The Welsh Utopia
An old Welsh folk tale tells of a utopian world out there in Cardigan Bay, between the Welsh and Irish coasts. This was not the submerged land of Cantre’r Gwaelod so popular with artists, writers, tourist organisations and funding bodies. This was the land of Plant Rhys Ddwnf, the Children of Rhys the Deep – but not deep below the sea, Rhys was a thinker, a folk philosopher. He reasoned that the mainlanders would destroy his world if they could see it, so he planted a hedge of herbs the length of what is now the Welsh coastline. Only if you stood on one small patch of this herb that grew on a mountaintop would the land of Plant Rhys Ddwnf become visible through the mist; and if you stepped away you would forget how to see it again. But no one knew where this patch of herbs grew, so they never saw the Welsh utopia. All they ever saw was rain. And all they wanted to do was reach the Irish coast on the other side as quickly as possible.

Flights, Fibs and Fairies: A folk history of flight from Fishguard
When I was a scruffy little child, I loved to climb to the summit of Tre’r Ceiri, and clamber over the tops of the stone walls of the hundred and fifty iron-age roundhouses,
and gaze out across the whole wide world. Well, maybe not the whole world, but I could see the mystical Wicklow Hills in faraway Poblacht na hÉireann, which felt like the end of the world. And the mountain was usually covered in a thin mist, y brenin llwyd, so I could barely see my own nose. I learned that if I squinted and used my imagination I could see two other mythical lands: the submerged city of Cantre’r Gwaelod beneath the sea, and the utopian world of Plant Rhys Ddwfn out there in Cardigan Bay. And in my own mythology, those lands were as real and as mythical as Ireland. If I flapped my arms and jumped off Tre’r Ceiri, I could fly there like the choughs that wheeled and squealed overhead.

Back in 1910, actor-turned-aviator Robert Loraine left behind his starring roles in George Bernard Shaw’s stage plays, and flew his Firman biplane from Holyhead with the intention of becoming the first man to fly from Wales to Ireland. In true theatrical style, he crash-landed in the sea sixty metres short of Dublin, and swam ashore, which sort of disqualified him. And so, two years later, Denys Corbett-Wilson, war hero, jockey, racing car driver, and the playboy son of a rich barrister, accepted the challenge.

On 12 April 1912, Corbett-Wilson and Damer Leslie Allen took off in separate Bleriot monoplanes from Hendon Aerodrome in a race to Ireland via Chester and Holyhead. Allen arrived in Holyhead first, refuelled and disappeared into the mist over the Irish Sea, never to be seen again, while Corbett Wilson accidentally dropped his compass overboard and landed in a field near Hereford. While waiting impatiently for his mechanic, he filled his engine with low-grade castor oil, and took off again only to splutter to a halt in Radnor. After three days of repairs, he assumed the race was lost, but resumed the chase and found himself in a field overlooking the ferry terminal in Goodwick harbour. At 6am on 22 April he took off again, and 100 minutes later landed in a field at Enniscorthy having completed the first flight across the land of Plant Rhys Ddwfn.
Five days later, Vivian Hewitt from Bodfari flew from Holyhead to Dublin and so became the first Welshman to make the journey. Ironically, he would have made the flight earlier but for thick mist that obscured his vision, although he did make the trip ten minutes faster than Corbett-Wilson, thereby starting an argument over which aviator had made the first flight across the Irish Sea. The answer was none of them. That honour belonged to an old fisherman from Goodwick.

Shemi Wâd was born in 1815 and lived in a now-demolished whitewashed cottage in Broom Street / Duke Street. He earned his pennies as a fisherman, market gardener, farmhand, clock mender, pig sticker, and tall tale teller for the children of Goodwick and anyone at the Rose and Crown. He smoked, drank, spat tobacco, scratched himself in public, and didn’t believe in washing. That’s why he had fleas. One of them was a singing flea who lived beneath his bed in a saucepan he used as a chamberpot. The flea sang rude sea shanties, and no one sang better than Shemi’s singing flea. It would have been a sensation on TikTok.

Shemi had half-shares in a fishing boat and a fishing net with his friend Dai Reynolds. They caught mackerel, lobsters and crabs off the Cow and Calf Rocks at Pencaer, and split the catch half and half, though Dai complained that Shemi’s half was bigger. So Shemi said to be fair, he’d have the inside of the net and Dai could have the outside.
They once caught a giant herring, 24 stone and too big to fit in the boat, so they hauled it back to Goodwick in the net. When they cut it open, old Jonah himself hopped out, and don’t laugh, because he wasn’t the first bible character to turn up in Fishguard. Years before, Jesus called at a cottage and asked a woman if he could bless her family. Well, she had 17 children and she thought Jesus might not approve of her having so much sex, so she hid ten of them in the woods, then brushed the hair and scrubbed the faces of the remaining 7 ready for blessing. When Jesus left, the woman went to fetch her other ten children, but couldn’t find them. They became the bendith y mamau, mother’s blessings, the first fairies, from whom old Shemi was probably descended.

After that, Shemi took to fishing with a rod from his favourite rock at Parrog. One sunny day, he settled himself down and felt in his pocket for the live maggots he kept as bait. He pulled out string (long), string (short), a tin of ‘bacci’, a box of matches, a spare box of matches, a piece of cheese, an unwashed hanky, two coins, a sweet covered in fluff, and a stale currant bun. But no maggots. So he broke off a piece of currant bun, threaded it on the hook, tied the rod to his tummy with the string, and dreamed of nice fat mackerel for tea.

As the tide went out, the sharp-eyed gulls spotted the crumbs and swallowed them down, hooks and all. At that moment Shemi snored loudly and startled the gulls who took off, pulling the fishing line behind them. Shemi found himself flying through the air and over the sea. On and on they went with only the horizon for company, when he saw below a green land and a grey city. Then the fishing line broke, down Shemi fell, and landed with a thump in a flower bed. He checked that his sou’wester was still on his head, asked a couple of passing ladies where he was, but they couldn’t understand a word he said. This was clearly Central Park, New York, where they didn’t speak Pembrokeshire. He was tired after his long flight, so he climbed inside an old cannon that reminded him of the ones back home, and went to sleep.
At nine o’clock next morning there was a loud bang and Shemi woke up to find himself flying over the sea once again, but this time not attached to gulls. He landed with a thump on the green grass of Pencw, picked himself up, checked his sou’wester was still on his head, looked around to make sure no one was looking, and strolled to the Rose and Crown where he told the landlord all about his day. The landlord didn’t believe him, of course. He said a flock of gulls could never have pulled Shemi over the sea to New York. It was too far. They must have dropped him in Phoenix Park in Dublin. Again.

You see, this wasn’t the only time Shemi flew to Ireland. He once caught a sewin off the beach and noticed an old heron eyeing it up. Shemi tugged on the line until the heron took off hauling him behind it. He flapped his arms until the line snapped and landed on a rock by the sea. An inscription on the rock told him he was in Ireland, and he was just wondering how to get home when a giant crab walked passed him, so he jumped on its back and sailed it to Goodwick just in time for another pint at the Rose and Crown. And the poor old crab died from exhaustion and everyone in Goodwick had crabmeat pie for dinner.

So there you are, Shemi Wâd was the first to fly to Ireland, and not Denys Corbett-Wilson, which I know might be difficult for those of you with scientific, academic, and logical minds to believe. But what if I tell you that the old boy wasn’t even the first person in Fishguard to fly?
Around the same time as Shemi flew to Ireland, Willie John was living at Trewern about a mile from Pontfaen. He was the uncle of the Rev W Meredith Morris who was collecting stories about Pembrokeshire fiddlers like Swansea Bill, Ianto’r Garth, Levi Gibbwn and Grassie Busville.

Willie’s wife had inflamed lungs and could barely breathe, so he set off across the Gwaun Valley and over Mynydd Melyn to Werndew, to consult the celebrated dyn hysbys Dr Joseph Harries. Now, this Dr Harries was no relation to the infamous Dr John Harries of Cwrt-y-Cadno, whose fame travelled so far that his Book of Incantations is archived on the shelves in the Librarian’s office at the National Library of Wales. But that’s a whole other story.

Dr Joseph Harries of Werndew was a tall slender man with shaggy hair and deep-set eyes, renowned for healing, foretelling the future, and finding lost animals and stolen property. He owned a magic mirror which he invited people to stare into and see what they wanted to see. Most people only saw mist, rather like peering out into Cardigan Bay from Tre’r Ceiri, so Dr Harries invited them to squint their eyes, use their imaginations and look again. This way a woman identified the person who had stolen her jewellery, another retrieved a stolen painting, and Daniel Thomas of Dinas and his cousin Edwin Lewis found their missing cattle by cutting out a sow’s heart, sticking it with pine needles and burning it on the fire.

Dr Harries gave Willie a potion and told him to hurry home, for his wife was nearly gone. Willie explained
that he had no horse and it was a moonless night and the path was worn away, so the doctor told him to walk down the lane to Dinas and he would be offered a lift. Willie set off into the darkness and when he reached Dinas he found himself whisked up by a gust of wind and flying through the air. The five mile journey took less than 20 minutes by air, and when he landed back in Trewern he gave the potion to his wife who could breathe again and recovered immediately.

So there we are. Remember, next time the mist covers Cardigan Bay, squint your eyes and use your imagination, and you might see the utopia you’ve always dreamed of, or maybe an old fisherman being pulled through the air by a flock of gulls.

Shemi’s gravestone at Rhos-y-Caerau, Pencaer, carries the message, Cyfaill i bawb a hoff gan bawb. ‘A friend to all and loved by all’.

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