Christopher Meredith

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DIANA WALLACE

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Christopher Meredith

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Preface

A novelist, poet, critic and translator, Christopher Meredith is a major writer who writes primarily in English about Wales. The author of four richly complex novels, one of them an acknowledged classic in Wales, and four substantial collections of poetry he is, despite a growing international reputation, barely known in the rest of the UK. This in itself tells us something about the geographies of literary reception and the domination of a London-focused literary scene.

This book is a study of his writing which aims to draw attention to the breadth and quality of his work. As a bilingual Welsh writer who learned his second language as an adult, Meredith's work very clearly comes out of a specific place, time and community. His early poetry in particular is often engaged in a search for his 'place' – linguistically, geographically, historically, socially and in terms of form and literary tradition. As an aspect of this quest, he often writes about his parents, the places where he grew up, and the occupations he has undertaken. This study therefore begins with an introduction which situates him as a writer within that geographical, historical, social and familial context.

Meredith is best known for his first novel, *Shifts* (1988), rightly recognized as the classic literary statement of post-industrialization in Wales. He is, however, unusual in being equally a novelist *and* a poet and it is perhaps partly because his poetry and prose have tended to be read separately that the breadth of his achievement has not always been apparent. In this book, therefore, I aim to read across the two genres, pairing poetry and fiction in each

chapter in order to listen to the echoes between them. This strategy foregrounds the concern with language, form and representation which runs through his work and connects it to his interest in the historical and geographical specificity of human experience. Despite the formal experimentation of his writing, there are important continuities in his work which mean that we can read it as a history of a place and a people, primarily the Anglicized Welsh of south-east Wales, and in its very specificities recognize it also as an exploration of the human condition.

I am indebted to many people for help and support in writing this book. My primary thanks go to Christopher Meredith who has been generous with his time throughout while remaining tactfully aware that his role was, as he wryly put it, to be the 'body in the library'. It was Jane Aaron who convinced me that I could write this book and she has, as always, been an inspirational support. Gavin Edwards and Jeni Williams read chapters in progress and the book is a far better one than it would have been without their expertise. Jeremy Hooker has been one of Meredith's most astute critics and I am indebted to him and Mieke for their hospitality and several useful conversations. University of Wales Press's anonymous reader provided constructive comments which were very helpful.

I would like to thank Christopher Meredith for permission to quote from his work and to reproduce the photographs from his family papers within the volume. I am grateful to Seren for granting permission to reproduce quotations from the works of Christopher Meredith which they have published.

My thanks also go to the following for various kinds of help: Andy Croll, Chris Evans, Jane Finucane, Claire Flay-Petty, Lesley Hargreaves, Cyril Jones, Phil Kelly, Barrie Llewelyn, Amanda Radford and Michael, Rhiannon Sargent, Marion Shaw, Dawn Percival, Ceri Thomas, Rhidian Thomas, Nigel Wallace, Esyllt Williams; Jean Kember and the Bruton Place book group, Judith Barker, Katherine MacDonald, Pat Adams, Rachel Davies, Victoria

Evangelinou. Thanks especially to Llion Wigley at the University of Wales Press for his kindness and patience.

This book is for Seán (who helped with the research), and for Jarlath.

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Illustrations

Abbreviations

AF Christopher Meredith, *The Story of the Afanc King and the Sons of Teyrnon* (Newtown: Gwasg Gregynog, 2006).

AH Christopher Meredith, *Air Histories* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013).

BI Christopher Meredith, *The Book of Idiots* (Bridgend: Seren, 2012).

BM *Black Mountains: Poems and Images from the Bog~Mawnog Project*, Poems by Christopher Meredith, Images by Elizabeth Adeline, Lin Charlston, Kirsty Claxton, Deborah Aguirre Jones and Pip Woolf (Cardiff: Mulfran, 2011).

CC Christopher Meredith, *The Carved Chair: A play for radio*, *Planet*, 65 (October/November 1987), 68–92.

CG Christopher Meredith, *Cefn Golau: Shooting a Novelist*, Places: Y Man a'r Lle, 4 (Newtown: Gwasg Gregynog, 1997).

G Christopher Meredith, *Griffri* (1991; rev. edn Bridgend: Seren, 1994).

I Christopher Meredith, interviewed by Diana Wallace, 23 June 2016.

M Mihangel Morgan, *Melog*, trans. Christopher Meredith with Afterword (Bridgend: Seren, 2005).

MF Christopher Meredith, *The Meaning of Flight* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005).

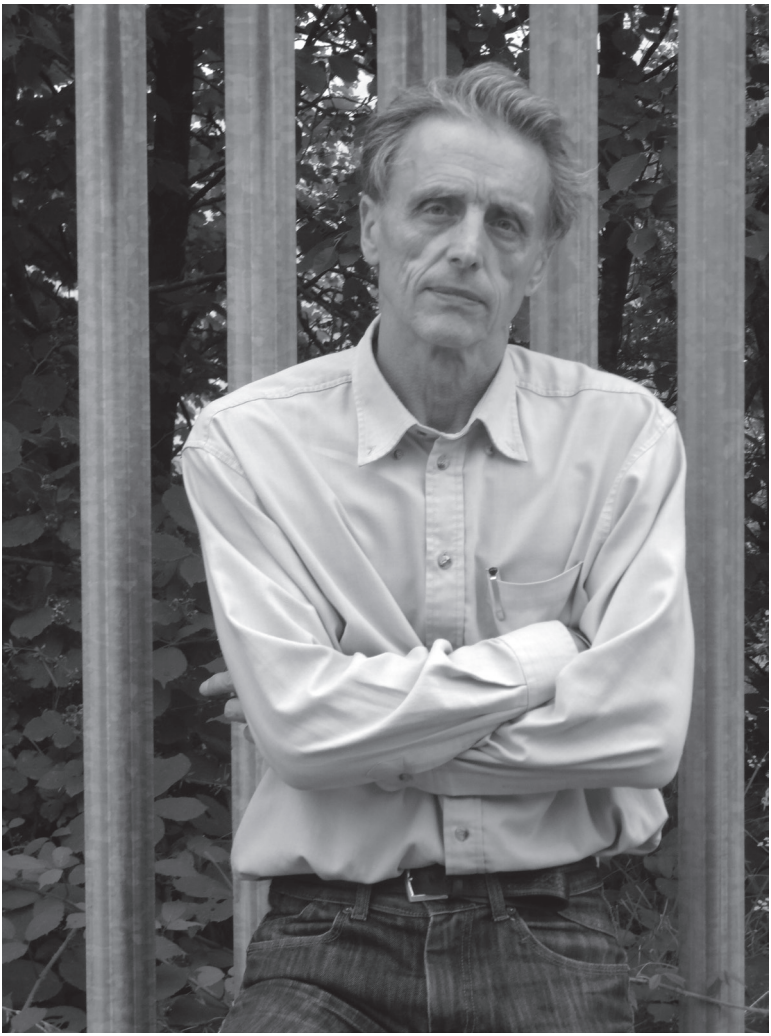
S Christopher Meredith, *Shifts* (1988; repr. with an Afterword by Richard Poole, Bridgend: Seren, 1997).

SA Christopher Meredith, *Still Air*, images by Sara Philpott (n.p.: Singing Nettle Press, 2016).

SH Christopher Meredith, *Snaring Heaven* (Bridgend: Seren, 1990).

ST Christopher Meredith, *Sidereal Time* (Bridgend: Seren, 1998).

T Christopher Meredith, *This*, Poetry Wales Poets Series: 1 (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1984).



Christopher Meredith by the east gate of the former steelworks at Ebbw Vale, August 2016. Photograph: Diana Wallace.

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1

Introduction: A writer in his place

Born at St James's Hospital, Tredegar on 15 December 1954, Christopher Laurence Meredith was the second son of Emrys Henry Meredith, a steel worker and former collier, and Joyce Meredith, née Roberts, formerly a domestic servant.[1] There was snow on the ground as his mother carried him into the open air and up Market Street for the first time. 'I know because my parents told me so', he asserts in 'Birth myth' (*AH*, 24–5), a poem which celebrates and ironizes the stories we construct about our origins, patched together from the half made-up memories of our parents. Opening with one of the most famous Welsh birth myths, Owen Glendower's assertion in *Henry IV* that 'At my nativity / The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes', Meredith immediately undercuts this with an ironic, 'Well, snow. Full of snow'.[2] 'But don't we hunger for the birth myth', he admits, enumerating the oversize signs which accompanied other marvellous births – Madam Patti, Greek godlets, Hercules, even – '(dare I?)' – Christ. In contrast to the '*signs* [*which*] *have marked [Glendower] extraordinary*',[3] as the Shakespearian epigraph has it, the snow in Market Street, Tredegar 'marks [Meredith] ordinary'. For Meredith, it is partly that ordinariness, the quotidian which is rarely celebrated, which is important.

Yet, as the poem suggests, Tredegar has its own mythic topography, less celebrated but equally as shaped and shaping as the landscapes of Greek myth: 'the name [Market Street]'s an Ithaca, Persepolis' (AH, 25). The snowfall is historically evidenced – 'I've sort of checked' – by photographs of miners at Tŷ Trist Pit in that winter. Sunk in 1834, Tŷ Trist was one of a series of pits opened by the Tredegar Iron Company, established by Samuel Homfrey

in 1800 and renamed the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company in 1837. Aneurin Bevan, born in Tredegar in 1897, began work there at the age of 14 before going on to become Labour MP for Ebbw Vale from 1929 to 1960 and the architect of the National Health Service.[4] Meredith's grandfather, uncles and father were all colliers at Tŷ Trist. It closed in 1959 so that 'this was a tide that had gone out by [Meredith's] early childhood', although he played in the ruins of the pit.[5] The landscape Meredith invokes in the poem encompasses the miners in their 'daicaps' silhouetted against the black girder work of the colliery and the geography of Market Street stretching from the Town Clock up to 'Saron Chapel where Ieuan Gwynedd / had preached against Blue Books' (AH, 24–50).[6] These are the pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial landscapes of south Wales with their layerings of literary, public and private histories – the leader of the last Welsh rebellion, the daicapped miners, the independent minister, and 'A woman with a baby in a whitened street / . . . walking towards eternity from the clock / uphill, in the cold' (AH, 25) – which become the (mythic) territory of Meredith's writing.

A strong sense of place within historical time underpins all Meredith's writing. As he writes in *Cefn Golau: Shooting a Novelist* (1997): 'I believe in the locatedness of experience, its historical specificity' (*CG*, n.p.). For Meredith as a Welsh writer this is a political assertion. 'If we choose to be Welsh,' he wrote in an early review of Tony Curtis's poetry, 'it haunts what we write.'[7] The specificity of Meredith's own imaginative work, both poetry and prose, has its roots firmly in his *milltir sgwâr*, the square mile or patch of land which so often defines a Welsh writer's childhood.[8] For Meredith this centres on Tredegar, particularly around the Cefn Golau council estate where he grew up. The estate bore the same name as the mountain it backed on to and the cholera graveyard just above it. An area which is 'charged with history and grief', it entered deep into his consciousness (*CG*, n.p.). As he writes:

> When I dream of places I usually dream of spots within a few miles of this centre, of the places where these dead lived. Even when the

> dreamplace is unrecognizable my dreamself knows precisely which part of the Tredegar area it is . . . I've driven at huge speeds through vertiginous perspectives of avenued skyscrapers out of American myth and known immediately that this was Commercial Street, Tredegar. (*CG*, n.p.)

While this sense of place expands in his later writing to include Breconshire, where Meredith has lived since 1978, the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains, it centres around what the poet and critic Jeremy Hooker has called (borrowing the term from Meredith's 'The slurry pond' (*AH*, 26)) Meredith's 'heartland' in the Tredegar area.[9]

This 'heartland' is not the empty picturesque landscape of the Romantic or even the neo-Romantic writer: 'My heartland', Meredith asserts, 'was a place of edges / though I scarcely knew it' (*AH*, 26). Dominated for 200 years by heavy industry, and now scarred by post-industrial decline and social deprivation, the Tredegar area nevertheless includes spaces of semi-wilderness. In 'The slurry pond', Meredith writes back to Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1807) with its assertion that 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy!'[10] At the same time he rewrites the clichés of the post-industrial south Wales valleys as irredeemably bleak. Here where 'coal surfac[es], becoming air', geological and economic history have shaped a very specific post-industrial landscape:

> A ruined city lay around *us*
> in our infancy
> the pumping station, railless sidings,
> workings of an age
> we didn't realise was not quite dead. (*AH*, 26)

Wordsworth's 'Ode' asserts the importance of the natural world to the child's development in part as a counter to the industrialization which was transforming Britain at that time but his poem is class and gender-blind. In contrast, Meredith's italicizing of '*us*'

politicizes the specificity of a shared childhood playing among the discarded 'rubbish' of that not-quite-dead industry.

Despite the prosaic title, Meredith's poem acknowledges the formative and transcendent nature of childhood experience of landscape. He and his playmates see 'no edge / between the natural and made': 'Quarries and cliffs, moor and shaletip / all were the garden of our / innocence'. The children are aware of the dangers in 'that other edge', represented by the opencast mine, the old mine shafts and the 'hardened pus' around the slurry pond. Meredith's 'heartland' is, then, paradoxically always a 'place of edges'. 'Edges are where meanings happen', he suggests in 'Borderland' (*AH*, 8), a central poem in *Air Histories* (2013). Even the form of 'The slurry pond', a sonnet in iambic heptameter, incorporates an 'edge' as the lines fracture in the middle.

This distinctive geographical terrain with its fractured history is the underpinning for Meredith's concern with the complex relationships between language, place, memory, identity and historical process. In one sense the geographical specificity of Meredith's work situates him in the Welsh-language tradition of 'canu bro' (poetry of place). Like Ruth Bidgood, with whom Hooker has productively compared him, Meredith is (to borrow Matthew Jarvis's apt description of Bidgood) '*a poet of a community in its place*'.[11] His landscapes – whether pre-industrial, industrial or post-industrial – are deeply inscribed with the evidence of their shaping by human history and labour. They are peopled by individuals who are in turn shaped by their environment. His own family's history connects to these landscapes, as his writing demonstrates, in complex and sometimes unexpected ways.

Meredith's father, Emrys Meredith, was born on 31 October 1920, one of the twelve children – seven sons and five daughters – of Tom Meredith, a collier from Tredegar, and Emily (always known as Daisy) Holloway, from Merthyr Vale. Emrys was the sixth son. The oldest son Charles was always known as Charl, pronounced with a rolled 'r' like the Welsh Siarl. A younger brother, Ronald, died at the age of 12 in 1933, an event Emrys Meredith remembered on 'his own last bed' (*AH*, 48).The Meredith family

Figure 1. Joyce Meredith (née Roberts) and Emrys Meredith, 1943. Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Meredith.

lived in 64 Walter Street, Tredegar, a terraced street in an area of the valley bottom known as 'The Tip' because it was built on a waste dump. The street had chapels at either end: the Bethania Congregational Chapel at one end and the James Street Primitive Methodist chapel at the other. Tom Meredith went down the pit at the age of 11 in 1891. He worked at Tŷ Trist for most if not all

of his working life until he retired at the age of 68. A lay preacher with the Primitive Methodists (the radical end of the Methodists), Tom Meredith was also a keen cricketer and snooker player. He died when Christopher Meredith was around four and a half.

A profoundly politicized man who valued reading and education, Emrys Meredith resented the fact that he was forced to leave school in 1934 or 5 at the age of 14 to work. After working in a butcher's shop for a few weeks, slaughtering pigs and making deliveries by bicycle, he started work at Tŷ Trist, the same pit as his father and some of his brothers, earning just 14s. a week, later moving to Oakdale. As a collier he was in a reserved occupation when the war broke out in 1939 but wanted to join up to fight fascism. The family was split over the issue: his brother Haydn was a conscientious objector and Christopher Meredith believes that his grandfather was also anti-war (he still has his grandfather's copy of Robert Blatchfield's socialist classic *Merrie England* (1893)). Emrys Meredith went to a tribunal and argued his way out of the colliery on a technicality. He joined the Royal Marines, serving in No. 44 (Royal Marine) Commando which took part in the Burma campaign. He served overseas for over two years, from late November 1943 to mid-1946, an experience which deeply impressed him and had a profound effect on his son's thinking about the connections between personal experience and historical process.

In an essay on Alun Lewis, the anglophone Welsh writer who died on active service (probably by his own hand) in Burma in 1944, Meredith draws an interesting distinction between Lewis and his father. Lewis, he suggests, was caught between contrary identities, 'between Welshness and Englishness, between officers and men, between social classes . . . and he had no clear map of commitments to guide him'.[12] He lacked, Meredith writes, 'the powerful political motive of fighting fascism – which moved my own father to get out of his reserved occupation in the pit a few valleys from Lewis's home and end up himself in Burma'.[13] Here Meredith pays tribute to his father's political commitment but also uses this history to tease out the elements that made Lewis's best writing 'genuinely exploratory'.[14]