

Magic, Reality, and Relevance: Why some narratives never die.

The fairy wife from a Welsh mountain lake and a renowned family of physicians.

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In a survey of the Welsh folk narrative tradition undertaken by the author during 1964-2020, the oral heritage of certain districts was studied in some considerable detail. One such area, first visited between 22-26 May 1967, was that of Llanddeusant – Myddfai, near Llanymddyfri (Llandovery), Carmarthenshire, south-west Wales, where the lake Llyn y Fan Fach is situated [Llyn: lake; y Fan: the beacon, peak; *fach*: small.] This mountain lake is associated in legend with a ‘fairy-lady’, or a fairy-maiden, who married a local farmer and founded a long line of physicians, namely the renowned Physicians of Myddfai.

The narrative to be discussed may be classified as a migratory legend (a localised narrative with similar versions in other countries), but it is also closely related to tales of magic (Märchen), folk belief legends (Glaubenssagen), and fabulates, or entertainment tales (Unterhaltungssagen). By today, the most attractive narrative genres in Wales are brief jokes and anecdotes, related in an informal, day-to-day context. The emphasis is on chronicles, or 'true', histrionic narratives. Even many of the jokes and anecdotes are delivered 'as if they were true'. Yet, the Llyn y Fan Fach legend, with its emphasis on magic, the supernatural and the other world, is as popular as ever. The main purpose of the present lecture, therefore, is to endeavour to answer the question: why? Why do some narratives from days gone by still stand the test of time? Why do some legends never die? In doing so it draws attention to:

1. **The importance of in-depth field-work activity.** The folk narrative scholar must not over-depend on desk-analysis when discussing what type of narrative form appeals to people today, or what kind of narrative material passive and active tradition-bearers are accustomed to within their current repertoire.
2. **The importance of function and meaning.** In any endeavour to understand the nature of contemporary folk narrative activity, due attention must be given to function, meaning, and communication, as well as to form, structure, and genre analysis. Whether a narrative is regarded as a tale of magic (*Märchen*), a legend (*Sage*), a fabulate, or 'just a story', the crucial question is whether that particular narrative, whatever its form, has a meaningful function and a relevant message to specific people at a specific moment in time.

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The narrative

This is the legend, translated into English.

The Princes of South Wales had been fighting hard in a succession of battles to preserve the independence of Wales against English aggression. At that time, in the twelfth century, there lived at Blaensawdde farm, in Llanddeusant, in the county of Carmarthen, South Wales, a widow whose husband had been killed in one of those violent encounters. One day when her only son was tending the cattle on the banks of a small lake, Llyn y Fan Fach, on Mynydd Du (the Black Mountain), he saw a most beautiful maiden sitting on the surface of the water, combing her hair. She was more beautiful than any girl he had ever seen before. Bewildered by a feeling of love and admiration, the youth continued to hold out his hand towards the maiden and offered her his barley

bread, but she said in a rhyming couplet:

*Cras dy fara,
Nid hawdd fy nala.*

(Hard is your bread,
'Tis not easy to catch me.)

Then she sank into the water.

The love-stricken youth returned home, and his mother advised him to take moist bread with him the next day. After he had waited for many hours, the maid appeared. He once more offered her bread, but she said:

*Llaith dy fara,
Ti ni fynna.*

(Moist is thy bread,
I do not want thee.)

Smiling, she again vanished.

The mother then suggested slightly baked bread. The following day the young man again waited and waited, but as the sun was almost setting, and he was on the point of going home, he cast a sad and last farewell look over the lake when, to his astonishment, he saw cattle walking on the surface of the water, followed by the maiden. This time she accepted the bread and consented to be his wife, but on one condition: 'If you strike me three times without a cause', she told him, 'I will leave you for ever'. Suddenly the maiden plunged into the water.

After a short while a strongly-built, hoary-headed man came out of the lake with two beautiful completely identical girls. And the hoary-headed man said: 'I will give you my daughter in marriage if you can tell which one of these two girls you love', he announced. The girls were so alike that the youth was on the point of saying he could not, when the one with a star on her sandal thrust her foot forward just a little, and he pointed to the girl he loved. 'You have chosen rightly', said her father, 'I will give her as a dowry as many sheep, cattle, goats and horses as she can count of each with one breath.' Then she began

counting as rapidly as she could, by fives: *un, dau, tri, pedwar, pump...* ('one, two, three, four, five...'). And the exact number of animals tallied each time came out of the lake.

The young couple were married and lived happily in great prosperity for many years on the nearby farm of Esgair Llaethdy in Myddfai. [Esgair: ridge; Llaethdy: dairy.] They had three sons.

One day the couple attended the christening ceremony of a new baby in the neighbourhood. The husband told his wife to fetch a pony from the field and he went to the house for her gloves. When he returned, she was still standing in the same place, and the husband tapped her playfully on the shoulder with one of the gloves and said 'go, go'. And it was then she reminded him of the 'three blows without a cause' and warned him to be careful.

Sometime later they were at a wedding, when the wife suddenly burst into tears. Her husband again tapped her on the shoulder and asked her why was she weeping, and she answered: 'I weep because the young couple's troubles are now beginning, and so are ours, too, for this is the second causeless blow.'

The years passed by, but at a funeral one day the wife began to laugh most gaily. Touching her arm, her husband urged her to be quiet, but she replied: 'When people die their troubles are over, and so, dear husband, is our marriage. This is the third causeless blow; farewell for ever.' She walked towards Esgair Llaethdy, their home, and called her cattle and all the other animals by their names:

Mu wlfrech, Moelfrech,

Mu olfrech, Gwynfrech,

Pedair cae tonn-frech,

Yr hen Wynebwen,

'Brindled cow, hornless, speckled cow,

Spotted cow, white freckled,

The four field sward mottled,

The old white-faced,

<i>A'r las Geingen,</i>	And the grey <i>Geingen</i> ,
<i>Gyda'r Tarw Gwyn</i>	With the white bull
<i>O lys y Brenin,</i>	From the King's court,
<i>A'r llo du bach</i>	And the little black calf
<i>Sydd ar y bach,</i>	Suspended on the hook,
<i>Dere dithe</i>	You, too,
<i>Yn iach adre.</i>	Come home quickly.
<i>Pedwar eidion glas</i>	The four grey oxen
<i>Sydd ar y ma's,</i>	That are on the field,
<i>Deuwch chwithe</i>	You, also, swiftly
<i>Yn iach adre!</i>	Come home!

All the cattle followed her, even the little black calf, though slaughtered and hung upon a hook. Four oxen ploughing in a field on the mountainside were also called, and they dragged the plough with them, making a deep furrow - a furrow which, it is said, remains to this day. Led by the lady, all the animals disappeared into the Fan Fach lake.

The husband was broken-hearted, and the sons wandered long, searching for their mother. One day at a mountain gate near Dôl Hywel, a gate still called today Lliidiart y Meddygon ('the physician's gate'), the mother suddenly appeared to Rhiwallon, her eldest son, and told him that his mission on earth was to heal the sick, and she gave him a bag full of medical prescriptions. On several occasions later she met her three sons on the banks of the lake, and once she even accompanied them on their return home as far as a place still called today Pant y Meddygon ('the physician's dingle'), where she revealed to them the medicinal qualities of various plants and herbs.

Rhiwallon and his three sons, Cadwgan, Gruffudd and Einion, became physicians to Prince Rhys Gryg, Lord of Dinefwr, who gave them lands and

privileges. They and their children wrote down their knowledge in manuscripts, and their fame as physicians soon spread throughout the whole country, and it has continued among their descendants to this day.

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The above is a retelling of one of the most well-known and best loved of all Welsh folk narratives since the collection of eleven classic Welsh medieval tales, known as the Mabinogion (also referred to as the Mabinogi). The legend was first recorded in print as recently as 1821 by Siencyn ap Tydvil, in the *Cambro-Briton*. A more detailed and the best known version was printed in 1861 by the Reverend John Williams, 'Ab Ithel', in his introduction to the book *The Physicians of Myddvai : Meddygon Myddfai*, which includes the text and translation into English of one of the three medieval manuscripts of the Physicians' herbal remedies.¹ The legend had been written down for him by William Rees of Tonn, Llanymddyfri (Llandovery), from the oral testimony of three elderly natives of Myddfai.

Since its retelling in the 1861 publication, the legend has been included in almost every published collection of Welsh folk tales, for adults and children, often with illustrations.² It has, for example, inspired artists of the calibre of Margaret D Jones, who has portrayed the legend in paintings, a greeting card,³ and a poster-map of Wales.⁴ It has been the subject of films⁵ and exhibitions,⁶ and in 1996 the Welsh National Opera Company commissioned Maxwell Davies and David Pountney to compose music for an opera, 'The Doctor of Myddfai'. The legend is also a very popular tale with children in homes and schools.

Why this continuing popularity? In endeavouring to answer this question we may first quote the words of the Irish Saint Colum Cille (Saint Columba):

'And for this cause it were right for thee to buy the poems of the poets, and to keep the poets in Ireland, and since all the world is but

a story, it were well for thee to buy the more enduring story, rather than the story that is less enduring.'⁷

We are also reminded of the Irish proverb:

*Is buaine port ná glór na néan,
Is buaine focal na toice an tsaoil.*

['A tune is more enduring than the song of birds, and a tale (or word) is more enduring than the wealth of the world.']

Legends are born and legends die. Some narratives, once they are recorded in print, or even before, seem to lose their sense of immediacy and fade into obscurity. They tell of marvellous things which have happened a 'long time ago' and have little relevance to modern-day life. Others, however, like a good folk song, or a good wine, become even more precious as the years go by. Why, therefore, is the legend of Llyn y Fan Fach so enduring? What has it meant to people of all ages from one generation to the next? Why is its message relevant to us today? In seeking to answer these questions, the present lecture concentrates on the following three main considerations.

1. Form and aesthetic qualities

First, the legend gives pleasure because of its form and aesthetic qualities. Although the actual version published by Ab Ithel is somewhat static and flowery in style, it has all the ingredients of a good story. In form, pattern and structure it well reflects the storyteller's art. For example, the use of rhyme (*cante fable*) and rhythm to express the maiden's response to the youth's offer of bread has an important mnemonic function, and helps the listener to grasp the significance of the words. A similar function is performed with the use of rhyme in the cattle-call run. With the exception of other versions of the fairy water-bride motif, such runs are unusual in Welsh folk narrative tradition.

Interesting use is also made in this legend of formulaic numbers and patterns and of what the Danish scholar, Axel Olrik, called the 'epic laws of folk narrative'.⁸ It opens with a reference to the only son of a widow whose husband

had been killed fighting for his country. The legend, therefore, immediately gains our sympathy. In many folk narratives two characters are either completely different or exactly identical. In the Llyn y Fan Fach legend we encounter the law of similarity (or the 'Law of Twins', *das Gesetz der Zwillinge*), with the introduction of the recognition motif - the two sisters who are almost identical. Similarly, we notice the law of contradictions (or the 'Law of Contrast', *das Gesetz des Gegensatzes*) when the wife cries at a wedding and laughs at a funeral.

Much use is made in the legend of the formulaic number three (*das Gesetz der Dreizahl*). For three days the youth waits to meet the lake maiden. He offers her three kinds of bread. When they marry, three sons are born, and Rhiwallon, the eldest, also has three sons. The fairy wife must not be struck three blows without a cause, but three times this occurs, and during three crucial occasions in man's rites of passage, namely: birth, marriage and death.⁹

2. The fusion of history and tradition

The storyteller's art and the human imagination at work is evident also in the legend's structure. From the fourteenth century onwards the fame of the Myddfai Physicians is well attested in Welsh literature. Yet, there is no recorded tradition connecting them with fairy descent prior to the written version published by Siencyn ap Tydvil (1821) and Ab Ithel (1861). What we have here, therefore, is an interesting example of the interaction of tradition and history. The narrative is a fusion of two local legends. The first is an early lake legend, based on the central motif of the fairy water-maiden marrying a mortal man.¹⁰ The second is a much later local onomastic tale relating to place names with medical associations and centred around the Physicians of Myddfai.

The fairy water-brid theme is but one version of a very popular migratory legend (ML 5090: 'Married to a Fairy Woman'), and there are a

number of similar narratives connected with various other lakes in Wales. On the other hand, the onomastic legend associated with the water-bride's descendants, the Physicians, does not exist as an independent tale in Welsh tradition, and this is the only known version. It seems, therefore, that the earlier lake legend and the later onomastic legend and traditions relating to the physicians were combined by the introduction of three well-attested related motifs, namely: 'Gifted descendant of fairy-mortal marriage';¹¹ 'fairy mother bestows magic power upon half-mortal son';¹² and 'fairy mother returns to visit son.'¹³

The addition of these motifs has greatly enhanced the legend and given it a new meaning. The various other versions of the early lake legend end tragically with the fairy wife returning to the lake. In some versions she occasionally revisits the children, but usually only to give them clothes or money. That is all. No more is heard about them. It is the end of the story. The wisdom and knowledge the fairy mother imparted to the Physicians of Myddfai, however, was to benefit mankind for generations to come. So, what we have here is a story without an end.

The Llyn y Fan Fach legend is much more than just a legend. It also opens a fascinating door on our historical past. Some scholars have argued that the narrative has its roots in the folk memory of a people who lived in a primitive lake dwelling or *crannog*, similar to the Dark Age *crannog* re-excavated in Llyn Syfaddon (Llan-gors lake), in Powys.¹⁴ According to this theory the dwarfish Stone Age or Bronze Age human population were forced to live a secluded life in caves and lake dwellings with the coming of the more powerful Celtic invaders who used iron. W J Gruffydd suggested that the Little People had no ovens as the Celts had, which explains why their bread was different.¹⁵ He also presented the argument that the Little People must have appeared very similar to the Iron Age race, which is why the youth in the Llyn y Fan legend has difficulty in choosing between the two identical sisters.¹⁶

However, as Kenneth Jackson has pointed out, the recognition motif ¹⁷ is a very widespread and well-known international motif which appears in a number of folk tales.¹⁸ Neither do we have to accept in its entirety the ethnic theory of the Little People to explain the origin of the fairies and fairy lake-dwelling.

Even so, the Llyn y Fan Fach legend in content and atmosphere takes the listener a long way back in history, possibly as far as the Iron Age. The cattle described, for instance, are, according to Ffransis Payne, similar to those which existed in Britain between the Iron Age and the Dark Ages.¹⁹ The 'white bull from the King's Court' was probably one of the half-wild white cattle, the descendants of the great urus. The 'little black calf suspended on the hook' could have been a black calf in a white herd. It was customary for such calves to be killed.²⁰

In the Laws of Hywel Dda (d. 950) there is a reference to the white cattle of the Royal Court of Dinefwr, which have been part of the estate right up to the present day. By the Middle Ages it is quite possible that there was some connection in people's minds between the white bull of the Llyn y Fan lake legend and those of the nearby Royal Court of Dinefwr. It is not difficult to see, therefore, how, at a later stage in the oral tradition process, the Physicians of Myddfai, the official physicians to Prince Rhys Gryg, Lord of Dinefwr, became intricately fused with the fairy water-bride theme of the earlier lake legend. Giving the Physicians a mother of supernatural origin was a means of explaining the source of their wisdom and remarkable powers of healing.

In an important article in *Studia Celtica*, Morfydd E Owen has shown that all three medieval manuscripts containing the herbal remedies of the Myddfai Physicians derive from a period some century-and-a-half after the time of Rhys Gryg (d. 1233). (The earliest surviving manuscript, BM Add. MS 14912, belongs

to the second half of the fourteenth century.) These texts are distinguished by 'the frequent use of stylistic devices, such as numerical groupings, pairs of antithetical statements, alliteration, and rhymes', which owe their origin undoubtedly to 'the oral nature of the Welsh learned tradition and had a mnemonic function.'²¹

The English translation of the colophon in the Red Book of Hergest's version (c.1400, MS CXL) reads as follows:

'Here with the help of God, the almighty Lord, are shown the most important and essential remedies for man's body. And those who caused them to be written down in this manner were Rhiwallon, the doctor, and his sons, Cadwgan, Gruffudd, and Einion; for they were the best and leading doctors of their time and of the time of Rhys Gryg, their lord and Lord of Dinefwr, the man who safeguarded their status and privilege completely and honourably as was their due. And the reason they caused the rules of their art to be written down in this way was lest there be no one who knew them as well as they did after their days.'²²

Rhys Gryg ['Rhys the stammerer'], was one of the eight sons of Rhys ap Gruffudd ap Rhys, Arglwydd Rhys, or Lord Rhys (d. 1197), one of the last and most important of the Welsh native princes. He and his family were well-known for their patronage of the church, the arts and learning. It would be quite in character, therefore, for one of its members, Rhys Gryg, 'to support a family of medical men, particularly at a time when medical studies were gaining prominence in Europe, as they were in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.'²³

Early Irish and Welsh laws testify to the high status given to the physician in society. Herbs were specially cultivated for him. During the thirteenth century Myddfai was a royal manor under the lordship of Dinefwr. It seems possible, therefore, to quote Morfydd E Owen, that:

'lands in Myddfai could have been held by a family of lay physicians, originally mediciners of the Lords of Dinefwr,

subsequently of the Anglo-Norman Lords of Llanymddyfri, and if the continuity of popular tradition be accepted, finally a family of country physicians famous for their remedies and their healings'.²⁴

The last of the direct line of hereditary physicians who practised at Myddfai, it seems, were a father and son who died in 1719 and 1739, respectively. But distant descendants of the family continued to practise medicine up until the twentieth century. Photographs of two recent upholders of the tradition were published in the *Welsh Medical Gazette* in 1971.²⁵

Pant y Meddygon ['the physicians' dingle'] mentioned in the legend is situated on the south-facing slope of Mynydd Myddfai (Myddfai Mountain). It is an area rich in ferns, bog plants, and herbs. Local tradition firmly testifies to the belief that certain farms in Myddfai parish once belonged to the Physicians, in particular: Llwyn Ifan Feddyg ['the grove of Ifan, the physician']; Llwyn Maredudd Feddyg ['the grove of Maredudd, the physician']; and Esgair Llaethdy ['the dairy ridge, or mountain land'], where the youth and the lake maiden went to live (the onomastic element in the name is obvious when one remembers that the fairy cattle and their offspring brought the couple great prosperity).

3. Message and meaning

The Llyn y Fan Fach legend is most memorable, therefore, first because of its form and the storyteller's art. Secondly, because of its structure and fusion of history and tradition, but, thirdly, because it also has a most important and meaningful message for all of us today. It is a symbolic presentation of the story of men and women through the ages. It reflects their fears and aspirations and, above all, their constant fascination with the mystery of life and death - the great paradox of living in this world and yet longing for another. One moment their feet are firmly based on the ground; the next moment they are not. Now there is sadness; then there is joy. Now nothing seems to be possible; then nothing

seems to be impossible - the world of magic becomes a reality.

In discussing this third reason, I will refer, in particular, to four words, or concepts.

i. The Greek word *pleroma*: fulfilment; incomparable joy.

In the Second Branch of the Mabinogion, only Branwen and seven men, we are told, returned alive from the tragic war in Ireland, carrying with them the wondrous head of their beloved Bendigeidfran, Branwen's brother. After the death of Branwen and her burial in a 'four-sided grave' on the banks of the river Alaw in Anglesey, north Wales, they journeyed to Harlech, in Merionethshire, north Wales. There, as they began to eat and drink three birds came, 'the Birds of Rhiannon', and sang too them a certain song, 'and of all the songs they had ever heard, each one was unlovely compared with that... and at that feasting they were seven years'.²⁶ In our daily lives where there is grief and suffering, men and women have long desired to experience, even for a short while, those everlasting moments of complete joy when time itself seems to stand still. Like the poet, Gwenallt (1899-1968), we, too, long to hear the wonderful song of the Birds of Rhiannon:

Come again this evening, Birds of Rhiannon,
Sing us a song from o'er the blue wave...
All is not well in Wales or Erin...²⁷

The Llyn y Fan Fach legend also opens with a reference to war. The father has been killed. There is suffering and grief. And the young man from Blaensawdde - the only son of a widow - is one morning tending his mother's cattle along the banks of a small mountain lake. Everyone who has visited this secluded lake on Mynydd Du (the Black Mountain) will know something of its peace and tranquillity. You are there, and yet you are not there - as if there was some truth in the ancient belief that water, where life began, and lakes in

particular, Llyn y Fan Fach included - was a doorway to the other-world. The youth is tending his mother's cattle on the banks of the lake, a task he has attended to many times before. It is not every day we experience that which is out of the ordinary. He is there amidst the peace of the Carmarthenshire Beacons - as if waiting. And there she is, a strikingly beautiful woman sitting on the surface of the water, combing her hair. A strange vision, indeed. But the young man's reaction is quite natural. He acts as men and women have always reacted in such circumstances - or, at least, would wish to react if they had the courage - he offers her his hand. And from that very moment the listener is witness to a drama which characterises this legend from beginning to end, namely the interaction between the natural and the supernatural, the rational and irrational.

The youth's one object is to win the affection of this lovely maiden. But the path is not easy, and at first he does not succeed. It reminds us of the episode in the First Branch of the Mabinogion, where Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, wishes to sit on the magic throne, or mound, at Narberth, although he knows that one of two things would happen to him: he would either be grievously wounded or he would experience a wonderful revelation. Pwyll ventures, and it is then that he sees the beautiful Rhiannon on her mysterious white horse. Pwyll and the youth of Blaensawdde represent men and women in all ages. There is more to a human being than mere flesh and blood. Men and women have a mind of their own, and they will, at times, reach for the stars. In the midst of death even, they can and will, occasionally, be able to rise as a phoenix from the ashes to be born anew. Although faced with the possibility of failure and ever-conscious of the fear of the unknown, their greatest desire is to see - to visualize - as they have never seen before, and to experience love and the wonder and joy of life.

The legend too symbolizes men and women's perseverance. In their constant search for fulfilment (*pleroma*) their motto is: *nil desperandum*. Pwyll

and his fellow riders were unable to catch up with Rhiannon, although she rode her horse at a 'slow even pace'.²⁸ She stopped only when Pwyll spoke to her.

Similarly, during the second and third day in the Llyn y Fan Fach tale, the youth had to wait for a very long time before he actually saw the maiden again. He had to offer her three kinds of bread. And then, when he thinks that he has achieved his goal, he still has to accomplish another task: he must distinguish between two identical sisters. But man's perseverance and dedication will eventually be rewarded. When the sun was almost setting on the third day and the young man was on the point of returning home, the lady of the lake appears. When the youth is unable to distinguish between the two sisters and is just on the point of giving up, the maiden he loves thrusts her foot forward just a little, and it is then that he notices the star on her sandal. It is merely a star, but one star can have a far-reaching effect.

Although the Blaensawdde youth belongs to this world and the lake lady to the supernatural world, they are not two worlds completely apart. There are bridges which assist man in crossing from one realm to the other, what Alwyn and Brinley Rees in their important book, *Celtic Heritage*, have called 'the union of opposites'.²⁹ Riddles, for example, speak of two worlds at once. Certain objects which can be regarded as 'neither this nor that' have a:

'mysterious supernatural virtue. The efficacy of dew (washed in at dawn, when it is neither day nor night, on May morn when it is neither winter nor summer) no doubt derives from its being neither rain nor sea water, river nor well water. It appears to come neither from above nor from below. So, too, the mistletoe is neither a shrub nor a tree. As a plant which does not grow from the ground, it falls into the same intermediate category as "a man not born of woman". In popular custom a person who stands beneath a bough of this tree which is not a tree frees himself from the restrictions of convention: he can take liberties.'³⁰

Similarly, in the Llyn y Fan legend, the lady refuses the bread the first

time because it is too hard and the second time because it is too moist. But she accepts the third time the slightly baked bread, 'bread which is at once both baked and unbaked - and with that the gulf between their two worlds is bridged'.³¹

In some versions of the fairy water-bride motif we notice a distinct process of rationalisation. In all versions the maiden always returns to the lake at the end of the story, even if, occasionally, it is explained as an accident. But in many of these versions the maiden acts like any other ordinary girl, and she does not, necessarily, come out of the lake when she first meets the youth. In the Llyn y Fan Fach legend, however, there is no mistaking the other-world origin of the lake maiden. From the very beginning the widow's son is completely under her spell. It is she who determines whether or not to accept the bread. She and her father determine the conditions of the marriage, and the young couple prosper because of the wonderful animals given to them from the lake.

In English the wife is generally referred to as the 'lady', or 'woman of the lake'. In the Welsh oral tradition she is invariably referred to as '*y forwyn*' ('maiden'). She is never regarded as a fairy, but she counted in fives, as the fairies did. If, however, the lake-maiden was a fairy, she was no ordinary fairy. The fairies usually were small and dainty. The Llyn y Fan Fach maiden, on the other hand, was a dignified, fully grown woman. She reminds us of a female deity: Rhiannon, Queen of Annwfn ('the Underworld') in the Mabinogion; Epona, horse goddess; and Freyja, Germanic goddess of life and fertility.

But although the maiden came to the life of the Myddfai youth from a supernatural world beyond the water, she also had all the qualities and characteristics of a woman, and that accounts much for the legend's appeal. According to one popular verse, Myddfai Parish was celebrated for its beautiful

girls:

<i>Mae eira_gwyn</i>	(There is white snow
<i>Ar ben y bryn,</i>	On the mountain brow,
<i>A'r glasgoed yn y Faerdre;</i>	And greenwood at the Faerdre;
<i>Mae bedw mân</i>	Young birch so good
<i>Yng nghoed Cwm-brân,</i>	In Cwm-brân wood,
<i>A merched glân ym Myddfai.</i>	And lovely girls in Myddfai.) ³²

But of all the beautiful girls the Myddfai youth had ever seen, none was so beautiful as the maiden from the lake. She belongs, therefore, to a world of superlatives. She was the personification of all ultimate good: *summum bonum*. She gave to the widow's son everything he had ever desired: love, children, prosperity, and joy. His fulfilment was complete.

ii. Destiny

If poets' verses be but stories,
So be food and raiment stories;
So is all the world a story;
So is man of dust a story.

These are the words of St. Colum Cille.³³ If the Llyn y Fan Fach legend reminds us of the Greek word *pleroma*, complete fulfilment, it also reminds us of the Aristotelian requirements for tragedy, namely 'to evoke fear and pity in the viewer.'³⁴ The legend celebrates man's achievement, but at the same time it signifies his failings and fragility. We are born to die - 'ashes to ashes' - and we live on borrowed time - *pro tempore*. Although the fairy mother returns to see her children, nothing more is told about the father. It is as if he has been destined to die. To quote James Shirley (1596-1666): 'There is no armour against Fate.'³⁵

Here we are reminded also of the original meaning of the English word

fayries ('fairy-folk', 'fairyland') which first appeared at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The term *fayry* (and its various forms) derives from Old French *faerie* in which the first element *fae* comes from Middle Latin *fata* and Classical Latin *fatum* ('fate', 'destiny'). The usual name for the fairies in Welsh, however, is *Y Tylwyth Teg* ['The Fair Family', or 'The Fair Tribe'], a name which, as far as we know, was first used in the fifteenth century.³⁶ It seems that it was based on a misconception of the original meaning of the English word *fayries*. 'Teg' is a literal translation of the English 'fair' ('beautiful', 'fine'). In a number of Welsh legends the fairies were other-world beings to be treated with fear. The great majority of Welsh narratives, however, depict them as, indeed, the '*tylwyth teg*': 'the fair family', kind and generous, to be treated with respect.

House-maids were told to keep their rooms clean and tidy, and, before going to bed, to leave food and milk for the fairies, and clean, warm water for them to wash themselves. In the morning the maids were repaid with 'shiny silver coins'. The fairies also gave money to help the poor, and they would supply 'ropes' to keep people on 'the straight and narrow path'.

Many of the narratives remind us of a certain code of conduct which had to be respected. The person who received fairy money was not, on any account, to disclose to anyone else the source of his or her new wealth. The farmer who received a fairy cow as a gift was not to ill-treat her. The harpist who mis-used a fairy harp was forced to play until exhausted. Pride and dishonesty are punished with grief and suffering. Love and kindness are rewarded with joy and wealth. People who listened to such legends would have been very conscious of their ethical and educational function.

In the tale of Branwen in the Mabinogion, the seven men travel from Harlech in north Wales to Gwales in Dyfed, south Wales. And there they spent 'fourscore years' in complete bliss. But there was a condition. There was one door facing Cornwall and Aber Henfelen that was on no account to be opened.

When Heilyn, son of Gwyn, eventually did open this door, the seven men were once again reminded of all their grief and tribulations.

Like Heilyn, son of Gwyn, the husband in the Llyn y Fan Fach legend also broke an ethical code which was not, on no account, to be infringed. He was not to strike his wife 'three causeless blows'. These were the taboos he did not, or could not, respect. The legend, therefore, in this sense is a cautionary legend (Frevelsage). It is a sermon in miniature.

In Wales, as in other countries, many legends reflect the fairies' innate fear of iron. It is no surprise, therefore, that in a number of the Welsh lake legends the wife must not be struck with iron. This usually happens when the couple attend a christening ceremony or a wedding.³⁷ In certain interpretations the three blows have been rationalised into merely three disputes.³⁸ According to Alwyn and Brinley Rees, the circumstances in which the three blows are given reveal the husband's failure to:

The 'apprehend the universality of the paradox by which he has won her. first arises out of his misunderstanding of her reluctance to attend a christening ceremony - a rite which separates a human being from his supernatural associations. The second blow is given when she weeps at a wedding, and the third when she laughs at a funeral. The revelation that seen through supernatural eyes joy and sorrow coincide both at weddings and at funerals comes as a shock to him, and instead of letting this truth loosen the bonds of his spirit he tries to suppress it and to impose upon his goddess his own one-sided view.'³⁹

iii. and iv.: Relevance and Continuity.

Finally, the Llyn y Fan Fach legend gives pleasure today because of its relevance to us in the twenty first century. It is a legend which takes us on a fascinating journey to the distant past, but it is also a 'story without an end'. It is a story which transcends time. The various other versions of the fairy water-bride legend in Wales end tragically.⁴⁰ The wife returns to the lake with her animals,

and, although in some renditions she does revisit her children, it is usually only to give them clothes or money. That is all. No more is heard of them. It is the end of the story. Indeed, according to the earliest known version from Wales, recorded by Walter Map in the twelfth century, she even takes her children back with her into the lake.⁴¹

In the Llyn y Fan Fach version, however, the fairy wife not only revisits her sons to comfort them in their sorrow - and every man and woman needs such comfort - she also reveals to them the secrets of plants and herbs. She gave to her children wisdom and knowledge that was to benefit mankind for generations to come. The legend, therefore, ends on a triumphant note. But in one sense there is no end. In the midst of death there is life. Some of the magic and goodness of the woman from the mountain lake is re-enacted in her own children, and her children's children in this world. The circle is complete. And the story continues.

For over 800 years, right up to our own day, the memory of the Physicians was kept alive in the Myddfai district.⁴² The legend is presented in photographs and prints on the walls of the nearby Llanddeusant Youth Hostel. In the 1950s the farmer of Esgair Llaethdy (where the young couple went to live) called some of his cattle by the names recorded in the legend. In Afon-wen, Flintshire, north Wales, many years ago a young couple named their plant centre 'Perlysiâu Myddfai' ['Myddfai Herbs'] in memory of the renowned thirteenth-century physicians. And today the Llyn y Fan Fach legend is beautifully portrayed in a special stained glass window in the Myddfai Community Hall, and it was unveiled by Prince Charles, in July 2017. In the hall, too, there are exhibits relating to medicinal plants and folk medicine.

For many years interest in herbal plants and folk medicine has been evident in the Myddfai area. For example, in 1967, when I first visited the farm

of Llwyn Meredydd (formerly known as Llwyn Maredudd Feddyg ['the grove of Meredith, the physician'], the family were very proud of their herbal garden, said to have belonged to one of the Physicians. The long tradition of practising medicine in Myddfai and the surrounding district is still thriving today.

Furthermore, various eminent historians now believe that more than one of the present-day medical practitioners from this area could well be distant descendants of the renowned physicians mentioned in the legend. Dr Donald Williams, in particular, has reminded us that 'during the second half of the 20th century, two consultants at Bart's, Saint Bartholomew's Hospital, London, were from Llangadog, a parish adjacent to Myddfai: Gareth Rees, a cardiac surgeon, and Glyn Evans, an obstetrician and gynaecologist.'

Another renowned medical practitioner, believed to be a distant descendant, is Professor Robin Lewis Jones of Llwyn Meredydd farm. He is the grandson of Ewart Jones (1898-1983), who was so pleased to show me the herbal garden at Llwyn Meredydd back in May 1967. Professor Robin Jones [October 2021] is an oncologist, specialising in the treatment of bone and soft tissue sarcomas, and is Head of the Sarcoma Unit at the Royal Marsden Hospital, the leading cancer hospital in Chelsea, London.

Since 2011 a very successful one-day annual conference has been held in Myddfai, and in 2014 *Cymdeithas Meddygon Myddfai* – The Physicians of Myddfai Society was formed. The Secretary, and one of the main founders, is the aforementioned Dr Donald Williams, Swansea, a native of Bethlehem, near Llangadog. He is a former Consultant Psychiatrist at the Cefn Coed Hospital, Swansea; an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Swansea; and a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, London. In 2018 the first volume of the *Transactions of the Physicians of Myddfai Society: 2011-17* was published, edited by Robin Barlow.

In addition to the conference, members of the society attend the annual service at Eglwys Sant Luc – St Luke’s Church, Myddfai, held on the closest Sunday to the 18th of October, the date of St Luke’s Festival. We are reminded that Luke, mentioned in the Bible as ‘the beloved physician’, is the patron saint of physicians and artists. The Society also organise visits to Ffynnon y Meddygon (‘the Physicians’ Well’) on Mynydd Myddfai (Myddfai Mountain), on Welsh Water land and adjacent to Cronfa Ddŵr Afon Wysg: the Usk Reservoir. (SH 807287) Water trickles from the well and eventually joins a nearby stream called Afon Siglo).

In other variants of the fairy water-bride legend, when the wife returns to the lake she suffers under her predicament and has become a moaning spirit, haunting the area. In certain versions she still retains her former beauty, but the exquisiteness which once enchanted a farmer's son from Myddfai now bewitches. She leads her suitors on to destruction. They drown in the lake, or are grievously wounded.⁴³ The lakes in these versions, therefore, were places to be avoided by human beings. Llyn y Fan Fach, however, is a lake which has enchanted people through the ages. By introducing her children to the virtues of medicinal plants the Fairy wife continued her service for the welfare of society.

People believed (or wished to believe) that the maiden still presided in the lake, a source of guidance and inspiration. When she left her mortal husband, she merely returned to the kingdom from whence she came - her home and her people's home, the land beneath the waves: *Annwfn* (literally 'the deep'); the underworld. Welsh fairies were occasionally called *Plant Annwfn* ['the children of the underworld'] and *Gwragedd Annwfn* ['the women of the **u**nderworld']. These women were comely figures, usually dressed in green.⁴⁴

In legend and tradition Llyn y Fan Fach came to be regarded, therefore, as a doorway to the underworld, the other world of youth and bliss, a realm, to quote the words in the Adventure of Brân:

Without grief, without sorrow, without death,
Without sickness, without debility. ⁴⁵

During the nineteenth century, in particular, scores of people visited Llyn y Fan Fach every year on the first day in August, and especially on the first Sunday or Monday of that month, which signalled the 'coming of the Lady of the Lake'. It is said that some even took potato peel to offer to the lady. ⁴⁶

Today people continue to make the pleasant journey up the mountain to the lake, and local inhabitants still relate some of the traditions and beliefs they have heard. It has been said, for example, that when the fairy wife returned to the lake the husband and three sons endeavoured to drain it in their search for her, but a hairy monster arose from below the waves to prevent them. Another tradition asserts that the Devil attempted in vain to destroy the fairy lady by throwing a cauldron into the lake. ⁴⁷ It is also said that the lake itself is bottomless, that there are seven echoes between the banks known as *Tyle Gwyn* and *Gwter Goch*, and that there is suction in the surrounding rocks; stones thrown from these rocks will never reach the water below. ⁴⁸ It should be emphasized, however, that these beliefs and traditions seem to belong to a later period and are not directly associated with the version of the legend presented in this essay.

Because the version of the legend we are now discussing has a meaningful message to people of all ages today, they can identify themselves with the main characters. There is something of the young man of Myddfai in all of us. To quote one of my informants from Llandanwg, Merionethshire, north Wales: 'We are the fairies' children...' ⁴⁹ - we are the children of the fairy lady of the lake,

continually searching for her. The maiden has long returned to her home beneath the waves. Mortal men and women will never see her again with human eyes. But in our search for her, with our eyes of faith and imagination, in our dreams, in our waiting, in our perseverance to fulfil our deepest aspirations, we too, mortal men and women, like the only son of a widow from Myddfai may catch a glimpse of her, as beautiful and as enchanting as ever before, sitting on the surface of the waters of a mountain lake combing her hair.

The narrative is more than just another story; just another folk tradition. It is a living legend which has a most meaningful and important message for us all today. To enjoy health is one of the greatest blessings for all people in every country, and doctors and all who care for our well-being must be regarded as indispensable benefactors of mankind. And for that reason alone the legend of a fairy wife from a Welsh mountain lake and the mother and grandmother of a renowned family of physicians is a legend that does not merely belong to folklore archives of yesterday. In a world of wars and suffering, it is a legend with a message which needs to be shared today with all people, more than ever.

And that is why I end this talk by venturing to offer you, as folk narrative scholars, an additional Latin term which we could perhaps consider adopting. With emphasis on the word consider! We talk of *homo sapiens*: 'the knowing human being'. We occasionally use the term *homo narrans*: 'the storytelling human being', a term first introduced by the German scholar, Kurt Ranke (1908-1985). The additional term I suggest now is: *homo praedicast*: 'the proclaiming human being'; the predicant; the preacher; the teacher; the one who shares with the people a most inspirational, elevating message, relevant to all ages.

And that is the great privilege you have given me, to share with you, my folklore friends from many parts of the world, a legend and a message

which has stood the test of time. I wish you all the very best of health and every blessing. Can mil diolch: a 'hundred thousand thanks'⁵⁰.

NOTES

1. Translated by John Pughe (Llandoverly, 1861). The retelling of the legend in this lecture is based on the version by William Rees of Tonn. See also the papers of William Rees in the Cardiff City and County Library (Cardiff MS 3.376). Siencyn ap Tydvil, Trehomer's brief version was printed in *The Cambro-Briton*, March, 1821, pp. 313-15. An earlier reference to the legend was noted by Richard Fenton, 20 June 1809, and published in his *Tours in Wales (1804-1913)*, edited by John Fisher (London, 1917).
2. For example in Wirt Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions* (London, 1880); John Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1901); T Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk Custom* (London, 1930); Hugh Evans, *Y Tylwyth Teg* ['The Fairies'] (Liverpool, 1935), with an illustration by T J Bond, Liverpool; Gwyn Jones, *Welsh Legends and Folk Tales* (Oxford, 1955), illustrated by Joan Kiddell-Monroe; and Robin Gwyndaf, *Straeon Gwerin Cymru* ['Welsh Folk Tales'] (Capel Garmon, 1988), including one black and white drawing by Ifor Owen and a colour painting on the front cover by Margaret Lindsay Williams. This artist also beautifully illustrated the legend in colour in a book in the 'Keenora' series, no 1, entitled *Chwedl Llyn y Fan* ['the Llyn y Fan Legend'], edited by John Morris-Jones (1864-1929), (Liverpool and Manchester, no date). See also David James, *Myddfai: its Land and Peoples* (Llandre [1991]), with a colour illustration by Margaret D Jones.

3. Published by Eryl Vaughan.
4. *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru - Welsh Folk Tales*, researched by Robin Gwyndaf and illustrated by Margaret D Jones. Published by the National Museum of Wales (Cardiff, 1989). See also the accompanying book of the same title by Robin Gwyndaf, p. 78.
5. For example, 'Let's Look at Wales: Lady of Llyn y Fan'. Directed by Robin Rowlingson. BBC Wales, 15.3.1976.
6. For example, 'Y Ferch o Lyn y Fan Fach: The Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach'; researched by Christiane Ulmer-Leahey; artwork by Sue Cull and Oliver Jackson; European Centre for Traditional and Regional Cultures (ECTARC), Llangollen, north Wales, 1988.
7. Judgement of Saint Colum Cille, quoted in Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London, 1961), 342.
8. 'Epic Laws of Folk Narrative', in Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), 129-41. This article first appeared in German in 1909.
9. See Trefor M Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs* (Cardiff, 1959), and also A Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passages* (1909).
10. F 302.2.
11. F 241.2.3; F 302; F 302.2; F 302.6; F 384.3.
12. F 305.1.1.

13. F 305.1.2.

14. See E N Dumbleton, 'On a Crannog, or Stockaded Island, in Llangorse Lake, near Brecon', in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1870), 192-8; H Dumbleton, 'On the Island in Llangorse Lake and its Possible Artificial Origin', in *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club* (1870), 101-8; Ewan Campbell and Alan Lane, 'Llangorse: a 10th-Century Royal Crannog in Wales', in *Antiquity*, 63 (1989), 675-81; Mark Redknap, Ewan Campbell and Alan Lane, 'Llangorse Crannog' in *Archaeology in Wales*, 29 (1989), 57-8; idem., 'New Light on Dark Age Wales', in *Ancient Ceylon*, 7 (1989), 209-25; Mark Redknap, 'New Patterns from the Past', in *Amgueddfa*, 8 (Winter, 1990), 5.

15. W J Gruffydd, *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion* (Cardiff, 1958), 12.

16. *ibid.*, 11-13.

17. *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), 47-9. For recognition motifs, see, for example, H 161.0.1: 'Recognition of person on prearranged signal.'; H 324: 'Suitor test: choosing princess from among identically clad sisters.'

18. For example, 'The Magic Flight' (AT 313); 'The Magician and his Pupil' (AT 325); 'The Grateful Animals' (AT 554).

19. *Yr Aradr Gymreig* ['The Welsh Plough'] (Cardiff, 1954), 161-4.

20. *ibid.*, 162.

21. Morfydd E Owen, 'Meddygon Myddfai: A Preliminary Survey of Some Medieval Medical Writing in Welsh', in *Studia Celtica*, 10 / 11 (1975-6), 232-3.
22. The original text of the colophon was published in Paul Diverres, *Le Plus Ancien Texte des Meddygon Myddveu* (Paris, 1913), 6. See also Morfydd E Owen, *ibid.*, 215.
23. Morfydd E Owen, *ibid.*, 216.
24. *ibid.*, 219.
25. 'Profile: Two Descendants of the Physicians of Myddfai', in *Cylchgrawn Meddygol Cymru - Welsh Medical Gazette*, no. 12 (Winter 1971), 6: Surgeon-Major Edward Hopkins, Carreg Cennen, Carmarthenshire, south-west Wales, and Dr John Edward Powell, The Norton, Tenby, Pembrokeshire, who died in 1970, aged 95. 'He was descended in the female line from the Physicians of Myddfai through his great-grandmother, who was Joan Jones, niece of the John Jones, Surgeon, whose tombstone stands in the porch of Myddfai church.'
26. Gwyn and Thomas Jones, *The Mabinogion* (London, 1949), 39.
27. Ysgubau'r Awen (Llandysul, 1938), 17. The quotation is from a translation by D Myrddin Lloyd, in D M and E M Lloyd, *A Book of Wales* (London and Glasgow, 1953), 254-5.
28. *The Mabinogion* (1949), 10-12.

29. *Celtic Heritage*, 265-6.
30. *ibid.*, 345-6.
31. *ibid.*, 266.
32. John Williams ('Ab Ithel'), ed., *The Physicians of Myddvai. Meddygon Myddfai*, xxii.
33. A O'Kelleher and G Schoepperle, ed. and tr., *Betha Colaim Chille* (Urbana, 1918), 352 ff. Quoted in *Celtic Heritage*, 342.
34. Wayland D Hand, *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions. A Compendium of American Folklore. From the Ohio Collection of Newbell Niles Puckett*, 1 (Boston, 1981), xxxvi. See also Wayland D Hand "'The Fear of the Gods": Superstition and Popular Belief', in Tristram P Coffin (ed.), *Our Living Traditions. An Introduction to American Folklore* (New York and London, 1968), 215-27.
35. James Shirley, *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (1659), 1, iii. Quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (1979), 507.
36. See W J Gruffydd, *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion*, 6-7; and J Gwynfor Jones, "'Y Tylwyth Teg" yng Nghymru'r Unfed a'r Ail Ganrif ar Bymtheg' ['the Fairies in sixteenth and seventeenth century Wales'], in *Llên Cymru*, 8 (1964-5), 96-9.
37. See, for example, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, vol.1, ch. 1, 'Undine Kymric Sisters', 1-74.

38. For example, the version associated with Llyn Nelferch (also known as Llyn y Forwyn ['the maiden's lake'] and Llyn Alfach or Elfarch) in the parish of Ystrad Dyfodwg, Glamorgan. See *Celtic Folklore*, 1, 23-28.
39. *Celtic Heritage*, 344-5.
40. See *Celtic Folklore*, 1, 1-74.
41. *De Nugis Curialium* (composed during 1180-1193). See the edition prepared by M R James for *Anecdota Oxoniensis* (1914) and his English translation, published in the *Cymmrodorion Record Series* (1923).
42. See the testimony of informants in the Myddfai district, recorded by the author, May 1967: tapes AWC 1528-1537. [AWC: Amgueddfa Werin Cymru, the Welsh name for the open-air museum at St Fagans, near Cardiff. (Amgueddfa: 'museum'; Werin, mutation of Gwerin: 'people'; Cymru: Wales). The English name for the Museum at first was Welsh Folk Museum. It is now called in English: St Fagans National Museum of History.]
43. See Marie Trevelyan, *Folk-Lore and Folk-Stories of Wales* (London, 1909), 9, 12.
44. They appear, for example, in the legend of the 'Stray Cow' associated with Llyn Barfog ['the bearded lake'], a mountain lake near Aberdyfi, Merionethshire. See *Celtic Folklore*, 1, 141-6. See also Robin Gwyndaf, 'Fairylore: Memorates and Legends in Contemporary Welsh Oral Tradition', in Peter Narváes, ed., *The Good People*, 1991, 155-195 ('Welsh Names for the Fairies', and item 20, 'The White Cow').

45. K Meyer, ed. and tr., *The Voyage of Brân* (1895), 1, 6. Quoted in *Celtic Heritage*, 343.

46. Tapes AWC 1528, 1533, 1535.

47. Tape AWC 1530.

48. See Robin Gwyndaf: 'Dyddiadur Gwaith Maes a Nodiadau' ['Field-work Diary and Notes'], 22-26 May 1997.

49. Martha Williams, born: 21 March 1884. Tape AWC 2002, recorded 1 November 1968.

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