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**Introduction, by Sue Asbee
to *The Wooden Doctor* by Margiad Evans**

‘if my pen has ever done anything for Wales it is honoured’¹
(Margiad Evans)

The Wooden Doctor

The Wooden Doctor was published in March 1933 to enthusiastic reviews. *The Daily Herald* thought it was ‘an astonishing story’; James Agate in *The Daily Express* said ‘Heavens! What characters and what a plot!...This young woman can write’, while Compton Macenzie’s *Daily Mail* review simply urged people to ‘[r]ead “The Wooden Doctor”’. It is really good’. None of the reviewers dwelt on the vivid and compelling descriptions of pain that Arabella, the central character, endures, nor the dark hints that these are related to her sexuality and her love for her doctor, but it is the power of such descriptions and the psychology behind them that make the novel so fascinating. In spite of the reviews, sales never quite lived up to the promise of that initial reception. *The Wooden Doctor* was neglected, effectively becoming a lost classic, perhaps partly because of the ‘uncompromising harshness’ noted by the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, and an unwillingness to delve too far into or be seduced by Arabella’s tormented mind.

The Wooden Doctor is an extraordinary and unusual novel about dysfunctional family life, obsessive unrequited love, and physical pain – all of which hold interest for contemporary readers and critics. The Prelude tells of a childhood fever which triggers Arabella’s obsession with Dr O’Flaherty, a man thirty years her senior. In Part One she is in France, a pupil-teacher studying the language; Part Two sees her return and the onset of her illness; in Part Three she goes to North Wales to research

background for her novel. Here a love affair with a young man results in marriage plans, which are summarily abandoned the moment she sees her beloved Doctor once again. That brief description is probably sufficient to show that the story is episodic rather than tightly plotted. It remains unresolved at the end, perhaps another reason why it was not especially popular with the reading public when it first came out. Modernist writers at the time were finding other ways of organising their narratives, de-emphasising plot and embracing open-endedness, but the structure of *The Wooden Doctor* was determined less by the desire to experiment than by Margiad Evans's own life, for it is a fictional autobiography.

Arabella's abdominal pains dominate the narrative; at first O'Flaherty confidently assures her that she is suffering from cystitis, but the pains endure and the diagnosis remains inconclusive. There is a strong suggestion that their origin is not physical at all, but nervous or hysterical. Writing at the end of the twentieth century Elaine Showalter remarks that 'as medical institutions expel hysteria, literary critics take it up'. The 'hysterical narrative', she says, has become 'one of the most popular formulations of literary criticism. It has grown at the busy crossroads where psychoanalytical theory, narratology, feminist criticism, and the history of medicine intersect'ⁱⁱ. Any of these approaches provide useful insights into *The Wooden Doctor*, and indeed it is not easy to separate them out. Hysteria, Showalter says, 'cuts across historical periods and national boundaries, poses fundamental questions about gender and culture, and offers insight into language, narrative, and representation'; it is 'a form of expression, a body language for people who might otherwise not be able to speak or even to admit what they feel'ⁱⁱⁱ. Hysteria is a complex cultural discourse

open to multiple interpretations, and it is particularly relevant to Arabella's narrative which offers few clear explanations.

The childhood fever and a later more mysterious episode requiring the doctor's attention occur before Arabella leaves for France, establishing a pattern of illness. At first sight Arabella seems eloquent on the subject of her feelings – she expresses vividly the physical pain she endures, her love for the doctor, contempt for her father and mother – nevertheless there are many gaps and silences in her story. Medical science can find no explanation for her condition, and at various times her mother and even her beloved Doctor come to the conclusion that it was her 'nerves that were wrong' (78). Arabella herself comes to believe that she was 'sick in body and mind' (79). If the cause is indeed psychological, what exactly is responsible for generating this crippling painful hysteria? If we define hysterical illness as a consequence of the body articulating symptoms of psychic anguish that cannot be expressed in words, Arabella's narrative offers no clear answers. A childhood nightmare she shares with her sister (p xv) may hint at sexual abuse, perhaps from her alcoholic father; on the other hand relationships with both her parents are sufficiently unhappy to trigger the illness which renders her helpless and demands the kind of attention she has lacked as a child and adolescent. Of her relationship with her mother, for example, Arabella says their 'old devotion' to each other lies 'dead between us, killed by cruel words, senseless misunderstandings, wild and wicked recriminations' (105), while '[o]ur home among the quiet fields became a cage of savagery' (xviii).

If her formative years lack nurture, the doctor's kindness goes some way to supplying this need. But there is also a sense in which his care provides not so much a solution

as part of the continuing problem. Crucially, by the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘some physicians had learned that hysteria could be *iatrogenic* – created by the interaction between doctor and patient’^{iv}. Rhodri Haywood suggests a physical rather than a psychological explanation for this: ‘in gynaecological and urological textbooks of the 1930s, cystitis is often held up as an iatrogenic illness, induced through botched surgical interventions and examinations or through the use of unsterilised instruments’^v. It is possible that both contribute to Arabella’s suffering. Her childhood experience of the new doctor’s ability to prevent nightmare (‘His touch had cheated the terror’ p.xv) is perhaps sufficient to begin the cycle of reliance which continues throughout the course of the novel: when she is ill, he comes.

When Arabella confesses her love and receives kind but professional rejection from her doctor, her feelings intensify and significantly she uses images of the body and sickness in an attempt to describe her experience of love: ‘it is possible to be happy before loving, perhaps after, but never while that diabolical poison coursed through the veins’ (p.152). Love and medical attention are associated in her mind from an early age with disastrous results for conventional relationships.

The dramatic frontispiece of the novel (which Evans drew, initialling it ‘PW’ for her given name, Peggy Whistler) focuses attention on illness. Executed in blocks of black and white, the illustration depicts a woman in bed. Her face is half in shadow, the side we see depicts strong features and a sensual mouth. The eye is closed but sleep does not seem tranquil. The body is arranged diagonally across the picture space, head and flowing hair occupying the top right hand corner, framed by the suggestion of a pillow and balanced in the right foreground by a nightstand with jug and ewer.

The eye is drawn along diagonal lines of composition, interrupted and disturbed by jagged black folds of bedclothes across the woman's abdomen in the centre of the picture, indicating shattering pains and perhaps even the suggestion of a fox's jaws. Representing Arabella in this way foregrounds her suffering in the narrative, and adds resonance to the question: does her illness have a physical or a psychosomatic cause? In hospital she is variously assured by her consultant that her pain must be stopped, and that there is nothing wrong. Another patient describes the agony of her kidney stones – Arabella claims the symptoms as her own.

Elaine Scarry insists on the difficulty of describing pain, claiming that it 'does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'^{vi}. Scarry also quotes from Woolf's essay 'On Being Ill': 'The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry'^{vii}. Evans's descriptive power refutes this:

Suddenly out of the darkness the fox sprang with flaming feet and famished jaws, rending, biting, tearing. I wished that I could faint and be delivered from this agony, but my strength increased the torture (WD 79-80).

The repeated imagery of the 'fox in a bag scratching and rending to get out' (WD 77) and the claws that penetrate Arabella's sleep (WD 78) gives the narrative coherence of a kind in the absence of a strong plot, and focus interest on psychology rather than action.

The Preface finishes with a chilling description of family life: 'we sharpened our claws in one another's flesh' (xviii). Through the imagery of claws then, her

undiagnosed illness is linked to her family situation. Gaps and silences in Arabella's narrative may be interpreted in various ways, suggesting that an abusive relationship with her father, her mother, or possibly even her own guilt about sexual feelings is responsible. Whatever conclusions we reach, it is clear that Arabella's body articulates complex emotional states which cannot otherwise be expressed^{viii}.

An enclosed world

Use of first-person narrative generates a sense of claustrophobia in the novel. Readers share the mind of a young woman in the grip of an intense infatuation, circumscribing the world of the novel with no possibility of escape. The immediacy with which the story is told allows no detachment from events described: we experience the torment of dysfunctional family life at first hand. The repressive milieu of Cours Saint-Louis, the school in France, contributes another closed world – as the Bassencourt school does in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, written eighty years earlier. The walled garden of Evans's French school, the directrice's jealousies, the young Englishman, and Arabella's distrust of Roman Catholicism also recall *Villette*. *The Wooden Doctor* is set in the twentieth century, but for readers familiar with Brontë's novel *Villette* co-exists and makes its own contribution to the sense of secrets and repression, while Jane Eyre's experiences at Lowood School might be recalled in Arabella's accounts of intense cold and insufficient food.

Evans's technique of repetition also works to convey claustrophobia. Descriptive words – 'cold', 'cruel', 'biting', 'bitter' – are repeated relentlessly, suggesting a mind constantly circling but never making progress. It is a technique she identified in the work of Byron and of Emily Brontë, arguing that they are 'twin poets' in an essay she

published in 1948^{ix}. Quoting from Bronte's poem 'Light up thy Halls' and Byron's 'Incantation', she points out a similarity in the two writers' diction 'even to the constant use and close-set reiteration of certain terse and ordinary words – words which they invest with a vehement and vindictive purpose almost unique in letters^x'. Evans uses the technique herself: 'Oh it was cold in the house, and in the garden, bitterly, cruelly, cold and lonely' (54); her mother's letter is 'bitter and biting'; Flaherty would not have 'so cruelly condemned' (56); while the girls 'cried bitterly when they returned to school' (57). The intention may not always be vehement and vindictive, but the repetitions certainly help to maintain the emotional tenor of the narrative.

Arabella is a young woman who takes all her clothes off in the garden (77) and is unembarrassed by the presence of nurses when she is having a bath, indeed, she is happy for them to scrub her back. Mid-nineteenth-century sensibilities may have little in common with such uninhibitions, but even without Evans's fascination with Emily Bronte, Arabella can be regarded within a similar literary tradition. Of the three Bronte heroines – Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, and Lucy Snowe – who could each exclaim, with Arabella, 'I *had* suffered' (77) *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe is perhaps the closest. In *Wuthering Heights* Catherine Earnshaw's voice, even in delusion, is mediated by Ellen Dean's and Lockwood's, narrators who always provide alternative realities, while Lucy Snowe, like Arabella, tells her own story and keeps secrets from her readers. At times one might be forgiven for believing *The Wooden Doctor* to be set in the late nineteenth century, not simply because of the rural setting but because of its Brontesque tone. But Arabella's unconventionality, her lack of modesty – indeed, her exhibitionist tendencies – ultimately place the narrative firmly in the twentieth.

Constant attention to light and shade also plays its part in evoking the enclosed world of *The Wooden Doctor*. A film version of the novel would need little work on this count for Margiad Evans is her own lighting director. Almost every scene is set with candle, lamp, lantern, firelight – or, in the case of Clystow Royal Infirmary, a rare reference to electric light ‘reflected in the glaze’ of ‘the naked wall’ (115). That last example comes as a startling exception, reminding us that we are not in a world before electricity. Returning home from her second hospital visit Arabella finds the house in darkness: Esther comes to let her in, ‘a lighted candle smoking and dripping grease on her hand’ (117). She has been reading ghost stories, ‘a fiery flush died her cheeks crimson; her features were heavy from the heat’. Upstairs lying on a sofa her mother is ‘glowering in the dark’ (118): in this case bad temper metaphorically lends dull red illumination to a darkened room. This perhaps offers a key to the reiteration of candle, lantern, and lamp, for none offer the stark exposure of electric light; each illuminates only selected pools within the darkness – rather like Arabella’s single-point of view narrative itself. Only in hospital is she subjected to the pitiless glare of electricity, and significantly that sheds no light on her condition.

Music is important too. In hospital the use of bedside earphones lifts Arabella out of her misery:

I had forgotten the fox, and knives, and moans and surgeons, anaesthetics, morphia, terror and panoply of death. Harps, violins and horns wove a dance. The thick balcony pillar stood out against the deep, living midnight sky like the fragment of a temple. Fancy flew (WD 101).

Her fancy is theatrical – and again lighting is an important part of the theatricality – but this is all part of the affective power music has on her. Significantly the earphones ensure that the experience is not a shared one. In a later episode Schubert’s

'Unfinished Symphony' is broadcast on the wireless against a background of inattentive chatter, effectively isolating Arabella in her response to the music as her experience of pain isolates her from those around her: 'Blissfully and heedlessly they chattered through the giant-striding chords, the unearthed melodies, those faint, receding footsteps dropping into distance like averted doom' (155). Here there is something elemental in the idea of melodies 'unearthed', in the sense of 'taken from the earth' rather than simply 'discovered'; there is a link with Evans's own sense of identity rooted in the landscape, as we shall see. Meanwhile, rhythm and movement are equally important in the following passage, where Arabella's interest in and attraction to other women is apparent: Mrs de Kuyper dances spontaneously,

She rose, lifted her skirt above her knees, displaying her beautiful straight legs and arched insteps, and began to dance. Her feet tapped like castanets, the black folds of velvet whirled and swathed her hips...She hardly moved a foot, but her whole body was in motion (123).

As a child Arabella remarks on the exotic tenant whose 'long silk-covered legs' contrasted 'strangely with our brown shins and our aunt's stumps' (xi), while in hospital (among countless other instances) she notices a female student who 'swung her hips as she moved like a person dancing a slow, sensual tango' (109). The narrative which focuses so closely on her own body also shows an interest in, and fascination with, other female bodies. Paradoxically this fascination does not extend to masculine characteristics, for – surprisingly - there are no comparable descriptions of Flaherty's physical appearance.

Biography

Distinguishing between biography and fiction presents a problem for anyone studying the life and work of Margiad Evans, or Peggy Whistler, as she was named when she

was born on 17 March 1909. In real life, as a young girl, Peggy Whistler fell in love with Dr John Leeper Dunlop, only really recovering from what amounted to an obsession after the publication of *The Wooden Doctor*. Identification between author and characters is more complicated than that simple description might suggest, for the novel and biography are supplemented by journals, and in those she refers to herself as Peggy, Margiad, and even Arabella. In an early draft of *The Wooden Doctor* there are times when the author forgets she is writing fiction and refers to her character Arabella by her own name of Peggy. Notions of identity, then, are complex in Evans's work, shifting between the usual boundaries critical readers are taught to observe between life and fiction.

Those complexities multiply when the idea of nation is added to the identity equation, for the English Peggy Whistler adopted a Welsh name for her writing, and the Herefordshire Border country as her spiritual home, while at the same time insisting that she had only 'one drop of Welsh blood'^{xi}. Reviewers of her fiction quickly labelled her as a Welsh writer, or Anglo-Welsh, taking their cue from her name, and the setting of her first novel, *Country Dance* (1932).

She was born in Uxbridge, Middlesex, first visiting Herefordshire with her father when she was nine years old, to stay at her aunt's farm, Benhall, near Ross-on-Wye. The countryside had a profound and lasting effect on her. Walking alongside the river Wye Peggy was moved to an intensity of feeling for the place that far exceeded her ability to articulate it. Some 'powerful emotion began to rise' in her when it was time to leave, 'some desperate adoration'; through a passion of tears she begged her father 'Oh don't, don't take me away from this place'^{xii}. Two years later circumstances

dictated that, together with her younger sister, she return for an extended stay, until eventually the Whistler family was reunited when the parents bought Lavender Cottage at Bridstow, not far from the farm near Ross-on-Wye.

Peggy went to the High School in Ross, passed her Oxford Junior exam in 1923 and her school certificate in 1925, at which point she left for France, to teach and to learn the language. She lived and worked at Cours Saint-Denis, a school in Loches, a small town near Tours. The experience was not a happy one, although eventually it provided material for Part One of *The Wooden Doctor*. Back at Lavender Cottage, inspired by discovering Aubrey Beardsley's work, Peggy studied at the Hereford School of Art. Her first published work was, in fact, illustrations for a book of fables, *Tales From the Panchatantra* (1930), and at that time she thought of herself as an artist rather than a writer. She returned to France for some months in 1926, this time staying in a fishing village in Brittany, Bas Poldu, where a community of artists lived and worked. These experiences also appeared in an early draft of *The Wooden Doctor*, but do not survive in the published version. As a young woman, Peggy had several short-term periods of employment as governess or housekeeper that took her away from Bridstow, but she always returned to Lavender Cottage, her home until 1936 when her father's death meant the place could no longer be maintained.

Family life was far from tranquil. Godfrey (her father) drank, and other members of the family in the house were highly strung. The intensity of a highly charged emotional family life is common to all of Margiad Evans's novels. Love is bound up with jealousy and leads to murder in both *A Country Dance* (1932) and *Turf or Stone* (1934). Married couples practise untold cruelty upon one another, while rivalries and

bitterness are rife in all kinds of relationships. *Creed* (1936), her last novel, is similarly violent.

The Wooden Doctor begins with a brief fictionalised account of the sisters' time at Benhall, and a comparison with the later (unpublished and much more extensive) 'Immortal Hospital' memoir suggests that the freedom and unconventionality of their young lives for that period was pretty much representative of the reality:

My aunt sent us to school in Salus. We were always late because we dawdled on the way eating the biscuits she had given us for lunch, playing with the dogs in the road, or searching the hedges and banks for birds' nests. Our egg collection was very large and carefully classified. We never took more than one egg from a nest (WD p.x).

Some aspects of her account of rural life recall Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). Cousin Robbie, for example, slept in the oldest wing of the house, his room 'was like a barn':

It smelt of leather, dung and feathers...Robbie always went to bed in his boots unless it was Saturday night, and his boots were mighty dirty. Into bed with him he took the alarm clock, about half a bushel or so of chaff: and, unforgettably, a large clasp knife to cut bread and cheese. Fearing he might cut or stab himself in his sleep this was always stuck deep into the mattress. The clock, the knife and occasionally the boots we found and sorted each morning, shaking the bedclothes free of chaff out of the ancient barred windows^{xiii}.

Another cousin, Roger, slept with a loaded gun. Life at Benhall may have been unconventional, if not at times downright eccentric, but it provided much-needed security for the sisters.

Peggy's love for the middle-aged Dr Dunlop, paralleled by the fictional Arabella's love for Flaherty in *The Wooden Doctor*, finally lost its power in her early twenties. Late in life Dr Dunlop married for the first time, and eventually Peggy recovered. In

1940 she married Michael Williams, a man she had met while running a guest house some years before. Married life began in Brickhampton, near Cheltenham, but the couple moved to Llangarron, near Ross, in 1941 where Michael did farm work until he joined the navy the following year.

During their separation Evans wrote regular long, detailed letters to her husband about her daily life. Her minute observation, attention to domestic detail and to the natural world was already apparent in *The Wooden Doctor*:

My mother was weeding in the garden, throwing the rubbish that she pulled out of the ground into a white enamel bucket with a hole in the side and a rusty handle that she had used for this purpose as long as I could remember. The red chestnut would soon flower. The deep crimson tulips were going over (143).

Such matter came to form the substance of her letters, with detailed descriptions of the changing seasons. The journals which she had long kept were also a repository for reflections on her intense relationship with nature, and she used them as raw material when, unable to finish a fifth novel for Basil Blackwell, she wrote instead the contemplative account of her inner life, *Autobiography* (1943).

In 1950, pregnant with her daughter Cassandra, she was diagnosed as epileptic. Her habit of journal writing provided her with a reliable record of the deterioration of her health: *A Ray of Darkness* (1952) is the story of her epilepsy, recounted 'as an adventure of body and mind....most of it exactly as it was written down at the time, for' she adds, 'I have my diaries'^{xiv}. A book she had longed planned on Emily Bronte was finally abandoned owing to her ill health.

When the Williams family moved to Hartfield in Sussex for Michael's work as a teacher, Evans felt homesick and exiled from the countryside that she loved. She endured several periods in hospital until finally a brain tumour was diagnosed in 1956. The unpublished manuscript 'The Nightingale Silenced' records in painful analytical detail her fear that she was going out of her mind. A sympathetic doctor assured her that she was 'not the type' to suffer mental breakdown, a remark which prompted this reflection on her writing:

It is true that somewhere centrally a calm and solemn detachment persists and has always persisted amid my extravagance, childish frivolity and general muddle-headedness....From this central theme of the spirit has sprung all my work including the tragic and the comic. A person who chatters easily, lightly, to others, I do not speak to myself but left alone, begin to listen to this human tune....It has a great many limitations and has narrowed my work as well as making it seem old fashioned to a great many critics^{xv}.

Wales, Landscape, and Identity

The year she spent with her aunt and uncle at Benhall was such a formative and significant a part of her life that, aged forty-eight, ill and aware that she had not long to live, she wrote recollections of her time there for her daughter Cassandra, then a child of five. Memory, she says, 'can be *sent back* by deliberate will'^{xvi} and the joy, happiness and freedom she experienced in that particular place remained to be drawn on when her adult self was in need of healing or being restored. For this reason she called her memoir 'The Immortal Hospital'. Benhall becomes Hill Hall in this account:

Hill Hall is the scene where I am always at my strongest, best loved and most enthralled. Hill Hall holds my youth. When lying half awake, half teased by sleep or by my disorder or the horrible associations this disorder has brought. When burnt by sorrow and hollowed by pain, when all the misery and narrowness of that nature which is a writers' makes me writhe like a snake over my own length of Self which I have collected behind me, at moments I can still be little Margiad at Hill Hall, if I try^{xvii}.

Evans's Romantic affiliations are clear: childhood, memory, and nature, are essential in maintaining her mental and spiritual well-being as an adult. Rhodri Hayward argues that in her 'imaginative recreation' of her childhood at Benhall, Evans 'formed a new mental environment for her failing sense of self...the imagined landscape of Ross on Wye could be seen as a practical mnemonic', providing in her writing 'a durable basis for her sense of identity'^{xviii}. Interestingly Evans equates the suffering born of her illness with 'the misery and narrowness' of a writer's nature, subscribing to romantic notions of creativity. But the main thing is that consolation can be found: it is possible to retrieve 'little Margiad'; those childhood days provide a bank of experience to be drawn on in later life.

In choosing her pen name, the young Englishwoman carefully laid hold of a Welsh identity for her writing: the name Evans came from her grandmother, Ann, who was thought to have a Welsh background, while 'Margiad' – perhaps more usually spelt 'Marged' - is a Welsh form of 'Margaret'. Her creativity and imagination were closely identified with the Herefordshire Border country where she spent most of her life, while she stayed at a farm in the Welsh-speaking community of Ponyllyfni in Caernarfonshire to research and write her first novel, *Country Dance*. That episode of her life becomes part of her second novel, *The Wooden Doctor*: 'The story had shifted from the English to the Welsh side of the Border. Actual information was required to continue; imagination I had not drawn upon, and it would have falsified what had been already carefully described' (WD 161). The need to research background, self-referentially inscribed within the novel itself, functions as a signpost to her position as an 'outsider'. For while Peggy Whistler adopted a Welsh pen name, and while critics quickly labelled her as Anglo-Welsh, she was also emphatic in asserting that she was

not, and never had ‘posed as Welsh’^{xix}. On the other hand, she undoubtedly felt a psychological, emotional and spiritual identification with the Border country which began (as we have seen) when she was nine years old.

As an adult, she writes in her journal of the journey home to Bridstow from Hereford:

The chronicle of the day is lifeless, a contamination of movement and mechanical sight, until the mountains of Wales, indigo beyond low transparent clouds, were gathered in one splendid vision spinning backwards as we fled over the Hereford road. The ocean which crashed about Herman Melville’s [sic] brain, and the thrashing of enormous waves in his ears, could never have meant more to him than those hills to me, an unsealable ponderous mystery which could drive me to frenzy and beyond if I looked at them too long. He could express it – he was up to the glory, but I’m mute and the hills lie on me as the water lies on a drowned body stirring it with its own movement and dispersing it^{xx}.

The mountains are sublime, inspiring fear and awe, while over-contemplation could induce frenzy and whatever madness lies beyond that. The profound effect of the landscape on her sense of identity is compounded by the weight of the hills and the notion of death. Self is first dissolved, then lent movement by those same hills that seem to bury her, in a complex image of water and drowning. The passage is intimately bound up with what it means to be a writer, to find expression: Melville has mastered powerful description (and description of nature’s power) whereas Evans by comparison feels herself to be mute. She cannot achieve artistic distance or perspective as he can, she is too embedded, too involved in it. The landscape is powerful enough to (literally) move her, but it also seems to rob her of her power of expression. In another journal entry made the following year, Wales is personified as female, reclaiming land stolen by England:

As sad, as sad and oncoming as the hills today which put out clouds from Wales, as if she would shadow England’s stolen marches, and stake her rights

with rain and mist. The land beyond the hills means so much more to me than the ground I stand on. For what I stand on only supports my flesh, but the distances uphold my heart and the hills sweep my thoughts across the sky^{xxi}.

Again, Evans's identity is intimately and *bodily* rooted within the landscape, allowing her mind – her 'thoughts' – to expand. 'How shall I ever die out of these hills?' she asks, 'The dawn of hills, and their retreating into night. I will write a poem to them one day; for their silence drives me beyond my own'^{xxii}. Clare Morgan, placing Evans's writing in the cultural and historical context of the 1940s, argues that Evans's Romanticism is actually Neo-Romantic. The border she inhabits

is not that of Wales and England, but that of Peggy Whistler and Margiad Evans, a psychological emotional and spiritual border whose aspect mirrors the prevailing cultural anxiety of a Britain seeking in its marginal spaces, rootedness^{xxiii}.

Certainly there is a vivid contrast between the interiors and enclosed worlds that define and debilitate Evans's alter ego Arabella in *The Wooden Doctor*, and the sense of inhabiting and being part of the wider natural landscape she describes in the journals. Arabella finds it impossible 'to imagine that the foundations of [the hospital] were on earth, and that above the roof was the sky' (93), but once admitted to the ward she is told she can have tea on the balcony and: 'Directly I stepped out on the balcony I lost the feeling that I was imprisoned....Why, the Infirmary owed some of its elevation to the hill on which it stood' (95). The separation between structures and institutions, and the outside natural world could not be clearer.

Evans's first three novels are all set in and around Ross-on-Wye, while the fourth and last, *Creed* (1936) is set in Salus (Ross) itself. Many of her short stories draw on the same landscape, while her first book of verse, *Poems from Obscurity*, was advertised as 'essentially Celtic'^{xxiv}. *Country Dance* established Evans's reputation as an Anglo-

Welsh writer. In the story of the love triangle between Ann Goodman (child of an English father and a Welsh mother), Gabriel Ford the Englishman, and Evan ap Evans the Welshman, is ‘represented the entire history of the Border...Wales against England – and the victory goes to Wales; like Evan ap Evans the awakened Celt cries: “Cymru am byth!” with every word she writes’^{xxv}. These are Margiad Evans’s own ‘editorial’ comments framing Ann Goodman’s journal, a nineteenth-century manuscript she purports to find and presents to her readers – in an eighteenth-century literary tradition. When *The Wooden Doctor* came out the following year, the *Daily Herald* said ‘something new and surprising has come out of Wales’ while the *Times Literary Supplement* said ‘There is an uncompromising harshness about Miss Margiad Evans’s new story “The Wooden Doctor” ... born perhaps of the Welsh hill country, which was also the background of her earlier book, “Country Dance”^{xxvi}. Rightly or wrongly, the link between writer and Wales was firmly established in critics’ minds.

Literary Context

Margiad Evans published novels, short stories, and poetry, as well as two other works: *Autobiography* (1943), which as we have seen is not autobiography in a conventional sense, and *A Ray of Darkness* (1952) describing the epilepsy which marked her later years. *The Welsh Review* published a number of her poems, *Life and Letters Today* accepted several of her essays, and she made broadcasts for the Welsh Home Service. Her writing has been compared to that of D. H. Lawrence, Emily Bronte, Richard Jeffries, John Cowper Powys and his brother Llewelyn, while Idris Parry, dwelling on the visionary aspects of her writing, makes a connection with the mystic Henry Vaughan^{xxvii}.

Although she never met the celebrated Welsh writer Kate Roberts, Evans admired her work and the respect was mutual. The two corresponded for some years after Evans reviewed a collection of Kate Roberts's short stories which had been translated into English, *A Summer's Day* (1946), in *Life and Letters Today*^{xxviii}. They had much in common, not least the distinction of being 'in danger of being marginalised by English critics, especially since they chose to write about what they knew best, rather than what might be acceptable or fashionable'^{xxix}. Themes of childhood, memory, old age, and the vicissitudes of rural life for working women, together with a strong sense of place – scenes which might be circumscribed in location but 'are wide in inference'^{xxx} are also common to both writers. Kate Roberts's stories, including her novels *Feet In Chains* (1936) and *The Living Sleep* (194?), are set in the quarrying districts of Caernarfonshire, places Evans knew from writing and researching *Country Dance*.

Evans was not the first woman writer to be accused of narrow horizons, and in the company of others such as Jane Austen and Kate Roberts, there is no need to defend her from such charges. She was honoured by the Welsh Committee of the Arts Council with an award for *A Candle Ahead* – her second volume of poems which had come out in 1956 - an award which *The Times* reported a week before she died, on her 49th birthday, 17 March 1958.

ⁱ Quoted in Moria Dearnley, *Margiad Evans* (1982) University of Wales Press, 70

ⁱⁱ Elaine Showalter, *Hystories* (1997) New York: Columbia University Press 81

ⁱⁱⁱ Showalter, op. cit., 7

^{iv} Showalter, op.cit, 18

^v Rhodri Hayward, 'Between Flesh and Friendship: Margiad Evans, F.L.Golla and the Struggle for Self' forthcoming

^{vi} Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (1987) New York: Oxford University Press 4

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- vii Scarry, op.cit., 4
- viii For further discussion, see Sue Asbee, 'Margiad Evans's *The Wooden Doctor: Illness and Sexuality*' in *Welsh Writing in English* vol 9, 2004, pp. 33-49
- ix *Life and Letters Today*, vol.57, 198
- x *ibid.*, 200
- xi Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans* (1998) Bridgend:seren, 32
- xii 'The Immortal Hospital' National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), ms 23369C
- xiii 'The Immortal Hospital' NLW ms 23369C (p.13)
- xiv *Ray of Darkness* p.??
- xv 'The Nightingale Silenced', NLW ms 23368B (33-4)
- xvi 'The Immortal Hospital' NLW 23369C, 5
- xvii *ibid.*, 5
- xviii Rhodri Hayward, 'Between Flesh and friendship: Margiad Evans, F.L.Golla and the Struggle for Self', forthcoming
- xix quoted in Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, op. cit., 98
- xx NLW ms 23366D 6 May 1934
- xxi NLW ms 23366D 2 Oct 1935
- xxii NLW ms 23577C 10 Nov 1935
- xxiii Clare Morgan, 'Exile and the Kingdom: Margiad Evans and the Mythic Landscape of Wales' in *Welsh Writing in English*, vol. 6, 98
- xxiv *Wales*, February-March 1948
- xxv *Country Dance*, (1978) London: John Calder 95
- xxvi *TLS* 23 March 1933, 198
- xxvii Idris Parry, 'Margiad Evans' *Silence Speaks* (1988) Manchester: Carcanet, 315
- xxviii November 1946
- xxix Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, op.cit., 107
- xxx *ibid* 107