

GCE AS/A Level
in English Literature

Owen Sheers

Skirrid Hill

(Seren Books)

by Dr Catriona Coutts





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Biography

Owen Sheers is one of the most exciting and versatile contemporary English-language Welsh authors. He has written poems, novels, plays, screenplays, articles and extended non-fiction.

Owen Sheers was born in Suva, the capital of Fiji, in 1974. He moved to London aged three and then to Abergavenny aged nine. He began writing at primary school in Abergavenny because, in his own words, “the response to every school event or trip was to write a poem about it.”¹ At the age of ten he won the Abergavenny agricultural show poetry competition. Later he attended King Henry VIII Comprehensive in Abergavenny (the former school of novelist and cultural critic, Raymond Williams).

He went on to read English at New College, Oxford but found “the stultifying academic atmosphere”² restrictive and for a while he stopped composing poetry. However, a week-long poetry workshop with Paul Muldoon at the Hay Festival revitalised his interest and he began to write again and, in 1997, enrolled on the poetry section of the Creative Writing M. A. at the University of East Anglia. There he was tutored by soon-to-be Poet Laureate Andrew Motion who rated his work highly, describing it as “sharp, fresh, clear and ambitious,” and branding him a poet to watch in the new millennium.³ Sheers in turn praised Motion both for constructive criticism and for guiding his

reading – it was Motion who introduced him to the Second World War poet Keith Douglas.⁴ Douglas would later become the subject of Sheers’ one-man play *Unicorns, almost*.

Living in London after completing his MA, Sheers worked as a researcher for *The Big Breakfast*, and as a freelance writer. His first poetry collection, *The Blue Book*, was published by Seren in 2000. It received generally positive reviews and sold well. It was shortlisted for the Forward prize for best first collection. Around this time, Sheers received an Eric Gregory Award and won the Vogue Talent Contest for Young Writers. His second poetry collection, *Skirrid Hill*, was also published by Seren. It appeared in 2005 and won a Society of Authors Somerset Maugham Award. Reviewers noted that this was a more mature and controlled collection.

In between these two collections, Sheers published *The Dust Diaries* in 2004. This unusual work sees the author go in search of a distant ancestor of his, Arthur Cripps, who was a missionary in what is now Zimbabwe. It mixes biography and fiction to tell the story of Cripps and his efforts to gain justice for the African people, as well as the story of Sheers’ search for him.

In 2007, Sheers published his first novel, *Resistance*, an alternative history in which the Nazis invaded Britain. It follows the experience of a group of women in a farming valley on the Welsh border whose husbands

1 Owen Sheers quoted in Nicholas Wroe, ‘Verses from the Valleys: A Life in Writing: Rugby-loving Young Welsh Poet Owen Sheers Talks to Nicholas Wroe’, *The Observer*, 30 September, 2000, p. B11.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Sheers quoted in Nicholas Wroe.

have left without telling them to join the underground resistance, and the complex relations they form with the occupying German troops. The novel has been translated into 11 languages and in 2011 it was adapted into a film with Sheers writing the screenplay.

In 2007 Sheers went to America as a Dorothy and Lewis B. Culman Fellow at the New York Public Library, remaining there until 2009. Much of his writing remained focused on Wales though and in 2009, Sheers published *White Ravens* as part of Seren's project to retell stories from the Mabinogion. This short novel reworks the story of Branwen, Ferch Llŷr. In the same year, Sheers presented a six-part television series called *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, where he examined poems that treated various aspects of Britain's diverse landscape (including an episode on Welsh-Argentinean poet, Lynette Roberts, who lived and worked in Llanybri in Carmarthenshire). An accompanying anthology with a wider selection of poetry and a Foreword by Sheers appeared in the same year and the series was issued on DVD in 2010.

For Easter 2011, Sheers wrote the site-specific play *The Passion* for the National Theatre of Wales. The production took place over 72 hours in Port Talbot with local actor Michael Sheen directing and starring. Sheers also produced a novel version of the play entitled *The Gospel of Us*. In 2014 he wrote another site-specific play for the National Theatre of Wales and the World War I Centenary Art Commissions – *Mametz*. Inspired by Sheers' poem 'Mametz Wood', and incorporating some of the work of Anglo-Welsh poet David Jones, it was staged in a woodland near Usk, Monmouthshire and told the story of the bloody First World War battle of Mametz Wood where 4,000 Welsh soldiers were killed or wounded.

Other drama by Sheers has also dealt with war. The 2012 play *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* was based on the experience of wounded

soldiers who also formed most of the cast. The widely acclaimed *Pink Mist* (2013) began as a radio play before being staged by the Old Vic at Bristol and later touring the UK. It tells the story of three young men from Bristol who enlist and join the war in Afghanistan, the traumas they face there, and the difficulties of readjusting to civilian life. Yet the play does not promote an oversimplified anti-war message, exploring the beneficial and appealing side of army life in addition to the darker side. The above mentioned *Unicorns, almost*, based on the life of war poet Keith Douglas, premiered at the Hay Festival in 2018, while his drama written for BBC Radio 4, *If I Should Go Away*, was inspired by Welsh writer Alun Lewis' Second World War writings.

In 2011, Sheers became the first writer in residence at the Welsh Rugby Union, spending a year in the international men's team's camp. A keen rugby player himself, he relished the experience which produced the non-fiction work *Calon*, published in 2014.

His second novel, *I Saw a Man* was published in 2015. In 2016 he composed *The Green Hollow*, a 'film-poem' inspired by the Aberfan tragedy to mark its fiftieth anniversary. The production starred well-known Welsh actors like Eve Myles, Michael Sheen, Sian Phillips and Jonathan Pryce. 2018 saw the appearance of his second film-poem 'To Provide for All: A Poem in the Voice of the NHS', and his extended meditation on the battle of Mametz Wood, simply entitled *Mametz*. *Mametz* drew on his previous creative work inspired by the battle and has since been translated into Welsh with a bilingual edition produced.

In addition to the key works mentioned above, Sheers has written numerous articles, mainly for *The Independent*, travel writing, essays of literary criticism on poets like Dylan Thomas and David Jones, and Forewords to various books including the Library of Wales publication *In the Green Tree* (short

stories and letters by Alun Lewis), and Martin Parr's photography book on Wales. This last reveals his interest in other arts – an interest that is also clear in his poem 'The Heath' written to accompany Andy Sewell's photography book of the same title. He also wrote the libretto for Rachel Portman's oratorio *The Water Diviner's Tale*.

From early in his career he has expressed his desire to introduce more people to

modern poetry.⁵ He is a patron of various organisations and enterprises, including the *New Welsh Review* journal and the Cheltenham Poetry Festival. He is also co-founder and a trustee of the Black Mountains College project – an establishment set up to provide further education on sustainability and the environment.

5 Sheers quote in Nicholas Wroe.

Contexts

Welsh Cultural Contexts

Owen Sheers was born in Fiji, studied at Oxford and the University of East Anglia, and has lived and worked in London and New York. However, he is still a distinctly Welsh writer. Much of his work deals with Wales and he himself states that he has always identified as Welsh; “there’s no doubt that for as long as I can remember, even when living in London between the ages of 3 and 9, I’ve identified as Welsh.” He adds that for him that sense of identity has a lot to do with family: “My Mother is the dominant force in our family, and her father, my Tad Cu, was immersed in Welsh culture, language, way of life. He was a hugely attractive personality and I’m sure when I thought of being Welsh as a child what I really thought of was of being part of that family and their heritage.”⁶

Sheers’ Welsh home town of Abergavenny also had a huge influence on his writing. He remembers Abergavenny as “always being full of poetry,”⁷ and his primary school encouraged writing. This may not be a uniquely Welsh phenomenon but poetry is prized and encouraged from an early age in Wales. The landscape of Wales, particularly that surrounding Abergavenny, has been a huge influence on his poetry. The local hill, Skirrid Fawr [literally Great Skirrid], gives its name to the collection *Skirrid Hill*, and the hill itself appears several times in the collection, having

been introduced in his first poetry collection *The Blue Book*. The poem ‘Skirrid’ from that first collection is worth reading alongside *Skirrid Hill*, as it sets up some of the themes and images that will be so important in the later poetry collection. Skirrid is presented as: “This hare-lipped hill, this broken spine of soil/ that stretches across my window...” Here the physical divide of the hill that will be a crucial image in *Skirrid Hill* is emphasised, as is the closeness the speaker feels to the hill. The mention of the hill being “stretched across my window,” suggests familiarity and affection. Moreover the poem is divided into two sections, the first entitled ‘Facing West’ and the second ‘Facing East’, emphasising its divided nature and positioning on the border of Wales, both of which will be very important in *Skirrid Hill*, as we shall see. In *Skirrid Hill* Sheers explains that the name comes from the Welsh word ‘ysgyrid’ which in turn derives from ‘ysgariad’ meaning divorce or separation. This also gives the collection one of its major themes. Thus the Welsh landscape forms a crucial part of the context in which *Skirrid Hill* was produced. Sheers also makes use of the local legend that the hill was split at the time of Christ’s crucifixion.

Sheers’ Welshness has not always been recognised by reviewers, however, particularly reviewers from outside of Wales. One review of his debut poetry collection by Nicholas Wroe described him as “living in Wales” rather than as Welsh, though it noted that the collection contained experiences from Sheers’

6 Owen Sheers, Correspondence with Catriona Coumts in preparation of these materials.

7 Nicholas Wroe, ‘Verses from the Valleys: A Life in Writing: Rugby-loving Young Welsh Poet Owen Sheers Talks to Nicholas Wroe’, *The Observer*, 30 September, 2000, p. B11.

upbringing in Abergavenny and the influence of his primary school on his poetry writing.⁸ However, recognising Sheers as a Welsh poet is crucial in order to fully understand his work.

It is also important to take into account the fact that Sheers is a Welsh writer who uses the English language. There is a long and accomplished tradition of English-language writing from Wales. In the twentieth century in particular, there are many instances of Welsh writers who have done the same thing as Sheers, either from choice, or, more often, because they did not learn Welsh or were not proficient in the language. The processes that brought this about are important to consider when studying the work of poets like Sheers.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Welsh regions like the Valleys became heavily industrialised and attracted workers from outside as well as inside Wales, a migration that naturally increased the amount of English spoken in Wales. English gradually became the main language of the workplace, although there were still plenty of Welsh-speaking communities. By 1901, the proportion of people speaking Welsh in Wales slipped below 50% for the first time.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, in 1847, three commissioners had been sent by Parliament to ascertain the state of education in Wales. These commissioners spoke no Welsh so often had to rely on interpreters or evidence presented by English speakers, often Anglican vicars. Unsurprisingly, this led to misunderstandings, and while educational provision in some places was undoubtedly poor, the commissioners' report condemned the entirety of the Welsh people for being lazy, backward, ignorant and immoral, and

laid the blame for all these faults on the Welsh language and Nonconformity.⁹ This report is often known as The Blue Books after the colour of the volumes containing the commissioners' findings, and the episode became known as *Brad y Llyfrau Gleison* (Treachery of the Blue Books). Consequently when Education Acts were passed in 1870 and 1889 to provide universal education in Wales, these Acts also mandated that the language of this education was to be English. As a result, many children grew up speaking Welsh at home but English in school and the literature they studied was English literature. Gradually, English came to be seen as the language of progress and high culture, necessary for gaining good jobs. Many parents stopped speaking Welsh to their children and encouraged them to focus on English instead. Children who were caught speaking Welsh in school could be punished by being made to wear the Welsh Not – the child wearing it at the end of the school day was punished, usually beaten. These are the processes that led to the rise of a generation of talented Welsh authors: R. S. Thomas, Dylan Thomas, Emyr Humphreys, Glyn Jones, Rhys Davies, Alun Lewis, Gwyn Thomas, writing in English.

In spite of being written in English, the work of these writers was unmistakably Welsh in style and often in content. It depicted experiences common to the people of Wales of both languages and its style and vocabulary was often influenced by the Welsh language and the English dialects of Wales. At first this modern Anglophone Welsh literature was regarded with suspicion by Welsh-language cultural circles that were concerned that it would mis-portray Wales for an English

8 Ibid.

9 Historians and other scholars have seen the 1847 Report into the State of Education in Wales, the Blue Books, as underpinned by imperialist attitudes to Wales and the Welsh Language. See Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: Wales and Colonial Prejudice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011; original edition 1998).

audience (exemplified by the furore over Caradoc Evans's *My People* (1915), a book Lloyd George tried to ban). There was considerable overlap between English- and Welsh-language communities, however, and many writers like R. S. Thomas, Emyr Humphreys and Glyn Jones chose to learn Welsh as adults and some became involved in protests on behalf of the Welsh language. They continued to write mainly in English as that was the language in which they felt most proficient, but they used their English-language writing to benefit Wales. The rift between the two literatures was healed to a certain extent and work by English-language Welsh authors was accepted as being Welsh, in spite of the language in which it was written. Glyn Jones's 1968 study of Anglophone Welsh writing is entitled *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* (meaning Welsh and English are the two languages of Wales) and contemporary scholars often refer to the 'two literatures of Wales'.

The tradition of Welsh authors writing in English continued as, although Welsh gradually stopped being forbidden in schools, the teaching of Welsh and Welsh-medium teaching remained sporadic. Welsh was recognised as a core subject in Welsh schools by the British government in 1988,¹⁰ but only became compulsory up to the age of fourteen in all Welsh state schools from 1990.¹¹ The upper age limit was increased to sixteen in 1999.¹² Therefore writers of Owen Sheers' generation were often still taught in English and if their families were not Welsh-speaking,

or chose not to speak Welsh to their children, then the children did not learn Welsh. This linguistic divide is dramatised in the title poem of Sheers' collection *The Blue Book*, which first talks about the 1847 Blue Book reports and then turns to another blue book – his younger brother's Welsh exercise book. This brother, ten years younger, has, unlike the poet, had the opportunity to learn Welsh at school. The gulf the poet feels between himself and his brother: "ten years younger,/ but a hundred and fifty years and one tongue apart," is clear.

Sheers confirms that this poem was largely autobiographical:

Yes, I was of that generation who had parents or a parent who could speak Welsh but yet wasn't even taught Welsh in school as a second language. My younger brother was able to go through Welsh medium education, hence the poem the Blue Books, which is about how languages fade and grow in the span of single generations.¹³

Despite being unable to speak Welsh as a child he felt and still feels a closeness to it, "the language has always been around me, and I around it."¹⁴ It is also an important part of his heritage. His motivation for learning Welsh properly was his daughters' entering Welsh medium schools. Of this process he writes: "I'm learning an ancient language alongside all the freshness, newness of a 6 and a 3 year old. It's rather lovely, witnessing them step back into the linguistic river of their grandparents and great grandparents, and taking me by the hand with them..."¹⁵

10 John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 703.

11 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cymru/cymraeg/yriaith/tudalen/welsh.shtml#:~:text=Welsh%20became%20a%20compulsory%20subject%20for%20all%20pupils,years%2C%20from%20the%20ages%20of%205%20to%2016.>>

12 Ibid.

13 Owen Sheers, Correspondence with Catriona Coutts in preparation of these materials.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

The Welsh linguistic context is therefore important to take into account when reading Sheers' work – and he regularly includes Welsh words (often names of places) in *Skirrid Hill*. 'The Blue Book' is the clearest poetic expression of Sheers' thoughts on the Welsh language and his emotional relationship to it. Reading it alongside the poems from *Skirrid Hill* could be a useful exercise when considering him as a Welsh poet. It is also notable that he chose *The Blue Book* as a title not just for the poem but for his entire debut collection. This suggests that he is very well aware of the historical processes that have formed him as a Welsh writer in the English language.

Welsh Literary Contexts

Sheers sees himself as heir to a Welsh as well as a global English poetic tradition,¹⁶ and is very aware of other English-language Welsh writers. He cites R. S. Thomas as a huge influence on his writing, both stylistically and in subject matter.¹⁷ Indeed, he felt so great a debt to Thomas that he contacted

him after the publication of *The Blue Book*, sending him a copy of the collection and expressing his gratitude.¹⁸ The third poem in *Skirrid Hill*, 'Inheritance', is subtitled "after R. S. Thomas" (meaning in the style of, or influenced by). Sheers has written articles about Dylan Thomas as well as the screenplay for *A Visit to America*, a neo-noir thriller about a private eye assigned to trail Dylan Thomas on the poet's trip to America. He also wrote an admiring essay on David Jones' poem 'In Parenthesis' and a Foreword to the Library of Wales republication of *In the Green Tree* comprising stories and letters from India by the Welsh Second World War writer, Alun Lewis. His play *If I Should Go Away* is adapted from Lewis' writings. Sheers is therefore very well aware of writing in a tradition of English-language writers that come from, or have connections with, Wales.

Sheers also draws on Welsh-language literature in his work, in particular the Mabinogion. As noted in the biography he was one of the writers invited by Seren to write a modern reworking of one of the tales of the Mabinogion. *White Ravens* is a clever retelling that reveals great familiarity with the original tale and interestingly interprets

16 A decade after the publication of *Skirrid Hill*, Sheers showed his awareness of the interplay between the Welsh context and the wider global context. In an article discussing Sheers' two film-poems, Merlin Gable writes: "In the two works Sheers grapples with two great myths of modern Welsh history: the Aberfan disaster, which, with the flooding of Capel Celyn, is one of the defining moments of Welsh post-war history, and the NHS – our welfare state arguably much more integral to the Welsh structure of feeling than the English. That isn't to say that Sheers sees himself writing in any quintessentially Welsh mode here, he insists: 'I'm aware of a tension in myself that is that you don't want to be the writer who only writes on Welsh themes; I'm not interested in that. We live in a globalised international world and I suppose my aspirations with the form are to scale it up now to an international subject.' Sheers identifies climate change here." (Merlin Gable, 'A Monument to the Communal' <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2019/01/a-monument-to-the-communal/>). As we will see, environmental concerns are very important to Sheers and in issues such as this he balances his love for the local, particularly the landscape, with the knowledge that global action is necessary.

17 Owen Sheers, 'Faith in Verse', *The Independent*, 9 June 2018.

18 Nicholas Wroe, 'Verses from the Valleys: A Life in Writing: Rugby-loving Young Welsh Poet Owen Sheers Talks to Nicholas Wroe', *The Observer*, 30 September, 2000, p. B11. Sheers adds that R. S. Thomas replied promptly and warmly.

the meanings of the Welsh names that come from it (Bendigeidfran = magnificent or blessed crow/raven; Branwen = white crow/raven). In the Afterword to the novel, Sheers noted that he felt the Mabinogion tales were timeless and therefore still relevant today. He argued that the myth of Branwen is “a surprisingly subtle and layered tale, the focus of which is defined as much by its contemporary readers as the fourteenth-century storytellers who first shaped and mapped its narrative.”¹⁹ In addition he draws parallels between the irrational rage of Efnisien and Matholwch in the story and soldiers returning traumatised from the army, a comparison that is at the heart of his reworking of the tale and one made possible by re-reading the original story in 2009.²⁰

Another possible Welsh literary influence on Sheers that certainly provides an interesting way of considering him is the predominantly Welsh-language tradition of the *Bardd Gwlad* (literally land/country poet). This term was used to describe a local poet, often one who may not have had much formal education but who was well versed in the Welsh poetic tradition and wrote poems for their community, usually on special occasions such as births, weddings, funerals and so forth. Most importantly, the *bardd gwlad* was part of the community and their gifts were at the disposal of their neighbours.²¹ It was very different to the English Romantic idea of the poet as a figure of lone genius standing apart from society. Sheers is not necessarily writing for his community but some of his poems, particularly those on farming life and those written to celebrate or remember a particular

person, arguably have some similarities with *bardd gwlad* poetry. No thing, process or person is too humble to be a subject for poetry and thus Welsh sheep farmers and maths teachers sit alongside artists in the pages of *Skirrid Hill*.

Global Contexts

Fiji

Owen Sheers was born in Fiji and spent his earliest years there before his family returned to the very different environment of the United Kingdom. He has written an article about the political situation in Fiji,²² and the country and its people appear in some of his poems, most notably ‘A Stitch in Time’ in *Skirrid Hill* and ‘The Fijian Lay Preacher’ and ‘The Umbilical Tree’ in *The Blue Book*. The last is an apparently autobiographical account of a return to his birthplace seeking both the local woman who buried his umbilical cord under a tree and the tree itself.

As well as providing material for his work, it is likely that his early experience of Fiji has shaped Sheers’ way of looking at the world and broadened his perspective. When asked about his memories of Fiji and the influence of his early life there, he replied: “No specific memories but perhaps more powerfully, I had the *story* of being born on the other side of the world. It was that which drew me back there at 18 when I spent 6 months in the country.”²³ It is clearly an important place for him and arguably contributes to the global dimensions of his work.

19 Owen Sheers, *White Ravens* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), Kindle Location 1536.

20 Ibid., Kindle Location 1536.

21 On ‘*bardd gwlad*’ (plural *beirdd gwlad*) see *The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales* eds. John Davies, Nigel Jenkins, Menna Baines, Peredur I. Lynch (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) pp. 50–51.

22 Owen Sheers, ‘Reflections in the Rain’, *New Statesman*, 136.48 (2007), p. 46.

23 Owen Sheers, Correspondence with Catriona Coutts in preparation of these materials.

Landscape Poetry and Border Writing: Literary Contexts

In addition to Welsh Writing in English, there are two wider poetic movements of which Sheers could be said to be part – landscape poetry and border writing (both of which are also key facets of Anglophone Welsh literary traditions).

Landscape

Landscape has long been a major subject of poetry, and landscape poetry is the literary tradition and influence that Sheers has most frequently acknowledged. In an article entitled ‘Poetry and Place’ he explores his dual loves of landscape and poetry, explaining: “I fell in love with landscape before I fell in love with poetry ... the landscape affected me in ways I sensed but didn’t know. It was only when I began reading poetry that I started to understand something about this ‘sensed’, yet undefined effect of place...”²⁴ Poetry helped him understand the feelings he had for landscape and thus developed his relationship with it.

He recounts how many of the early poems he read and loved were “rooted within specific rural landscapes... This was poetry that didn’t so much write *about* landscape as write from *within* it.”²⁵ He felt that in the work of these poets the landscapes about which they were writing affected their style, “often defining a poet’s language, rhythm, voice and linguistic climate.”²⁶ Later in the article, he describes how Whitman’s style changed when he moved from the country

to New York and how Sheers himself tried to adapt his style to suit his surroundings when living in Manhattan.²⁷ Landscape influences poetry and this is important to consider when reading Sheers’ landscape poetry. In ‘Skirrid Fawr’, for example, the two sides of the hill with its physically split ridge and position on the Wales/England border are reflected in the two line stanzas and contrasting pairs of images: “east-west,” “dark... sunlit...” In ‘History’ the short words with their sharp vowel sounds, repeated consonants and partial rhymes: “still,” “oil,” “soil,” mimic the sound of drilling and chipping that would once have filled the now abandoned quarry.

Sheers explains that landscape poetry also helped him understand the history and value of places as poetry and landscape came together:

One of the most significant shared qualities of a landscape and a poem that works (in both senses of the word) on us is their ability to ‘situate’ us by translating the abstract world of thought and feeling into a physical language. When I look out over the Black Mountains from the ridge of the Hatterall... what I see before me seems to embody and define a multitude of vaguer sensations and thoughts about the place: about the relationship between humans and nature in this half-farmed part of the world; about Wales’s defensive history; about the sweep of geographical time in the glacier-carved valleys, and the shorter arc of historical time in the concentric rings of a hill-fort on the opposite ridge.²⁸

In the Introduction to *A Poet’s Guide to Britain*, he explained the way poets and poems

24 Owen Sheers, ‘Poetry and Place: Some Personal Reflections’, *Geography*, 93.3 (2008), 172-5 (175).

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

express this: “Poets of the landscape are gamekeepers of our cultural and communal memories, the finders and the keepers of landscape’s metaphoric qualities.”²⁹ This is well displayed in Sheers’ own poem ‘History’ from *Skirrid Hill* with which he finishes his article on poetry and place. It can also be seen to a greater or lesser extent in many other poems in *Skirrid Hill*, for example ‘Y Gaer’, ‘Landmark’, and ‘The Singing Men’. This will be discussed in more detail in the themes’ section below.

Sheers also stresses the importance of landscape poetry at the current time. He is a keen environmentalist, as can be seen from his co-founding of the Black Mountains College project, and sees landscape poetry as performing a vital role in conservation: “...poems about our environments are reminders that unless we embrace a more sustainable culture, then the shared experiences of generations, and therefore our knowledge of ourselves, will be drastically culled.”³⁰ Although the article and introduction were written after the appearance of *Skirrid Hill*, it may be useful to bear this environmental concern in mind when reading Sheers’ landscape poems. An example would be the possible interpretation of ‘Hedge School’ as encouraging outdoors education for children (this will be discussed in more detail under ‘Landscape and Nature’ in the themes’ section).

Border Writer

People who live on the borders of nations or regions can often feel torn between two cultures. Either they feel drawn to both cultures so that they cannot choose between them, or they feel excluded from both. Equally common is a feeling that they belong to the border region itself, more than they do to either country/region – this is a well documented feeling in both the Scotland/England and Wales/England border areas. Borders also make people aware of divisions and dualities, whatever they may feel about them.

Owen Sheers grew up in Abergavenny, only a few miles from the Wales/England border. When asked about the influence of the border in his case he replied: “It’s true I was always fascinated by the border, and especially by how it could be physically manifested in the landscape around where I grew up near Abergavenny, the way the hills of Wales gave to the flatter lands of England. I’m interested in the ‘Borderers’ as a group of people too, and see myself as partly shaped by that landscape...”³¹ However, he adds that he has always identified himself as Welsh, even when living in London.³²

Moreover as a Welsh writer in English he is acutely aware of cultural and linguistic as well as national borders. Different types of borders frequently appear in his poetry and when considering his work it is useful to bear in mind his upbringing in the border country (the title of course of one of the poems in *Skirrid Hill*).³³

29 Owen Sheers, ‘Introduction’ in *A Poet’s Guide to Britain*, ed. by Owen Sheers (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. xvii-xxiii (p. xxiii).

30 Ibid, p. xxiii.

31 Owen Sheers, Correspondence with Catriona Coutts in preparation of these materials.

32 Ibid.

33 *Border Country* is also the title of an influential novel by Raymond Williams, set in Pandy near Abergavenny. It is ‘mapped’ at www.literaryatlas.wales. Like Sheers, Raymond Williams was

Literary Influences: R. S. Thomas and Seamus Heaney

Like any poet, Sheers has been inspired by a wide range of writers in addition to those already mentioned. When asked about his general influences Sheers gave the following answer.

Interviewer: What writers have inspired and influenced you? I know you've talked in a few places about how influential R. S. Thomas and Seamus Heaney have been. Are there any others? Or anything outside of poetry or even wider literature that have inspired or influenced you?

Owen Sheers: I never know how to answer the influence question. RS was certainly important, as were Heaney and Hughes. Perhaps just as influential, though, was the fact I was working on *Skirrid Hill* while a writer in residence at the Wordsworth Trust, so was exposed to some of the best poets of the day every week for around 20 or 30 weeks of the year. That was incredible, in terms of tuning the ear and the mind towards the frequency of poetry *now*.³⁴

As seen earlier, in the article by Nicholas Wroe, Sheers explains how influential R. S. Thomas was to him, a fact he reiterated in his later article 'Faith in Verse'. Thomas and Heaney are the two poets Sheers mentions in 'Poetry and Place' as awakening him to the link between poetry and landscape:

Many of the early poems I was drawn to as a teenager were rooted within specific rural landscapes, from the sparse yet visually

electric poetry of R. S. Thomas to the peaty and lyrical early poems of Seamus Heaney. This was poetry that didn't so much write *about* landscape as write from *within* it. The geography of these poems – the stark North Wales uplands and the damp Irish farmland – operated within the poems as both author and subject, often defining a poet's language, rhythm, voice and linguistic climate. In turn the poems excavated the layered associations of their environments, revealing these places to be not just a physical locale, but also, in Heaney's phrase, 'a country of the mind': geographical areas possessed of their own internal geographies of memory, history and language (Heaney 1989). Sometimes this metaphoric quality of landscape, its ability to represent its own cultural associations, was itself made physical within the poem, as is the case with Heaney's bog-preserved 'Grauballe Man' with his 'cured wound' that 'opens inwards to a dark elderberry place', or R. S. Thomas's drowned villages beneath the North Wales reservoirs. Both these examples are concrete images that represent how the land can simultaneously hold and embody the contemporary and historical signatures of a place. Such explicit images, however, also point towards a more subtle and enduring relationship between places and poetry; a relationship based only upon what informs the place and the poem in terms of their linguistic or cultural context (often originally created by the geography of an area) but also upon *how* the place and the poem works upon *us* as readers.³⁵

deeply interested in the relationship between literature, people and place.

³⁴ Owen Sheers, Answer to questions asked by the compiler of this pack.

³⁵ Owen Sheers, 'Poetry and Place', p. 172.

Language and Form

Most of the poems have no regular metre. Most have some sort of stanza structure though the number of lines in a stanza can vary within a single poem. Some are in completely free verse. This gives them a greater freedom and sense of naturalness. At times, short or broken lines can be used to visually and rhythmically denote the partings and break-ups which are so prevalent in the book.

The rhyming structure of the poems is also irregular. Some have no rhymes at all but most have at least one full rhyme which is frequently supplemented by internal rhymes, assonance, and half rhymes. A good example of this is 'Inheritance' which has one example of standard rhyme ("stable" and "fable" in the second stanza), a close rhyme ("bones" and "stone" in the first stanza) and a few assonances such "ore" and "horse" in the second stanza and "forged" and "core" and "lives" and "sides" in the third. These tie the poem together, while the lack of a tight regular rhyming structure gives the poet the freedom necessary to express his views.

Alliteration is used in many of the poems to varying effects. In 'Inheritance' the repeated 's' sound in the first two lines mimics the stammer under discussion. In 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two' on the other hand, the repeated 's', 't' and 'b' make the sound more fluent, matching the stroking and caressing that is occurring.

Similes and metaphors are prevalent. Sheers brings together vocabulary from very different areas to create unusual and startling images which force the reader to think about the poem and its subject(s) in a new way. In 'Flag' the Welsh flag is: "A Chinese

burn of red white and green..."; in 'Night Windows' the lover's body is "the curves of a distant landscape... slick and valleyed..." A few poems describe bodies in terms of landscape. This can create a sensual effect in the love poems or a bleak one as in 'The Wake'. He often uses vocabulary from the other arts, particularly music, and references to light and shadow are also common.

Sheers is a highly visual poet, sometimes describing scenes that are very graphic such as the farmers discovering the dead soldiers in 'Mametz Wood' or the castrating of lambs in 'Late Spring'. However, he uses unusual comparisons and metaphors to describe the processes. The lambs' testicles are "two soaped beans" suggesting softness and strangeness but not grossness. The bones of the dead men are "a chit of bone," "the china plate of a shoulder blade," a "broken bird's egg," which convey fragility and sorrow without being overly macabre. The reader is distanced from any blood or gore and the images are familiar, domestic, even comforting.

He is a precise poet, mentioning specific objects such as types of car in 'Border Country', and specific names of real places. The place names are often in the Welsh language like Moel Siabod in 'Liable to Floods' and Lleder Valley in 'History'. In the twinned pair of poems 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort' the Welsh name is the title of one and the subtitle of the other inviting considerations of duality, identity, and perhaps different ways of knowing the landscape. In this pair of poems the Welsh is translated but in all others it is not. The Welsh names centre those poems that contain them firmly in the Welsh countryside

and give a distinct sense of place. They also act as a reminder that Wales has two languages, even in this border area which sometimes seems Anglicized. One possible effect is to make the land a repository of the earlier Welsh-language culture of the area; to connect landscape (or place) and the Welsh language.

Skirrid Hill contains many poems in the first person, both singular and plural. This makes the poems more personal and tends to heighten the emotions, though we must be wary of a simplistically biographical reading.

Key Themes

There are several key themes in *Skirrid Hill* in addition to those indicated above that will be discussed in this section. Each subsection will begin with a list of the poems that use the theme or themes in question and then go on to examine a few in greater detail. It will also make occasional links to poems from Seamus Heaney's *Fieldwork*. At the end of each section the Heaney poems (if any) that contain these themes will be listed. However, some key themes spill over into other poems in recurring imagery (for example the use of natural imagery to describe people or objects), so many poems appear in two or more categories and the list should be seen as indicative rather than exhaustive.

Relationships and Partings

Relationships: Inheritance, Marking Time, Valentine, Winter Swans, Night Windows, Keyways, On Going, Y Gaer, The Hill Fort, Song, Landmark, Four Movements in the Scale of Two, Stitch in Time, The Wake

Partings: Y Gaer, The Hill Fort, Marking Time, Valentine, Night Windows, Keyways, On Going, Landmark, Four Movements in the Scale of Two, Stitch in Time, The Wake

This section will begin with the two interlocking themes that are at the heart of this volume and are touched upon in the majority of the poems. Relationships and all that that concept includes – family, love, sex – are repeatedly reflected upon by Sheers, but almost invariably these relationships

are broken by death, disagreement, or some other parting. Indeed, the very title of the collection is based upon division. The note on the title explains that Skirrid comes from the Welsh *ysgyrid* deriving from *ysgariad* meaning divorce or separation. As Sarah Crown explains in her review in *The Guardian*, Sheers uses Skirrid Fawr, itself cloven, as “the metaphor that unites his second collection.” Crown adds “It is these ideas [of divorce and separation] – which have their visual representation in the hill itself... that form the thematic core [of *Skirrid Hill*]...”³⁶ Additionally, Sheers refers at times to the local legend that claims that Skirrid Fawr was split by a landslide caused by an earthquake or lightning strike at the moment of Christ's crucifixion – another instance of parting, albeit one that contains the idea of return/resurrection and a transformed relationship.

The majority of the relationships are between lovers. The language is frequently sensuous with a focus on touch as well as sight. In ‘Four Movements in the Scale of Two’ Sheers reveals the importance of touch in a relationship, “bodies, like souls,/ only exist when touched.” A recurring image is that of lovers fitting together perfectly: the tumblers of a lock (‘Keyways’), the hands that fold “like a pair of wings settling after flight” (‘Winter Swans’). In some cases the image is brief as in ‘Winter Swans’; in others it is extended throughout the poem, as in ‘Keyways’. Starting from the cutting of a new set of keys, Sheers uses this image to chart a whole relationship. At the start of the poem the narrator is “an uncut key, a smooth blade,

³⁶ Sarah Crown, ‘Review of *Skirrid Hill*’, *The Guardian*, 25 February, 2006.

edentate,/ waiting your impression, the milling and grooves/ of moments in time, until our keyways would fit..." The process of lovers getting to know each other is likened to cutting a key to fit. The image changes briefly to describe their bodies fitting together "like a pair of Siamese twins sharing one lung," but then quickly returns to the image of the key:

From then on I was sure
we were keyed alike.

That our combinations matched,
our tumblers aligned precisely to give and roll perfectly into the other's empty spaces.

In the next stanza, the lovers are curled up together at night, "a master key fit." But then, still in keeping with the image, the poet asks: "So when did the bolt slip? The blade break in the mouth?" The violence of this image rests upon the overlay of the human body upon the imagery of locks and keys: the mouth here is an unusual name for a keyhole while the blade-like key has broken off in the lock. But a blade in a human mouth suggests something far more painful and catastrophic, while the word 'mouth' could also suggest something spoken, or mouthed: perhaps even sharp words. They gradually realise that it is

Useless...to try to unpick the months
back to that second when, for the first time,
one of us made a turn that failed to dock,
... leaving us
waiting the expected click, which never came.

The click can apply to the concept of people 'clicking' when they understand each other or get on instinctively as well as to the click of a lock when it opens. The conceit of keys being cut and fitting is thus expanded to encompass the entire relationship. Thanks to the poet's tenderness this is in no way mechanical and the last two lines: "So strange then, that we should do this now,/ this cutting of keys, just when we're changing all the locks,"

emphasises the poet's sadness and confusion. This can be read as referring to both the practical thing that needs to be done at the end of the relationship and the changing of the key and lock that was their relationship.

It is also possible to read this desire to completely fit with and unlock another person as sinister. While it seems harmless and even sweet in this case, it raises interesting and important questions about boundaries and privacy within relationships. Does the desired perfect fit indicate simply a loving and complete reciprocity or does it have a darker possessive element?

Sarah Crown notes that nearly all the poems end with the lover leaving,³⁷ or with the poet alone, looking back on a shared time, as in 'Valentine'. Partings occur in other relationships too; the poem 'On Going' describes the death of a loved one, while 'Border Country' muses on lost youth and the death of a friend's father. 'Farther', 'Y Gaer' and 'The Hill Fort', all muse on departed or separated loved ones.

One of the few positive relationship poems in the collection is 'Inheritance' where the poet considers his parents' relationship. As Sarah Crown notes, "there is a sense almost of marvel at the beautiful simplicity of their lifelong union."³⁸ The poet considers the very different attributes he has inherited from each parent, then expresses his "desire" to have a relationship like the one they have "forged." "Forged" seems to suggest that the relationship has had to be worked at but unlike most of the others in the collection, it has been successful. However, forged can of course mean faked or copied as well as created. The use of words like "hammer," and "core," frequently associating with blacksmith's forges, strongly suggests created as opposed to faked, but it is possible to read against

³⁷ Sarah Crown, 'Review of *Skirrid Hill*'.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the grain and see the alternative meaning undermining the apparently intended one. This ambiguity could be deliberate on the part of the poet or it could be that the language he uses is not completely under his control and works to undercut his intended meaning.

Relationships feature in far fewer of the poems in Heaney's *Fieldwork* and are generally more positive and lasting than those in *Skirrid Hill*. The exception is 'The Skunk' where the poet appears to be missing his spouse/lover. Interestingly, in 'Homecomings' Heaney uses a similar image to many of Sheers' – the poet asks his partner to: "Mould my shoulders inwards to you... Be damp clay pouting." As in poems like 'Keyways', the lovers are seen to fit together perfectly. However this comes at the end of the poem suggesting a happy ending that does not usually occur in *Skirrid Hill*.

Relationships in *Fieldwork*: The Otter, The Skunk, Homecomings, A Dream of Jealousy, Fieldwork, The Harvest Bow. With the possible exception of 'The Skunk' there are none that really deal with partings except perhaps for the memory poems for the dead which will be listed under Memory.

Fathers and Sons

Farther, Border Country, 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort'

Another relationship of great importance in *Skirrid Hill* is that between fathers and sons. The 'border' of time which divides the generations is another motif. In 'Border Country' described above, the untimely death by suicide of a father precipitates children across the border into adulthood. In 'Farther' the axis of time that exists between the son (the 'I' of the poem) and his father, tilts as they climb Skirrid: 'Half way up and I turned to look at you'. The father's "head [is] the colour of the rocks," presumably because he is growing old. The poem is full of oblique references to time, from the

instantaneous 'shutter's blink' to the short breaths of the man, to the long myth of the stories attached to the hill, to the even longer sense of geological time in the 'rocks'. This walk is one the pair have done many times (they "climbed Skirrid again"), but this time the walk redefines their relationship. The pun on the word 'father' is also important in pinpointing the relationship between the two men (which has an intimacy that could on first reading be mistaken for lovers).

Just over midway through the poem (line 19 of 32), the balance between the two lives shifts: "and again I felt the tipping in the scales of us/ the intersection of our ages". Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where their ages (or experiences?) intersect, the image of tipping scales suggests that the son is beginning to take the place of the father – to move 'farther' into the role of adult, away from his own father, and perhaps in due course become a father himself. Is the tipping of the scales a measure of relative vulnerability, with the son perhaps envisaging a time when he will become responsible for his parent, as now he waits for his father to catch up rather than vice versa? By the end of the poem, the poetic persona, 'I', has shifted in his sense of self: he feels both adrift as he reaches for a new independence ("every step apart"), and awed by the sense that as he becomes his own man he is also becoming his father: "I'm another [step] closer to you." There is also a sense however that is heightened by the reference to the legend of Skirrid Fawr "...that cleft of earth/ split they say by a father's grief/ at the loss of his son to man." This suggests that they will be parted, although, as noted earlier, if the reference is to the crucifixion then they may be reunited, their relationship transformed, as it is starting to be in the poem.

'The Hill Fort' is perhaps the most moving portrayal of a father-son relationship. It is possible that this poem and its companion 'Y Gaer' are also referencing the Skirrid Fawr

crucifixion myth but it is not certain as the hill is not named in either poem and the relationships seem very human. In ‘The Hill Fort’, the father walks up the hill with his son who is full of life and vitality “charging the hill/ as wild as the long-maned ponies.” The bond between father and son is beautifully depicted. The father, who would “crouch so their eyes were level,/ one hand at the small of his [the son’s] back,” points out the various towns they can see, with the underlying message that generations come and go and that it is the impression a person makes while on the earth that matters not the longevity of their life. In these few short lines, the father is seen to be nurturing, teaching and protecting his son. This makes the death of the boy and the father’s loss all the sadder.

Memory

Memory: Marking Time, Valentine, Night Windows, Border Country, Hedge School, Joseph Jones, On Going, Landmark, Shadow Man, The Singing Men, The Wake, The Steelworks, History

Memory is another major theme in *Skirrid Hill*. Many of the poems are written in the past tense with the poet looking back on events, including the majority of the relationship poems. There are memories of childhood and youth, of relationships, of particular people and of community and historical events. Memory is also a major theme in *Fieldwork* though there are some differences in the ways in which it is treated.

Memories of Relationships

Most of the poems that cover this have already been discussed in the relationship section so they will just be mentioned here. The prime examples are ‘Marking Time’, ‘Valentine’ and ‘Four Movements in the Scale of Two’. ‘Valentine’ is particularly interesting as it uses

its short stanzas to draw one very focused image, similar to a photographic snapshot.

It is also interesting to note that as these relationships all appear in memories they are naturally in the past and so the outcome of the relationship is already known. This suggests that the most important thing about the relationships is their ending (with the possible exception of ‘Wild Swans’) and that ending comes to define the entire relationship.

Memories of Childhood and Adolescence

These poems form some of the most vibrant of the collection. Particularly notable are ‘Hedge School’ (which takes its title from a work by Heaney that was republished in *Fieldwork* as ‘Glanmore Sonnets’), ‘Late Spring’ and ‘Border Country’.

‘Hedge School’ describes collecting blackberries on the way home from school, reproducing the child’s musing on how best to gather, transport and eat them. This issue, so small to an adult, is crucial to a child and becomes the centre of the poem. However, the adult poet filters the child’s thoughts through his own language. Images such as “tightly packed as a nervous heart,” “cobwebbed and dusty as a Claret/ laid down for years in a cellar,” and “hedgerow caviar,” are clearly not the words of a child. However, these words capture the spirit of the child’s thoughts – the excitement, delight and wonder – and so the poem is extremely effective.

It is interesting to note here that as well as taking the title of the poem from Heaney, Sheers is playfully subverting the original concept of a Hedge School. Hedge Schools were informal schools established in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to provide education for Catholic and nonconformist children at a time where there was either little formal education or the official system was Anglican. They were

probably called Hedge Schools because, prior to the repeal of the penal laws in 1782, the schools were illegal and so they had to meet wherever they could and accommodation was frequently basic though they usually met in some sort of shelter like a house or a barn. Here, though, Sheers is playing with the concept by suggesting a literal hedge school, one where children learn facts pertaining to nature, facts they would never learn in a conventional classroom. In line with Sheers' passion for landscape and the environment it could suggest the importance of the things learned in this kind of school: a respect for nature and joy in what it can produce.

Heaney uses the term hedge school in the second of 'Glanmore Sonnets' and depicts it as a place where poetry is learned, coming from and returning to the ground: "Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,/ Each verse returning like the plough turned round." In this case the land could be the natural countryside or the specifically Irish land.

'Late Spring' recalls childhood memories in a similar way to 'Hedge School'. The first stanza conveys the child's pride: "It made me feel like a man/ when I helped my grandfather..." Again the words are that of an adult but the feeling comes from the child. The same is true with the poem's imagery: the lamb "like a cello," the "strange harvest of the seeds we'd sown." As in 'Hedge School' the adult's words reflect the child's vision.

'Border Country', on the other hand, feels a more serious and mature poem. It reflects on changes in the landscape: "Filled in years ago," and remembers the time spent there with a friend, "shouldering the kick of your father's shotgun;/ or playing at war in the barn,/ dying again and again..." These dark games foreshadow the tragedy that is to come but are displaced for the time being in the next stanza by the more innocent images of imitating buzzards and pretending to drive the abandoned cars. Then comes the tragedy

of the death of the friend's father which derails their young lives and the whole poem. The speaker recalls "...life put on the brakes/ and pitched you, without notice,/ through the windscreen of your youth." The image of life as a car jerking to a halt references the wrecked cars the children have playfully pretended to drive. The friend is "pitched" from their childhood as symbolised by the play cars. When the poem starts again, the poet is remembering returning to the quarry years later and finding it changed: "I came back once, to find cars smaller/ or the undergrowth grown," – a common trope in memories of childhood places. In a sense this poem is about the loss of innocence, symbolised by the image of "pitching... through the windscreen of your youth," and the change of perspective that that loss brings. The place is smaller, drabber, no longer the delightful playground of youth. The buzzards that had once flown high "striking their cries against a flint sky," now fly "like a rag/shaken out in the wind." The scene is dark and bleak with "spittle sheep," and "ink-dot cows." The poem closes with the memory of a boy who "meandered between the hedges... trying once more to find his way home." This suggests that even children can seem lost, from an adult's perspective at least. Consequently 'Border Country' is darker than the other childhood poems like 'Hedge School' that keep the child's perspective throughout.

Memories of Specific People

Memories of people abound in *Skirrid Hill*. Many are unnamed, as in the various poems that remember a lover or lovers (since they are unnamed it is impossible to say whether the lover who appears in different poems is the same person). This makes them seem archetypal; representative of lovers rather than specific lovers. This is lessened a little by the poet addressing them as you and by the clear element of memory in many of the poems

but there is very little specific description. The features mentioned: “heels” and “skirt” in ‘Valentine’; “pelvis,” “head,” and “toes,” in ‘Night Windows’ could belong to any woman. In some poems such as ‘Keyways’ it is impossible even to say whether the relationship is between man and woman, two men, two women, or a non-binary or gender fluid couple. The only poem that definitely genders the lovers is ‘Four Movements in the Scale of Two’ where they are named as “she,” and “him”. Other poems suggest the lover is female because of mentions of clothing: “skirt,” “dress,” “heels,” but this is never confirmed (though it is pretty heavily implied with the landscape comparison in ‘Night Windows’). Equally it should not be assumed that the narrative voice of the poem is male, just because it is written by a male poet. Therefore these nameless lovers can stand as archetypes for romantic and sexual relationships of all kinds.

One exception to these poems that do not name their subjects is ‘Joseph Jones’, a poem that depicts the eponymous character – a young man from South Wales. It is very specifically a poem about memory as it begins: “Of course I remember Joseph,” before going on to recount the traits that the poet remembers: “Fifty press-ups before a night out,/ hair sheened with gel,/ air dead with scent when he passed.” It is possible to read this poem in two ways. The first is as a portrait of a specific person from the poet’s past. The second is as a representation of a type of person – in this case Welsh working-class youth. This becomes more plausible when the commonness of his first and second names is considered. Either way though, the portrait that emerges is not a positive one – Jones is seen drinking, fighting and bragging. However, there is a poignancy to the final two lines “a trial once/ with Cardiff Youth,” that suggests wasted potential and a lack of options that have shaped his character, as

well as the possibility that he is not quite good enough, at sport or in life. Therefore while this poem does not display its subject positively, it is not completely unsympathetic.

This poem has links with ‘The Singing Men’ although the latter is discussing a phenomenon rather than a person. While at first seeming to romanticise this life the poem does convey its hardship and loneliness but still celebrates the skill, versatility and passion of these musicians. In both cases the poet speaks about those marginalised by society and thus appears to act as a remembrancer of those who would otherwise be forgotten. Writing about ‘ordinary’ people is a strong trait within the bardd gwlad tradition. However it is not completely clear that this is what Sheers intends to do here. In neither case does he consider himself ‘like’ his subject. The subjects of ‘The Singing Men’ come from many places and a different class to Sheers, and while Sheers may have come from the same community as Jones or people like him, there is nothing in the poem to suggest any sense of kinship, despite the potential fleeting sympathy revealed at the end. It is certainly not a celebratory poem in the tradition of the bardd gwlad but Sheers may be drawing on or adapting the style of that tradition to portray either a particular person or a type of person from his past. ‘The Singing Men’ is more celebratory, recognising the skill of the singers and their importance to society; the singer at Balham tube is “welcoming the commuters home.” The ambiguity of Sheers’ poetic representation of the singers leaves readers considerable room to decide (and to assemble evidence) for themselves on whether he is writing in solidarity with the singers or whether he is objectifying them by romanticising and exoticising, even as he expresses sympathy and appreciation.

Poems remembering specific people are also plentiful in *Fieldwork*. Two are specifically entitled ‘In Memoriam’ and

many others fulfil the same function. Some, like the Irish musician Sean O’Riada were well-known; others, like the anonymous old woman in ‘A Drink of Water’, are presumably local people the poet knew. Poems like the latter can be seen as celebrating the marginalised and forgotten in a similar way to Sheers. It is also interesting that while men are named occasionally in Sheers and more often in Heaney, no female subject of a poem is named outside of the dedications of Sheers’ ‘On Going’ and the first of Heaney’s ‘Glanmore Sonnets’.

The focus of Heaney’s memory poems varies more than those of Sheers. ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, for example, recounts the death of a countryman shot at an army roadblock. Here the man is remembered but the way in which he died is equally important to remember. In contrast, ‘A Postcard from North Antrim’, although remembering another man who was shot, focuses on the man himself and his distinctive possessions and actions. Others like the long poem ‘Casualty’ mix the two elements.

Memories of Place

Some of the poems contain memories of places that are not from childhood. ‘History’ is subtitled “Lleder Valley, North Wales” and therefore immediately announces itself as a poem about the history of a specific place. This poem will be examined in detail in the section on landscape below, but it is important to mention here because of its message – that the history of the valley can be better learned from its landscape than from any book and that it is written within the local people: “in every head, across every heart/ and down the marrow of every bone.” “The

Steelworks’ is inspired by a specific event – the closure of the steel plant at Ebbw Vale – which was a social and economic disaster for the community. In writing about it, Sheers is again playing the role of community poet.

In ‘The Singer’s House’ Heaney also evokes memory of place and community. He describes a house he remembers and lists the sights, sounds and cultural activities associated with it. For this reason it is both a personal memory and a communal one. As noted in the section on language above, Sheers too makes extensive use of music in his poetry, drawing on it for vocabulary and images.

Memory: Triptych I, The Strand at Lough Beg, A Drink of Water, A Postcard from North Antrim, Casualty, The Singer’s House, In Memoriam Sean O’Riada, Glanmore Sonnets, September Song, The Skunk, Leavings, The Harvest Bow, In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge

Landscape and Nature

Landscape: Skirrid Fawr, Y Gaer, The Hill Fort, Border Country, Farther, Flag, The Steelworks, History

Nature: Wild Swans, Trees, Hedge School, Swallows, Calendar

Landscape is one of the most prevalent themes in *Skirrid Hill*, as is nature. It is important to make a distinction between landscape and nature here and the best way to do so is in Sheers’ own words: “without us, landscape would not exist. There would be nature, but no landscape. Landscape is what happens to nature when we turn up...”³⁹ Consequently, “poems of landscape are also poems about us.”⁴⁰ Nature on the

39 Owen Sheers, ‘Introduction’ in *A Poet’s Guide to Britain*, p. xviii.

40 Ibid., p. xviii. In Welsh there are two words for landscape ‘tirlun’ which literally means land-picture and evokes landscape painting, and ‘tirwedd’ which refers to a wider sense of topography: both natural

other hand, is separate to people. To this definition I will add that nature includes living things that are not people, so, for example, nature is the primary subject of Sheers' bird poems like 'Wild Swans' and 'Swallows'. Both nature and landscape appear in *Skirrid Hill*, though usually people interact with nature in some way. Even a poem like 'Swallows', which seems to be wholly fixed on the birds, sees them flying between the telephone wires which are of course manmade.

This interaction between people and nature that creates landscape is particularly evident in two of the poems in the section on community memories: 'The Steelworks' and 'History'. In the former the abandoned steelworks has left a manmade mark on the valley but is gradually being taken over by nature once more with sheep passing through the carpark (though sheep of course come from farms and therefore represent a different type of interaction between people and nature so this is not completely straightforward). The birds nesting in the vents, however, are completely independent of humans, and since no people are placed in the scene the overwhelming effect is that of wilderness. In 'History' the disused quarry gives evidence of similar human involvement. There is no clear divide between human and nature, indeed Sheers deliberately brings the two closer together by describing the blackbird's song in language normally associated with industry: "the only chiselling," "drilling its notes." As a result, these poems are excellent examples of Sheers' ideas about landscape revealing human history – indeed 'History' is the poem he printed at the end of his article on poetry and place.

Landscape in the poems also reflects other themes. Sarah Crown notes that the landscapes in *Skirrid Hill* are "characterised habitually by gaps, shadows and boundaries...

and manmade features of landscape.

41 Sarah Crown, 'Review of Skirrid Hill'.

while the sites he homes in on are linked by their liminality...The ruptured terrain reflects the collection's fractured emotional landscape." The frequently mentioned cleft of Skirrid Fawr is the prime example – it visually symbolises the partings that constantly reoccur.⁴¹

As mentioned in the section on language, Sheers also frequently imagines the body as a landscape. In 'Night Windows', "the curves of a distant landscape [are]/ opening across your pelvis," giving a sense of strangeness and wonder to the lovemaking as it defamiliarises the body. Sheers does this in both 'The Wake' and 'The Singing Men'. In 'The Wake' lungs are described as "two pale oceans/ rising and falling in the rib cage's hull." Again this defamiliarises the body, giving it a sense of mystery and depth. In 'The Singing Men', the men's "tendons in their necks [are] making valleys in their stubble," visually displaying the effort of their singing.

Landscape and nature are also important in *Fieldwork*, appearing in some way in the majority of the poems. In some like 'Glanmore Sonnets' and 'September Song', nature and landscape are crucial themes. In others, such as 'The Strand at Lough Beg' and 'The Otter', they simply form a backdrop or provide imagery. Of those that have nature as a theme, some like 'September Song' show technology and humankind intertwined with nature as in the majority of Sheers' poetry; in others like 'Song' the natural scene is untouched.

Landscape: Glanmore
Sonnets, High Summer

Nature: Glanmore Sonnets, Song,
September Song, Homecomings, Fieldwork

Country Life and Routine

Country life and routine: The Farrier, The Equation, Hedge School, Late Spring
 Linked to landscape but not wholly part of it is another common theme of *Skirrid Hill*: country life and routine. Several poems describe farm and country work; shoeing a horse in ‘The Farrier’, castrating lambs in ‘Late Spring’. In this he is following, consciously or otherwise, the example of the bardd gwlad, writing about local events and people. He may also be attempting to commemorate and preserve in verse customs that may not continue much longer. In that case he is acting as a recorder or ‘remembrancer’ for the farming community where he grew up and those like it. There is no clear evidence for this in the poems but given the importance of memory to the collection it is a reasonable interpretation.

This is also an important theme and background in *Fieldwork*. ‘High Summer’ discusses the collecting of maggots for fishing bait and has a farming background with objects like tractors and barns. ‘The Harvest Bow’ describes the custom of making the harvest bow then continues the imagery to talk of the poet’s attraction to the one making the bow. Unlike Sheers, Heaney generally does not make the farming activity or custom the entire centre of the poem, instead using it as sub-theme, background and/or image.

Country life and routine: Triptych I, High Summer, The Harvest Bow

Wales and Borders

Wales: Skirrid Fawr, Farther, Flag
 Borders: Skirrid Fawr,
 Farther, Border Country
 As discussed in the contexts’ section, Wales

is an important influence on Sheers’ writing and the nation appears in a few poems in the collection. ‘Flag’ is the only poem where it is the main theme but it makes important appearances in ‘Farther’ and ‘Skirrid Fawr’ – two poems that also meditate upon different sorts of borders. Therefore this section will discuss the themes of Wales and borders side by side. Ironically, the poem ‘Border Country’ does not mention geographical borders. Its title presumably refers to its apparent location in Sheers’ childhood country near the Wales/England border and the fact that it discusses a different type of border – that which marks the boundary between youth and adulthood, innocence and experience.

‘Flag’ focuses solely on Wales, with no mention of its borders, musing on the nation by using the Welsh dragon flag as its symbol. It is not a positive image, however. The poet first considers some sightings of the flag. These present a motley array; the flag is variously “hung like wet washing,” “on the flat end wall of a Swansea gym,/ fading to the east,” (both a literal and metaphorical fading one presumes) and “tied to the side of a SNAX caravan,/ throwing fits on its pole, high in the motorway wind...” The suggestion that the dragon is “so suitable” an emblem for Wales because it is “the currency of legend, the tale/ that is truer in its fiction than facts can ever be,” appears positively but is immediately undercut by the following stanza: “an old country pulsing to be young/ and blessed with a blind spot bigger than itself...” Wales is depicted as a nation unable to modernise; now the comments on the dragon suggest that its people are perhaps deceiving themselves. The final stanza depicts the flag as “a tourniquet, a bandage tight on the wound/ staunching the dreams of what might have been.” This suggests a loss of opportunity on the part of the nation and possibly even that the flag is hindering that opportunity. The poem’s epigraph adds an extra layer of complexity and will be dealt

with in the section on references below.

‘Farther’ and ‘Skirrid Fawr’ both meditate upon Wales and its borders, ‘Farther’ just in passing, ‘Skirrid Fawr’ to a greater extent. In ‘Farther’ “a country unrolled before us,/ the hedged fields breaking on the edge of Wales,” designating Wales as a country rather than just a part of the United Kingdom and clearly delineating the border. The use of the word breaking suggests waves rather than fields and thus the difference between Wales and England is like sea and land – very different but also movable and unclear in places as tides frequently alter the point at which the sea ends and the land starts. Although Wales is depicted as an island in some mythology and contemporary literature and art,⁴² here, Wales is a sea of fields whose hedges break upon (the landmass of) England.

‘Skirrid Fawr’ expands on these nautical and border images. The hill is “a lonely hulk/ adrift through Wales.” The difference between the two sides of the hill is emphasised with a line of brief comparisons: “Her east-west flanks, one dark, one sunlit...” The poem then goes on to reflect on another type of border – the “vernacular.” For him the hill and border symbolise “the unspoken words/ of an unlearned tongue.” This can be interpreted as either an attempt to hear a message from the landscape or as regret for being unable to speak Welsh – a subtler version of his poem ‘The Blue Book’ – or both. Here Wales, the Welsh language and the border merge.

Seamus Heaney’s treatment of nation (Ireland and/or Northern Ireland) in poems such as ‘Triptych’, ‘The Toome Road’, ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, ‘A Postcard from North Antrim’, ‘The Casualty’, ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, ‘September Song’, and ‘Leavings’ could be fruitfully compared with Sheers’ poems on Wales.

Behind the Scenes/ Appearance versus Reality

Behind the Scenes: Last Act, Show, Service

Appearance versus reality: Last Act, Show, Drinking with Hitler, Service, L.A Evening

A minor theme in *Skirrid Hill* but one that is still found in many poems is the idea of showing what happens ‘behind the scenes’ or behind a façade that is the only thing the public see, be it in show business, a restaurant kitchen or, most disturbingly, the mask of an official responsible for criminal acts.

‘LA Evening’ is a touching portrayal of an elderly actress looking at photographs of herself in her starring roles. She is portrayed with stars like Olivier and Brando, actors who “wear the faces of her friends” but she is alone. She “leaves/ before the roll call of the credits,” reluctant perhaps to shatter the illusion. Her evening routine emphasises her loneliness – she appears to have only pets for company – and fear – she checks the sensitivity of the intruder light. The dimming of the light in the final stanza echoes the sun that “leaks into the ocean,” in the first and suggests the decline of her career.

‘Service’ is less poignant and more informative, depicting the kitchen of a busy restaurant. The poem portrays two completely different worlds: the chaos of the kitchen and the serenity of the dining room. The poet also muses on the journey the oysters have made to reach the kitchen. This is similar to Heaney’s poem ‘Oysters’ where he thinks about the Romans transporting their oysters and may be a deliberate reference or an unconscious influence. There are no other obvious links between the two poems but both use startling imagery to great effect. Heaney’s

42 See for example *Twenty Thousand Saints* (2008) by Fflur Dafydd at www.literaryatlas.wales

tasting of the oysters results in: “My palate hung with starlight:/ As I tasted the salty Pleiades...” a strange entwining of the senses of touch and taste and images associated with them. Sheers, meanwhile, describes the wine tasted by the restaurant sommelier as a boxer’s mouthful of red,” suggesting blood not alcohol. As noted elsewhere with regards to Sheers’ poems, these unlikely comparisons defamiliarise familiar processes, in this case eating and tasting wine, and cause the readers to experience them anew.

‘Drinking with Hitler’ describes the poet’s meeting with a Zimbabwean politician and is one of the darkest poems in the collection. This politician performs a (false) smile, beautifully encapsulated in the metaphor “a CD selected/ with play pressed across his lips.” He appears affable but the poet adds: “But I’ve heard about the burned workers’ homes...the 5th brigade trucks that come in the night.” The reality of the man’s cruelty contrasts sharply with the image he puts on for foreign visitors and women.

War

War: Mametz Wood, Happy Accidents, Liable to Floods

War is a prevalent theme in much of Sheers’ work (see the biography for details). It also appears in Heaney’s *Fieldwork* and should therefore be mentioned briefly. There are only three poems in *Skirrid Hill* that deal with war: ‘Mametz Wood’, ‘Happy Accidents’ and ‘Liable to Floods’. This last discusses preparations for war, although the flood that sweeps the camp away foreshadows the soldiers’ likely fate in the war: “as if the weather had finally caught up with their lives –/ this being taken at night without any say,/ this being borne, this being swept away.”

These young soldiers are no more in control of their lives in times of war than they are in control of their bodies in the flood.

The refusal of the army to listen to local advice also echoes the way in which large areas of rural Wales were requisitioned by the Ministry of Defence. The farmers of Epynt were evicted in 1940 to make way for military training. The area is now known as the Sennybridge Training Area and remains in MOD hands to this day, as do stretches of Wales’s coastline, particularly Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. Plans to create a training area in the Preseli mountains during the 1940s were successfully defeated by a group of nonconformist pacifists including the poet Waldo Williams. In 1969 a ‘Save our Sands’ campaign led to the Ministry of Defence withdrawing plans to create a bombing range from Pembrey to Pendine. Sheers’ poem can be read in the context of this battle for Welsh land (a recurring theme in Welsh poetry in English and Welsh)⁴³ and is an example of how reading Sheers from a Welsh perspective can reveal extra layers in the poems.

‘Happy Accidents’ considers the photos taken of the D-Day landings by Robert Capa. The contents of the photographs and the conditions Capa worked under are mentioned and therefore the poem does give some view of the war “the air turned lead/ and the marines before him dropped into the water.” However, the focus of the poem is on the photographs and how they represent the war rather the war itself.

‘Mametz Wood’, meanwhile, focuses on the aftermath of a battle fought by Welsh regiments during World War I. The image of farmers turning up the remains of the dead years later and skilfully evokes the pity of war and makes a connection between the

43 See Kirsti Bohata, ‘The Battle for the Hills’ in *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 80-103.

rural background of many of the soldiers who died in Mametz. The bones discovered are compared to delicate things – bone, china, birds’ eggs – showing how fragile and easily lost the soldiers’ lives were. The image of skeletons linked arm in arm is almost unbearably sad as is the idea that their boots “outlasted them.” It is also notable that ‘Mametz Wood’ is the first poem in the collection and therefore sets the tone for what is to follow. Therefore, although war is a relatively minor theme in *Skirrid Hill*, it is still an important one and Sheers has drawn attention to the importance of his sequencing of the poems in this collection.

Most of Heaney’s war poems are about the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ and draw on personal experience. He is angered by the English soldiers on “my roads/ as if they owned them,” (‘The Toome Road’) and addresses one of the Irishmen killed as “cousin” (‘The Strand at Lough Beg’). Even the soldier killed in the First World War in ‘In Memoriam: Francis Ledwidge’ is a man who has relevance to his life, a former lover of his aunt. This gives his writing an immediacy that is lacking in Sheers’ work. The Welsh poet writes about wide-scale conflicts that happened before he was born (the First and Second World Wars) and focuses on general rather than specific loss of life.

War: Triptych I, The Toome Road, The Strand at Lough Beg, The Badgers, Casualty, Postcard from North Antrim, In Memoriam: Francis Ledwidge

References to Literature, Legend and Music

Owen Sheers makes several references in *Skirrid Hill*, though fewer than Heaney makes in *Fieldwork*. In the case of both poets these references are rarely explained. It is not necessary to recognise these references in order to enjoy the poems but understanding them can add extra layers of meaning.

References to the legend of Skirrid Fawr have already been mentioned and it is notable that knowing the legend can alter significantly the way that the reader interacts with the poems. For a reader who does not know the legend, poems like ‘Y Gaer’ and ‘The Hill Fort’ are simply about the loss of a child. Once the legend is added into the equation it leads the reader to wonder whether the father and son are supposed to be God and Jesus and therefore whether Sheers is doing something theologically radical in depicting them as having an ordinary father and son relationship.

With the exception of the legend of Skirrid Fawr, Sheers’ preferred method of reference is using a quotation as an epigraph for a poem. These quotations are wide-ranging, from R. S. Thomas through 20th century English poet Christopher Logue to the American indie rock band Eels. The first pays homage to Thomas, acknowledging the part that poet has played in shaping Sheers’ poetry. The other two are more complex. A quotation from Christopher Logue’s poem ‘Professor Tucholsky’s Facts’ begins the poem ‘Flag’. It lists the organs a man needs to survive: “a liver, a heart, a brain, and a *Flag*.” The supposed importance of a flag – and thus a nationality – is stressed. However the quotation cannot be fully appreciated out of context. ‘Professor Tucholsky’s Facts’ is a satirical poem, purporting to describe life on earth to aliens.

It shows man refusing to think, blaming religion for everything and generally behaving foolishly. Dependence on a flag is therefore shown to be one more foolishness. This reinforces the failure with which the Welsh flag depicted in Sheers' poem is associated.

A quotation from the Eels' song 'Susan's House' begins the poem 'Under the Superstition Mountains'. Here the quotation appears ironic as the neighbourhood in 'Susan's House' appears far rougher and more dangerous than the sleepy aged community that Sheers depicts. However it could also be read as a warning that darker things lie beneath the surface, particularly when combined with the image of the rattlesnake waking at the end.

Some references are less significant. The line from The Pardoner's Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales* that begins 'Hedge School' appears simply to refer to the subject of the following poem. The young poet's soul has gone "blackberrying" in the sense that they are completely absorbed in the activity. Knowing the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale does not cast a great deal more light on the poem. The same is true of the quotation at the start of 'L.A. Evening'. The mention of Booth and the Player's Club situates the poem firmly in the American acting world (Edwin Booth was a nineteenth-century actor who founded The Player's Club in New York as a private social club for actors and people from the worlds of literature, painting, sculpture and music). The content of the quotation echoes the theme of the poem. But knowing the context of the quotation does not add much to the reading of the poem. In these last two cases, the opening quotations serve more as a starting point or inspiration for the poem than a comment on them.

An audio version of 'Professor Tucholsky's Facts' by Christopher Logue is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1rHhKycwJQ>

The lyrics to 'Susan's House' can be found here: <https://genius.com/Eels-susans-house>

Suggested Questions and Exercises

Ask each student to think of a landscape feature of any sort: a hill, a field, a forest, a street or road, that they see regularly. Get them to think about what they see or sense when they look at it. How does this feature reflect the way in which humans have interacted with it over the years? Alternatively, ask them to pick a landscape feature that is special or important to them and get them to explain why, orally or in any form of writing they like.

Ask students to identify Welsh words or phrases in the poems (are there any Irish words or phrases in Heaney?). What kind of words are they? For instance, place names? Are they presented differently from the English-language of the poems in which they are found? (e.g. in italics?) What is the effect of typographical integration/distinction? Are they translated directly or can you guess the meaning from the context? What is the purpose, function and/or effect of these words? For instance, do they represent something other than (or in addition to) the specific thing/place/concept to which they 'literally' refer? (e.g. could they be synecdoches for a wider language/culture?) What other non-English languages appear in the collection? How does the use of Welsh compare with these traces of other cultures? (Note: students may not identify place-names as instances of Welsh language but it is worth pausing (and translating) these and considering the significance of *not* identifying place-names as instances of Welsh appearing in the otherwise English-language poems.)

Ask the students to read 'Joseph Jones' and 'On Going' carefully and think about whether their subjects are the kind of people they would expect to see portrayed in poems. Why or why not? If not, what sort of people would they expect to read about in poems? Then have them think of a person, alive or dead, that they might write a poem about. Have them list some of the things they might say in it and then think about why they might or might not want to write a poem to remember or talk about someone. They do not have to write the poem unless they want to, just think about the process and the reasons for doing so.

Suggested Resources

All resources are available online for free.

Owen Sheers' website provides a lot of information and useful resources, including links to reviews and videos of the author talking about his work.
<http://www.owensheers.co.uk/>

Sarah Crown, 'Review of Skirrid Hill' in *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/25/featuresreviews.guardianreview28>

'An Interview with Owen Sheers' *The Poetry Archive* <https://poetryarchive.org/interviews/interview-owen-sheers/>

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/owen-sheers> - Gives some background information about Sheers and an analysis of his work.

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2016/jul/28/black-mountains-wales-walking-myth-folklore>

Sheers' walking tour taking in the view of the Black Mountains from Hatterall Ridge

<https://surfnslide.wordpress.com/2011/05/27/hatterall-hill/> This blog features pictures of Ysgryd Fawr and Hatterall Ridge and will provide context for some of the discussion on landscape above.

Merlin Gable, 'A Monument to the Communal' <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2019/01/a-monument-to-the-communal/> This primarily focuses on Sheers' two film-poems but gives some useful information about his career and his views on writing and Wales.