

# **Things achieved through patience and great care possess a quality that endures**

## **A tribute to Wil Petherbridge**

During my college days, whenever the late Brinley Rees would pull a pile of papers out of a brown envelope and start to talk about the *englynion* of Llywarch Hen, when Dafydd Glyn Jones would embark on another lecture on the syntax of the Welsh language, or when Dr Enid Pierce Roberts shared with us her vast knowledge of the medieval Welsh Court Poets, I'd feel a touch of awe. In a similar fashion, I felt both awe and respect for Wil.

I first heard of him at Gwynedd Technical College in Bangor when a non-Welsh-speaking economics lecturer mentioned the rather unusual surname and said, "You must know Wil Petherbridge ... He's a translator ... He knows everything about translating ..."

Some years later when I decided to follow the one-year part-time course on Translation Studies at the University of Wales Aberystwyth, it was led by the very same Wil Petherbridge. I very soon realised that he possessed, to say the least, a strikingly extensive knowledge of day-to-day translation practice and academic theory. He had a string of qualifications to his name: MA, MIL, MITI, Dip Trans (IoL) and he was also a member of Cymdeithas Cyfieithwyr Cymru's Translators' Examination Board and an examiner for both the Institute of Linguists' Diploma in Translation and for professional membership of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting.

That someone who had learnt Welsh as a second language could acquire such a firm grasp of the traits of the Welsh language and be so aware of the connotations of words and different registers, not to mention such a complete mastery of its grammar and syntax, never ceased to amaze me.

The way in which he led seminars and workshops made us really think about what we were trying to do. Having analysed the meaning of a word

by searching in a heap of old dictionaries and examining a number of possible synonyms in at least one thesaurus (two, if possible!), he'd try to lead us to convey its exact meaning in the target language. Oftener than not, the dictionary failed to provide a translation that corresponded exactly to that of the word in its particular context, so we'd have to go 'beyond the dictionary', a process that just happened to be the theme of one of his workshops.

Wil's ability to investigate the meaning of words was amazing and even though I'd been translating for several years before attending the course, this opened up a completely new world for me. One of the main things I learnt was that something could be translated correctly in many different ways. For example, different language registers could be used to suit different audiences. The word order of the original sentence could be altered with no loss of meaning. Sentences could be divided up. Different idioms could be used to convey the same meaning. To me, at the time, this was an exciting revelation.

For Wil, translation was a strict discipline, and in his seminars he'd use an overhead projector slide of a page on which he'd analyzed the various steps the translator should go through both before and during the translation of a text, including giving consideration to the nature of the intended audience. Our own translations, when returned, would be covered in red (or usually blue-black) marks highlighting misplaced clauses, unsuitable idioms, ambiguity, misinterpretation, anglicisms, an inappropriate register or an incorrect tense of the verb. The evaluation he provided at the end of our attempts at translation was always precise and the thoroughly-thought-through comments constantly polite and encouraging.

Wil's insistence on achieving the highest possible standards in translation earned my deepest respect. He was an uncompromising perfectionist in an area where people are too often satisfied with second-best, if that. For him, good translations were "things achieved through patience and great care (and) possess a quality that endures".

Depth. Substance. Integrity. Independence of mind. Sincerity. No ambiguity. No flattery. Nothing but the plain unvarnished truth. In this, we can find comfort in the words of the renowned Welsh-language poet Waldo Williams:

Nid oes yng ngwreiddyn Bod un wywedigaeth  
Yno mae'n rhuddin yn parhau.  
Yno mae'r dewrder sy'n dynerwch  
Bywyd pob bywyd brau.

*In the root of Existence there is no withering away,  
There our true vitality endures and  
We find the courage which is the true kindness  
Of every fragile life.*

As a one-time student, and later an assistant tutor, on the Translation Studies course, I glimpsed another prominent aspect of Wil's personality – his humour. At the final workshop of one of his courses I decided to present the class with a really horrible text, riddled with jargon and Americanese, for translation. Wil started to analyse it with one group of students while I tried to do the same with another. We were in the Seddon Room in the Old College on a fine bright day and Cardigan Bay a blaze of Mediterranean blue. Suddenly Wil stood up and began to get carried away as he read his group's translation aloud in the accent of the North Wales Welsh dialect spoken by the youths of Bangor. We were all in stitches and Wil laughed as uncontrollably as anyone. Enjoying the process of translation was just as important as doing it well.

He was a very gifted tutor in that he gave all his students an equal level support. He never belittled anyone's efforts or patronised them. He respected everyone, displayed great patience and enjoyed discussing problems with his students over tea or coffee during the breaks between seminars and workshops. The notes he provided on theory work and translation exercises were the result of meticulous and perceptive research.

I remember that in one seminar he'd prepared a whole A4 page of notes on the single word 'awkward'. Yet he remained a very modest scholar.

On top of everything else there were his own brilliant translations, for example: 'cors o ddamcaniaethau' for '*a theoretical minefield*', 'teithiau tlawd' for '*shoestring tours*', 'pan oedd mynd ar adeiladu amgueddfeydd' for '*the museum-building boom*', 'andros o gaffi da' for '*an ace caff*' etc. etc.

Though his funeral service featured a few affectionately comic references to the scooter he used to ride about on in his Aber days and the helmet which he'd carry everywhere under his arm, we also heard the heartbreaking truth about the cancer that had gone into remission for a while before slyly creeping back again. But we also heard of the joy of Christ which was an essential part of all he did. It was a sermon like no other.

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed ... for this corruptible **must** put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality.”

That Wil left this world “totally prepared and calm”, in the words of one who was with him till the end, is small wonder.

Totally prepared and calm. That was Wil.

It was an honour to meet his family on the day we gave thanks for his life, and we sympathise with them in their great loss and longing.