

The Dylan Thomas Summer School in Creative Writing

by Pamela Petro

Imagine this: 15 or so sleepy American writing students on a small coach, skirting the edge of the Brecon Beacons. It's morning and they're enveloped in heavy fog. The students are promised a castle on a precipice, but none is in sight. They stagger off the bus and look up: out of the mist looms Carreg Cennan, the magnificent, 12th century castle in West Wales. *Magic*. The students explore and then retire to the converted-barn-cum-coffee-shop to make their own magic. They *write*. They ponder, they write some more. And then they drive to a nearby pub, gather with their pints and pens around a fire, and read to one another.

"This was the best day ever," one of them announced.

The writing students were attending The Dylan Thomas Summer School, which it has been one of the great honors and adventures of my life to direct, alongside Welsh poet and literary impresario Dominic Williams. The "DTSS" was founded in 2014 by the internationally known poet Menna Elfyn—the most-translated minority language writer in the world—and has flourished ever since. It's a 12-day escape in West Wales for writers of all ages, styles, and genres. We focus the program on "A Sense of Place," and lead students to destinations like Carreg Cennan and other castles, to mines, gardens (such as the 17th century walled gardens at Aberglasney), Stone Age monuments, and many more extraordinary and ravishing locations, where they write on site to imaginative prompts. Our goal is to help students generate new writing, rather than to intensively critique their work. They commence up to 14 or 15 new pieces while in Wales, and then return home with much to ponder. Many have published the work they began in Wales—and some have won awards, such as the Ten Minute Play Award from the Kennedy Center—while others have approached the workshops as a way of creating structured, private travel journals.

Each year's class is made up of approximately 15-18 students, of ages that have so far ranged from 18-81. We seek out



The harbor town of Aberaeron, about 20 minutes

an invigorating mix of undergraduates, MFA in Creative Writing graduate students, and individuals from across the States and Canada who enjoy creative writing for its own sake. Several years ago the youngest and oldest students on the program bonded—one from California, the other from New Mexico—and are still in touch, sharing their work with one another.

The DTSS is based on the rural campus of the University of Wales, Trinity St David, in Lampeter—so rural that there's no place on campus where you can't hear sheep bleat. Students attend workshops on campus as well, in a lovely library in the turreted tower of the college's oldest building. Workshops are taught by me—Pamela, a prose writer—and award-winning Welsh poets including Susan Richardson, Kathy Miles, Paul Henry, and Samantha Rhydderch. (Students are free to respond to prompts in whatever genre they wish, from prose to poetry to comics.) In addition to daytime workshops, one of the richest aspects of the experience is our evening reading series, which townspeople enjoy as well. Every evening one of Wales' finest writers joins us to give a reading, answer questions and sign books, and then—for students who still have the energy!—retire to the pub. Our readers have included Poets Laureate of Wales, Gillian Clarke, Gwynth Lewis, and Ifor ap Glyn, as well as Menna Elfyn, Owen Sheers, and many others.

On the penultimate evening we do something a little different. We meet at one of

Lampeter's pubs for a Poems & Pints session: our students read their work to townspeople, and the townspeople of Lampeter and the surrounding farms read to us. They've also been known to sing, play the saxophone, and one year we even had an interpretive dance. It's a glorious evening that has twice ended in happy tears, as two American students, on their own initiative, have memorized the Welsh hymn, "Ar Hyd y Nos," and sung it acapella as a thank you to the town for hosting them.

Over the past few years Dominic and I have developed three Lampeter-based itineraries that we rotate, albeit adding new elements with each iteration. These include Mining Valleys, Brecon Beacons, Swansea, and Gower Peninsula; Pembrokeshire, including St David's, the Around Wales Coast Path, and Pentre Ifan dolmen; and North Wales, featuring Snowdonia, Llechwyd Slate Mine, and Ty Newydd, the National Writers' Centre.

The program is fully accredited and may be taken for credit or just for fun. All-inclusive cost for 2021 is £1950 without airfare, and the upcoming dates are 31 May - 11 June, 2021. For more information contact Pamela Petro - ppetro@lesley.edu, Dominic Williams at dominic.coracle@gmail.com and please visit our website at www.uwtsd.ac.uk/dylan-thomas/summerschool.

Bio: Pamela Petro is a writer, artist and educator. She is the author of *Travels in an Old Tongue - Touring the World Speaking Welsh*, and finally—25 years later!—has a new book



DTSS student Sophie Willard Van Sistine doing a handstand at Harlech Castle.

coming out about Wales: *The Long Field - A Memoir, Wales, and the Presence of Absence*, which will be published by Little Toller Books in May, 2021.

Cân Sadwrn with Côr Cymry Gogledd America - Building up our Choir Community Virtually!



The design of the Cor Cymry T-shirt

By Heather Evans DeFer

Nearly every Saturday since lockdown began in March, Dr. Mari Morgan and the choristers of *Côr Cymry Gogledd America* (North American Welsh Choir) have met virtually for rehearsals that we now fondly call, *Cân Sadwrn ~ Saturday Song!* Through the lockdown, we have added to our understanding of Welsh Culture, with presentations on Art, History, Popular Music, Film, Genealogy, and Literature. Additionally, many of us choristers have joined together to begin Welsh lessons - *Dosbarth Cymraeg - diolch* (thanks) to our tutors, Dan Rowbotham, Dr. Mari Morgan, and Hefina Philips. We have truly enjoyed getting to know each other in this format and have shared many happy Saturday mornings singing and learning together - 28 weeks in all so far, and our numbers are growing with new choristers and friends in attendance. The most recent addition to *Côr Cymry* has been our amazing new dragon T-shirts! They were designed by our very own chorister - Alicia. A graphic

designer in an earlier career, Alicia put her skills to work, and thanks to the inspiration of her young son, created these magical dragon T-shirts for us - even down to how to draw the dragon's eyebrows! During a recent *Cân Sadwrn*, we were fortunate to hear Alicia walk us through her artistic process, and we were all stunned by the thought and preparation involved. The shirt features a dragon conducting the virtual choir, with a music stand full of fantastic Welsh tunes. Wording around the image reads, "Côr Cymry Gogledd America - North American Welsh Choir", and "Cân Sadwrn - Saturday Song". One of the founder choristers of *Côr Cymry* more than 20 years, Alicia is now a busy nurse case manager with a family but is able to fully share in our activities through this new virtual environment. *Diolch yn fawr iawn* to Alicia for her hard work and for sharing her talents with us. We are all thrilled with the end result - can't wait for the next Alicia & son creation for our wonderful *Côr Cymry Gogledd America Community!*

Welsh Ingenuity in a Pandemic (continued from p 3)

and served in their temporary accommodations. The response to her offerings has been outstanding. She was recently featured on a special segment of the S4C program "Garddio a Mwy". Most recently she catered a party for a family staying in one of Anglesey's holiday windmill homes. The menu featured:

"Roasted butternut squash soup served with crispy sage, soft goat's cheese and chili oil. Followed by seared rump of Welsh lamb, braised lamb breast pie, minted peas and rosemary potatoes. Dessert was a Tart Tatin made with local fiesta apples, enhanced with cinnamon sugar and softly whipped Anglesey cream." Is your mouth watering yet?

Plans are underway for a purpose built, fitted kitchen on the grounds of the family home. If you are planning your own visit to Wales (who knows when?) or, better yet, have friends and family in the old country,



Anglesey's finest produce feature in Delyth's cooking

encourage them to check her out at book-a-cook.co.uk. They won't be disappointed!