

Banquet 2013

Response.

Wardens, Mr Alderman, Liverymen, Freemen, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you ANDREW for your best wishes for the future of the Company as we work through our 25th year. I am unable to match your humorous vein since my Learned Clerk tells me that this is the one event when we all enjoy ourselves; not just the Master, so there will be no jokes from me; just a few gentle words wound around some reminiscences but I am MASTER and it would be remiss of me if I did not remind you all that John Milton's 'chief of men', Oliver Williams, commonly and improperly known as Oliver Cromwell, could have played for Wales.

In a poem by John Ceiriog Hughes, translated by Jan Morris as Staying and Going, Ceiriog wrote that the mountains appear permanent and it is only the shepherds who do not stay long in these places. Unlike the slate industry, in mountainous farming areas human impact in the 19th century was certainly modest and short-lived and Ceiriog noted how,

'The generations each arrange their own brief patterns on the page'

Behind the transitory nature of farming itself Ceiriog found that the words and music of each generation did live on. This pattern of generational change along with words and music played a significant but unusual part in my early days as an engineer.

When I was reclaiming abandoned mineral workings, Gwyn Edwards was a principal engineer at the Welsh Development Agency. Gwyn is an aesthete and as such he was sensitive about many things and a great a man to work with. He is too frail to travel now but he laughed heartily when I told him what I would be saying tonight.

In general engineers' reports depressed Gwyn, and those dealing with abandoned mines and quarries did even less to ease his sense of despair at the dereliction and social decay that was around us. These reports also did nothing to reduce his melancholy. From the early days Gwyn looked to me to provide reports which gave him pleasure. I did my best to oblige. Individual

words, sentence length and shape, and report structure all became very important. Locke, Ruskin, Kipling, Keynes, and others were all useful in providing colour. In the context of us reclaiming land and creating new patterns; Gwyn and I found Ceiriog's words and his concept of writing on a previously used page to be compelling.

Beyond the limits of the derelict sites we saw crowded South Wales losing its purpose and the grandeur of Snowdonia where I viewed the juxtaposition of beauty and dereliction as obscene; not subjects that we could dismiss lightly because of our 'love, pity and pride' as Jan Morris puts it in 'Wales, the first place'.

I was privileged to have had the chance of expressing my feelings in a particularly physical way and on a substantial scale as well as using the words of others to give pleasure and make a point, for example;

In his 'Ode to Ironfounders', yes an Ode to Ironfounders, Gordon Bottomley observed how

'Grass the forerunner of life has fled but plants that spring in ruins and shards attend until your dreams are done'.

Gwyn and I walked around many desolate sites. Grass had fled for sure, but we too would find a few green shoots, these were tough pioneers and survivors of the plant world. They epitomised for me an emerging future, in time this was called 'Working with nature; low-cost land reclamation techniques'. It was a best seller and ran to a couple of editions. As the introduction to an engineering report Gordon Bottomley's 'Ode' pleased Gwyn immensely.

Trust between us and the capacity to empathise with one another were important for progression of the work. Scale and cost was not a topic for extended discussion. Some of our site visits could extend over a couple of days; we needed diversions if we were not going to end up clinically depressed, and Gwyn had enough problems anyway; if poetry wasn't enough of a diversion then we turned to music.

Gwyn was fond of Mozart, whose music probably best countered his melancholic approach to life. The raindrop prelude was not for him. One

evening over dinner he suggested, just in passing, that Mozart was the greatest and most elegant musician ever and that Beethoven was all strain and sweat, this was a reference-back to an earlier conversation that morning.

The melancholy had set in too and he commented that the Chateau de Pez 72 which we were drinking was boot polish; boot polish I cried; but that is a story which he still tells against himself.

Anyway, back to Mozart and Beethoven, I replied, yes Gwyn, Beethoven was a heavy weight, I see him as a tight head prop, strong and leading from the front, but Mozart; no Gwyn, compared with Beethoven Mozart was lightweight, a gentleman at outside half perhaps, you remember Gentleman Billy Raybould at half-back tip-toeing about the field for Wales, promising something half decent but offering little by way of real penetration, that's your Mozart; back came the response, 'Beethoven didn't write a decent opera'.

The conversation turned to the qualities of other Welsh outside halves; at last the Chateau de Pez took on a glow.

I have to remind you that the Lord Mayor's Show will soon be upon us at the weekend, our carol service is on December 17th at St Mary at Hill and the Myddleton Lunch will be on 29th January. The year marches on.