate use of noisy jet skis on Borth waters. Because of their Midlands accents, they are sometimes known as "Yow-Yows", as when on first arrival one says to another: "Yow unload the jet ski and oy'll boy an oyce cream!" ("you unload the jet ski and I'll buy an ice-cream"). Wulfrunians (natives of Wolverhampton) can even laugh at themselves on holiday at Borth. "If you talk to anyone local, tell them your great grandma was born in Caernarvon. I'm not having anyone overcharged for Curly Wurlys"<sup>15</sup>. "This is going to be awesome, like a nature documentary." "It's nice here, isn't it?" "Yes, if you like midges, Costcutters [the Nisa store again], and not being able to pronounce place names." These are lines from the episode "Dead Man's Caravan" in the British television sitcom *Raised by Wolves* (Moran et al., 2016) inspired by Caitlin and Caroline Moran's memories of their childhood on a Wolverhampton Council Estate. It stars a dysfunctional family whose heavy accents are the medium of improbable eloquence that doesn't save them from the breadline. In this episode they stay in a caravan at Ynyslas inherited from their grandfather. Rainclouds loom, but do not break and the family blissfully reunites over a campfire on the beach.

It was not just shipping but farming that gave ground to tourism. We were one of the first caravans on Y-Fron. I have a dim memory of a scene when it was still predominantly a farm run by Mr. Morris, a wiry man with a kindly attitude of slight uncertainty and mild retreat, standing in tall gumboots near a barbed-wired fence and an ancient, rusty trough. He was ever the farmer, ministering to sheep rather than holiday-makers. My compassion for his departing way of life took no account of my family's presence as caravan owners, and we, as much as anyone, abhorred the garish, polychrome blight of vans that spread across the contours of *other* rolling green fields in coastal Wales.

---

<sup>15</sup> This refers to a two-tier price system for tourists and locals, which my mother used sometimes to dodge by shopping in Aberystwyth supermarkets.

Despite our contribution to the local economy, I was always reminded on visits in the 1950s and 60s of my status as an outsider due to the gloom of what I now know realize were older and more serious tensions between England and Wales weighing on Borth from afar. At about the age of ten, near the railway crossing on the road that ties the church to the village, I plucked up courage to ask the time of a very tall, erect, slow-moving, elderly man dressed from head to toe in black, including a curiously rounded, wide-brimmed hat and a flash of white from a dog collar. I think he was a Methodist minister. With sombre dignity, he unbuttoned a pocket in his waistcoat and slowly withdrew a gold watch on a chain from which he read the time—in Welsh! He certainly knew I was English, for after a suitably agonising interval he reluctantly recited it in English. I felt he was making a point. He probably grew up at a time when nineteenth century children were still made to wear the “Welsh Not,” a wooden or slate board, as a punishment for speaking the native language at school. I well remember the strangeness of overhearing the son of the headmaster of the school on Borth hill talking to his mother in perfect English and receiving replies in fluent Welsh as I passed the gate of the high-walled playground on my way up to the caravan. Yet my shock at Alan Michelson’s analogy between *Y Gors/The Bog* and Monty Python is that my social barriers with Borth locals of my age were most fully dissolved as I was watching the shipwrecked mariner staggering up the beach in the very first episode of that series sitting with Anthony and his father Aran in Bel-Air, his parents’ house, and grocery store. I thought it must be an odd kind of religious programme before the penny dropped, and Anthony and I began roaring with laughter at the same instant, while Aran looked on in an indignant state of bewildered disapproval<sup>16</sup>. A cosmopolitan bond was sweeping the younger generations together across the whole country. Around this time pink dinosaur prints appeared on Borth pavements, leading to some houses but not others. It’s likely that the perpetrators, whose identities have never been discovered, thought the chosen owners were dinosaurs of one kind or another, and worthy of a shock. There are rumours of an 8 mm film in an Aberystwyth bank vault of Jimmy Hendrix, the supremo of American rock guitarists, walking barefoot on Borth beach, carrying his Fender Stratocaster. I possess a fake poster of the concert dated 22 October that he certainly did not give in the Cabin Bar of the Friendship Inn, the pulsating heart of Borth counterculture, where those with dandruff on their jacket collars or white bras beneath their tops lived in fear of exposure from its flashing ultra-violet lights. But Hendrix did tour mid-Wales in 1967, allegedly driven by Johnny Morris, a musical promoter and son of the proprietors of our very own caravan site (Shrubsole, 2011). Fame by association! In a fantasy appended to this account, Hendrix, who did compose tracks inspired by elemental waters<sup>17</sup>, is listening to the waves on his way back to Borth, and imagines he hears the bells of Aberdovey that are described in a popular song based on the legend of the bells of a sunken lost kingdom called Cante’r Gwaelod (The Hendrix hundreds, 2012),

<sup>16</sup> Aran’s own showmanship was more practically demonstrated as captain of Borth lifeboat when, in preparation for sending up a flare to bring in the crew from whatever they were doing in the village for the next sea- or cliff-rescue, he would dramatically hold back a gaggle of onlookers, including myself, with a theatrical sweep of his arm and cry: “stand back! STAND BACK!!” in the richest and most vibrant of voices, then “woosh,” up and off it went, “BANG!”

<sup>17</sup> For example, “Castles Made of Sand” (1967) and “1983 (A Merman Should I Turn To Be)” (1968).

---

the “Welsh Atlantis”, that can sometimes be heard ringing beneath the waves near the actual remains of a petrified forest that regularly surfaces on Borth beach. What a clash with that earlier invasion of beach missionaries, the Children’s Special Service Mission, an evangelical Christian group who sacrificed their holidays to teach us hymns we bellowed out against the wind to the accompaniment of a peddle organ. We made suitable hand gestures:

Do you want a pilot? (point)  
 Signal unto Jesus (beckon)  
 Do you want a pilot (point)  
 Bid him come on board (beckon)  
 For He will safely guide (steer)  
 Across the ocean wide (sweep)  
 Until at last we reach the heavenly harbour (crook elbow)

Why should the devil have all the good tunes? This was before Borth became one of many places in Mid Wales subject to an influx of English hippies in the 1970s, where they were generally warmly welcomed (Danks, 2015). Yet the weight of older grievances persisted.

Conquered by England in the thirteenth century, Wales has sometimes been called England’s first colony. Deprived of legal rights and subject to summary dispossession for aeons, its citizens mounted many rebellions that were brutally suppressed by English overlords (Davies, 2007, pp. 158–217). After the cultural recalibration of a distinctive Welsh national identity in the nineteenth century, abiding resentment of this fractious past in the twentieth was focused on the obligatory supply of plentiful Welsh water to the densely populated cities of Northern England and the Midlands. To this day an average of 300 million litres a day is extracted from the Caban Cock Reservoir along the Elam Valley aqueduct to supply the city of Birmingham with domestic water after an Act of Parliament passed the Birmingham Corporation Water Act of 1892 for the compulsory purchase of the total catchment area of the Elam and Claerwen Valleys. A hundred people lost their homes as a result. Leaving cultural sensitivities out of account, it made perfect engineering sense for a country with a sparse population, high rainfall, and a mountainous topography of deep valleys to supply high volumes of clean water for domestic use in the growing industrial cities of a generally flatter, more densely populated country.

I was dimly aware of these issues as a child, and on one occasion was implicated personally. My mother was an inveterate bargain-hunter because of having lived through two world wars. By now she had her own car. One day I set off with her on an interminable car journey from Borth in a direction we had never ventured on before in search of a cheap Welsh dresser which was to proudly adorn the kitchen of our Wolverhampton home for ever more. At that time the second-hand dealers of Brighton—a city said at the time to be collectively “helping the police with their enquiries”—were buying up a glut of cheap dressers from Wales and on-selling them at huge profit. Cutting out the middleman, mother took me on a long drive to an isolated

---

rural Welsh hamlet where furniture was going cheap because its valley was about to be flooded to supply England with water. I remember the eeriness of observing a cluster of houses around a church whose spire would soon be underwater, and the poverty of a community where a smiling young farm worker with an abnormally large head had already sold his brains to the medical department of the University of Aberystwyth for £20.00. Could this really have been Capel Celyn, the community in the Tryweryn valley, where 48 people were displaced in 1965 to flood a valley that would supply water to heavy industry in Liverpool and the Wirral? Not only was the private bill sponsored by Liverpool City Council designed to overrule Welsh local authorities, it was vehemently opposed by all but one of the thirty-six Welsh Members of Parliament (the other one abstained). According to contemporary photographs the chapel did not have a spire, but both the year of the flooding and the length of the journey from Borth seem right. How the precious, honey-coloured dresser was delivered to Wolverhampton I do not know, but it would not have fitted in my mother's Morris Minor 1000.

This flooding was the catalyst for the growth of the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, and for various attempts at sabotage around the reservoir. It eventually spread to the terrorist use of another of the four elements: fire, for between 1979 and 1994, over a similar period to the Troubles in Ireland, Meibon Glyndŵr (Sons of Glyndŵr) and other Welsh militant groups firebombed three hundred English-owned holiday homes in Wales, fortunately without loss of life. The fires lent savage irony to a contemporary coal market campaign spoofed in a BBC TV comedy sketch: "Come Home to a Real Fire: Buy a Cottage in Wales" (Welsh not British, 2015). In 1977 the Welsh rugby player Phil Bennet raised the hackles of his team before a cup-tie with England with a speech in which he urged: "Look what these bastards have done to Wales. They've taken our coal, our water, our steel. They buy our homes and only live in them for a fortnight every year. What have they given us? Absolutely nothing. We've been exploited, raped, controlled, and punished by the English—and that's who you are playing this afternoon," though in later accounts he put a comical slant on his motives (Bennett, 1977). Disregard for the hydrological, social, cultural, and linguistic impacts of English domination of Wales contributed to pressures for the devolution of the legislature and the establishment of the Welsh parliament in 1999, for which support has only strengthened during the pandemic.

### Coastal Dreaming of a Midlander

I confess to shameful pride in an imaginary pecking order amongst Midlanders who spent childhood holidays in Borth. I smile when I think of them waxing lyrical about old Borth as a timeless idyll, asking myself if they are old enough to remember all that had gone before their time? The ferry station at Ynyslas for crossing the estuary to Aberdovey? The lumpy tar on the beach from passing ships that stuck to your clothes and skin? The Pantyfedwen Hotel, that stuccoed white elephant adorned the skyline near the station, whose demolition in 1976 rid Borth of its most prominent landmark? Pairs of cartwheels on the beach whose spokes were used to manhandle heavy wooden fishing boats in and out of the sea? The guns stationed at Towyn (Welsh:

*Tywyn*) firing shells at targets towed by military aircraft out at sea? The concrete railway bridge over the tracks at the station with its lonely view of the Fors Cochno at the top where I would grip the railings as the Cambrian Coast Express approached to see if I was brave enough to stand my ground when it enveloped me in acrid-smelling clouds of steam before it thundered to a halt?

*Steam.* Steam power and the chemical composition of H<sub>2</sub>O were discovered in my neck of the woods during the so-called Midlands Renaissance in the late eighteenth century. They went along with the canalization of Britain (Uglow, 2002) and the mindset that straightened the Leri River from its former winding course into a gash across the bog that emptied into Dovey estuary instead of formerly at Borth beach (Carty et al., 2018, 08:12). The kinds of hydrological relations imposed on Wales by England evolved from the scientific conception of water that Ivan Illich (1986) contended has transformed it from the material basis of myth, poetry, and dreams into a utilitarian commodity of metered and recycled cleaning fluid that deprives our dreams of “a stable, dense, slow, and fertile water stuff that obscurely vegetates within us” (p. 7)<sup>18</sup>. In all pre-modern societies:

What the rivers or beaches wash from those who cross them [in death] is not destroyed. All mythic sources feed a source that is not destroyed. All mythic water feed a source that is located on the other side. The streams carry the memories that Lethe has washed from the feet of the dead [...] This well of remembrance that the Greeks called “Mnemosyne.” In her clear waters, the residue of lived-out lives float like the specks of fine sand at the bottom of a bubbling spirit [...] In this way the world of the living is constantly nourished by the flow from Mnemosyne’s lap through which dream water ferries to the living those deeds that the shadows no longer need. (Illich, 1986, p. 31)

Fear not, Reader: I am not about to claim to be in communication with the dead! But I do claim that the waters of Borth sustain me because of the peculiarities of my dream life. If I hesitate to explain this, it is not because of squeamish concerns about personal privacy, but because I fear erasing an invaluable psychic resource by drawing it too far into the light of consciousness and writing about something of slender public significance or interest.

It is very common to have recurring dreams about certain feelings, actions, or themes, but apparently much rarer to dream for decade after decade about a particular place<sup>19</sup>. I dream about Borth much more often than my hometown of Wolverhampton—the real cauldron of my family dynamic—or of Australia where

<sup>18</sup> Of course, Borth itself is now supplied from a dammed reservoir at Craigyfistyll abstracted from a water treatment works at Bont-goch. The whole village was plumbed into a mainline sewage system the late '60s or early '70s, of which the treatment system is at the eastern side of Otter's Island, whereas before all the houses on the seafront had their waste drain into the shingle (A. Morris, personal communication, 15 May, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Relph, Perth psychotherapist, whom I would like to thank for long friendship and fascinating discussions of typical dream patterns.

---

I have lived for more than thirty years, while a run of dreams about New Zealand abruptly sank into the dark swamp of the undreamable as soon as I had visited it!

Since childhood, Borth has served my psyche as a pliable, archaeological layer of living dreamscape in which any real or imaginary point within a roughly triangular area bounded by the estuary, the coast, and the hills behind our caravan site, may suddenly be activated as a “magic spot” for dreaming, even if I’ve never physically visited it. Neither does it include momentarily memorable places just outside that area, such as family cliff walks from Aberystwyth or down the lovely valley to Wallog for picnics near the mysterious lime kilns and distinctive spit on the beach. Undoubtedly, this privileged dream region is distinct from a “bro” (short for *brogarwch*), the Welsh term for the physical area to which you and your community belong. Anthony defines his bro as what he can see in all directions from the church cemetery on the rocky knoll near the Leri, unless it is too far away to be physically accessible, like hills in the distance (A. Morris, personal communication, 27 April, 2022). Terry Davies’ bro is the twenty square miles of hinterland “between the Dyfi estuary and through the village of Borth southwards to the Clarach estuary” (Terry Davies Ceramics, n.d.), far beyond my own limit of Aberwhenal, the next bay up from Borth cliffs. I can hardly match these citizens’ depth of emotional attachment to these places, nor do I imagine that their dreaming is any less robust. I speak no Welsh and am not immersed in Welsh culture nearly as much as I would like to be, but then my dreamscape is not a place in the same way. It is a moving feast in a double sense. It moves with me to whichever country I go to and is itself in movement as a living creature, throwing up what seems an inexhaustible wealth of real or imaginary locations for its quixotic enterprises within its precinct, though it may occasionally form a *capriccio* that incorporates somewhere else such as the plumb pudding mound of Castle Hill from my Cambridge days, as if it had always risen next to the amusement arcade at the North end of the village. And except for our caravan, that predictable scenario of Family Romance, where dream flowers have grown through holes in the floor since its destruction many years ago and the deaths one by one of all the immediate members of my family who stayed in it (Figure 1)—all my dream locations are new. One of them places its focus on an unreachable spot twenty yards or so into the bog from the road beyond the station, or in a damp and unalluring field enclosed by hedges on the crown of a hill behind Y-Fron: places I’ve never been to in waking life but mean to! Or they may be expansively apocalyptic.

I was on the beach under a slate grey sky. Suddenly, out of the water, there rose to a height of fifty feet a gigantic rectangular gantry about two hundred feet long by thirty feet high, festooned with sets of twin lamps and other, more obscure apparatus. It shed shining water as it rose under no visible source of propulsion. The suddenness of its rise and arrest in the sky were striking.

The next moment it leapt the roofs of Borth High Street and through a paradox of scale installed itself within the dilapidated shell of the long-gone Lerry Garage, where a vintage, 16-cylinder Isotta Fraschini luxury saloon, “big enough to raise a family in,” had stood rotting for many years. How the metal framework got over the roof and shrank its proportions to fit within the walls, I don’t know, but there it was, visible

enough through the broad, wooden doors, shedding its remaining water, pregnant with menace, and possessively guarded by smartly dressed, unfazed soldiers in boots and gaiters. They looked British, but the apparatus had the feeling of an alien invasion, though not in any faddish way. It was *intrinsically* mysterious. What would it do, apart from turn its lights on? No one knew, but the attention it was receiving made it certain that another, potentially catastrophic event would soon follow.

**Figure 1**

*Author's Family Caravan and Father's Car at Borth, Wales*



*Note.* School drawing, crayon. Late 1950s. Source: In possession of the author.

Not every dream combines industrial equipment, automobiles, and water<sup>20</sup>. I chose this dream rather than another one about enthusiastically swimming down the High Street where the waves of Cardigan Bay had reached the rooftops, because although my psychical “gift” attracts me to the oneiric qualities of *Y Gors/The Bog*, I do not think they reflect any of the film’s environmental and social messages. I have heard what seems to me the trivial interpretations that recurrent dreams of single places reflect either buried traumas or sanctuaries from them. Rather, I think, mine represents the structure of my subconscious, but not my adult subconscious. So far, they have shunned recent developments such as the multi-Purpose Reefs or the anglicization of the village and, like children, do not take much responsibility for anything. I think this is because the dreamscape represents the structure of my childhood subconscious. Perhaps one can only know a place by living there, though another view is that it is only in the interval between first arrival, when nothing is

<sup>20</sup> For the classic text on the mutual entanglements of technology and the pastoral ideal since Shakespeare, see Leo Marx (1964).

clear, and settling in, when everything becomes habitual, that you really start to see, if not to know, a place (Anderson, 2016). As a holiday-making child I started this process over and over again. Borth became always both familiar and newly strange. Thus, although my dreams of Borth are often frightening, and sometimes reassuring, if I were to nominate a dominant feeling-tone in which these feelings of terror or safety are couched, I would say it is one of jubilant, exploratory wonder at Borth and its waters, and for that I'm really grateful.

## References

- Anderson, B. (2016, January 21). Frameworks of comparison. *London Review of Books*, 38(2), 15–18. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n02/benedict-anderson/frameworks-of-comparison>
- Bagnall, B. (Executive producer). (2021). *The lakes with Simon Reeve* [TV series]. The Garden Productions.
- Bennett, P. (1977, March 5). "Look what these bastards have done to Wales", pregame Wales v England—1977 [Speech audio recording]. *Speakola: All speeches great and small*. <https://speakola.com/sports/phil-bennett-wales-england-1977>
- Carlson, A. (2020). Environmental aesthetics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Winter 2020 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/environmental-aesthetics/>
- Carty, A. M., Jones, N., & Sills-Jones, D. (2018, June). Y Gors/The Bog [Video]. *Screenworks*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.37186/swrks/8.2/4>
- Castaing-Taylor, L., & Paravel, V. (2012). *Leviathan* [Film]. Arrête ton Cinéma; Cinereach; Creative Capital; Film Study Center; John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; LEF Moving Image Fund; McMillan-Stewart Foundation; Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL).
- Connected Communities. (2014). *Towards hydrocitizenship. Connecting communities with and through responses to interdependent, multiple water issues*. <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project/towards-hydrocitizenship-connecting-communities-with-and-through-responses-to-interdependent-multiple-water-issues/>
- Cowperthwaite, G. (2013). *Blackfish* [Film]. CNN Films; Manny O Productions.
- Danks, J. (2015). *Towards the West; a varied crowd: The stories of the incomers to mid Wales in the 1970s*. The Friends of Ceredigion Museum.
- Davies, J. (2007). *A history of Wales* (Rev. ed.). Penguin.
- Davies, T. (2004). *Borth: A seaborne village*. Gwasg Carreg Gwalch.
- Didion, J. (1969). *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. André Deutsch.
- Doyle, A. C. (1902). *The hounds of the Baskervilles*. George Newnes.

---

Gooding, J. (2007). The politics of a panorama: Robert Dale and King George Sound. In N. Etherington (Ed.), *Mapping colonial conquest: Australia and Southern Africa* (pp. 66–78). University of Western Australia Press.

Hendrix, J. (1967). *Castles made of sand* [Song]. The Jimi Hendrix Experience.

Hendrix, J. (1968). *1983 (A merman should I turn to be)* [Song]. The Jimi Hendrix Experience.

Hepburn, R. (1966). Contemporary aesthetics and the neglect of natural beauty. In B. Williams & A. Montefiore (Eds.), *British analytic philosophy* (pp. 285–310). Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hydrocitizenship. (2015, March 15). *The freshwater blog: The voice of aquatic life*. <https://freshwaterblog.net/2015/03/15/hydrocitizenship/>

Illich, I. (1986). *H<sub>2</sub>O and the waters of forgetfulness*. Marion Boyars.

Lackoff, G. (2001). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Locke, J. (2005). *The selected political writings of John Locke: Texts, background selections, sources, interpretations* (P. E. Sigmund, Ed.). W. W. Norton.

Luostarinen, K. (2013). *Kotona kylässä* [At home in a village] [Film]. Kiti Luostarinen Production Ky.

Madsen, M. (2013). *Into eternity: A film for the future* [Film]. Atmo Media Network; Film i Väst; Global HDTV; Magic Hour Films ApS; Mouka Filmi Oy; Sveriges Television (SVT); Yleisradio (YLE).

Marx, L. (1964). *The machine in the garden: Technology and the pastoral ideal in America*. Oxford University Press.

Michelson, A. (2005). *TwoRow II* [Video]. <https://www.alanmichelson.com/tworow-ii/2019/1/5/tworow-ii-excerpt>

Mighall, T. M., Timberlake, S., Foster, I. D. L., Krupp, E., & Singh, S. (2009). Ancient copper and lead pollution records from a raised bog complex in Central Wales, UK. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 36(7), 1504–1515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2009.03.005>

Minha-Ha, T. T. (1993). The totalizing quest for meaning. In M. Renov (Ed.), *Theorizing documentary* (pp. 90–107). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873083>

Moran, C. [Caitlin] (Writer), Moran, C. [Caroline] (Writer), & Fitzgibbon, I. (Director). (2016, April 6). *Dead man's caravan* (Series 2, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In K. Allen & C. Leddy (Executive Producers), *Raised by wolves*. Big Talk Productions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQ8toyYnPmQ>

Murray, R. (2009). *The end of the line* [Film]. Arcane Pictures; Calm Productions; Dartmouth Films; The Fish Film.

---

Nomis. Official census and labour market statistics. (n.d.). *Borth parish. Local Area Report for areas in England and Wales*. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=W04000362>

Payne, T., Jones, O., Rowland, A., Hourahane, Sh., Plows, A., Roe, M., Morus-Baird, G., Lloyd Francis, J., Hall, J., Jordao, A., Penrhyn Jones, S., Gunn, T., Biggs, I., Jones, N., Lyons, A., & Hywel Griffiths, A. (2017). Dramatizing the anthropocene through social media: The spatiotemporal coordinates of hydrocitizens. *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 5(1), 100–134. <https://doi.org/10.5250/RESILIENCE.5.1.0100>

Perez, F. (2003). *Suite Habana* [Film]. Wanda Visión S.A.; Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industrias Cinematográficos (ICAIC).

Psihoyos, L. (2009). *The cove* [Film]. Diamond Docs, Fish Films, Oceanic Preservation Society, Participant Media, Quickfire Films.

Purdy, J. (2015). *After nature: A politics for the Anthropocene*. Harvard University Press.

Saar, M., & Palang, H. (2009). The dimensions of place meanings. *Living Reviews in Landscape Research*, 3(3), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.12942/lrlr-2009-3>

Shrubsole, G. (2011, January 30). Jimi Hendrix's Welsh experience. *After the end of history: How can the past inform the future*. <https://guyshrubsole.wordpress.com/2011/01/30/jimi-hendrix-welsh-experience/>

Skrine, J.H. (1878). *Uppingham by the sea: A narrative of the year at Borth*. Macmillan.

Stevenson, P. (2014). *Ceredigion folk tales*. The History Press.

Terry Davies Ceramics. (n.d.). *Statement*. <http://terrydaviesceramics.com/statement.html>

Tew, E. (2015, February 20). Water water everywhere (part 2). *Esther Tew*. <https://esthertew.com/exhibitions-installations/>

The Hendrix hundreds. (2012, March 1). *No Good Boyo*. <http://alfanalf.blogspot.com/2012/03/hendrix-hundreds.html>

Uglow, J. (2002). *The lunar men: The friends who made the future, 1730–1810*. Faber and Faber.

von Humboldt, A. (1849). *Cosmos: A sketch of a physical description of the universe* (E. C. Ott, Trans.). (Vol. 2). Henry G. Bohn.

Welsh not British. (2015, December 13). *Come home to a real fire: Buy a cottage in Wales. Not the Nine O'clock News* [Video]. Facebook21. [https://facebook.com/watch/?v=966889406716055&\\_rdr](https://facebook.com/watch/?v=966889406716055&_rdr)

---

<sup>21</sup> Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. In the Russian Federation, it is recognised as an extremist organisation and its activity is prohibited.