

17 January 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I had a Welsh friend when I lived in Cambridge, in England. He was, as they say over there, 'a bit of a lad'. He was often visited by what the Welsh call the *hwyl*.

Memories of 'Last Call'

The word is unpronounceable to all but the Welsh. This grants them license to lambaste the non-Welsh for '*saying it wrong*'. Occasions for such chastisement flourish throughout the United Kingdom. Shame on you if you don't know a local custom or word, and, foolishly risking it, you '*say it wrong*'!

So, risking Welsh wrath (but not for the first time), I offer 'whoil' as my botched approximation of a phonetic pronunciation. Try it. Quietly. To yourself.

Think of it as a 'mood' or 'muse' that has married itself to someone's personality, or a gathering of personalities. To be gifted with the *hwyl* is to be capable of large emotion, to be both exciting and excitable. 'Welsh', in other words.

It shouldn't surprise you, then, to learn that my friend admired the opposite sex ardently and demonstrably. The feeling was mutual (but that's another story). And yet, he told me, Welsh preachers of the 19th century were also said to 'have the *hwyl*' when, with feverish fervour, they warmed to their text and released their oratorical powers at full throttle; and the people jammed into the crowded Chapel leaned further forward, hanging on to their preacher's every word of unpronounceable Welsh Gospel.

But I digress.

My friend's room was at the opposite end of the same College I lived in. This put him about 40 yards from our local pub. I had to trudge twice as far to meet him there. (You can see how hard my life was back then.)

In no time he taught me the rudiments of pub life in Britain, for I was a swift learner in this field. Though pub culture is 'non-aristocratic', its etiquette is more elaborate and subtle than the primitive rules of engagement that govern the taverns of Northern Ontario: 'No Spitting. No Fighting. Swearing OK.'

"See here. We take turns to buy the next round," my friend instructed. "Watch for a chance to buy one for the man pulling the pints, but *don't* make a

fuss about it. Don't be glum and quiet. Chat to regulars. And for God's sake, try not to sound so American, see?"

He tutored me in the strategies of 'last call' (one clang of the bell and he'd sprint to the bar to get one last pint), and then the final bell at 11 p.m. (*two* clangs), which was the legal closing time back then.

"Good night you lovely people! Bedtime!" the landlord, whose name was Pat, would shout.

"Look you," my friend would say. "Ignore Pat for the moment. We still have ten minutes." Flush with the *hwyl* and several pints of bitter, he could charm his way through anything.

On special occasions, and at Pat's whim (as when he 'won big at the horses' in Newmarket), there might be a 'lock in', when, with curtains drawn and door bolted, the regulars would linger after hours. If a passing policeman, seeing a crack of light, pounded on the door, he'd be welcomed in too, and his temper assuaged with the offer of a pint.

It was a 'town' pub back then, rather than 'gown'. They were distinct and separate entities in this little city filled with Pubs and Churches and Scholars. Tensions between University students (gown) and citizenry (town), having waxed and waned over the centuries, created a kind of 'pub apartheid', the uneasy diplomacy of 'separate but equal'. "You drink in your pub, and I'll drink in mine" is how they kept the peace.

Yet we, despite being unmistakably 'gown', were welcome in this 'town' pub – he with his *hwyl*, and I as their callow Canadian mascot. I befriended some working-class men, and pensioners with stories from the war, some of which may even have been true. Birthdays were marked. On Christmas afternoon, after Church, everyone packed the place to toast Pat and each other.

But my reminiscence is a sentimental 'period piece' now. Pat lost his shirt, probably at 'the horses'. The pub changed hands. Then it closed at some point in the early years of this century, only to re-open as something yearning to be chic and posh, neither 'town' nor 'gown', but 'tourist'.

Hunger for Beauty

"There are places I remember all my life, though some have changed...." We must bless the happy marriage of memory and place, people and the buildings, wherever we find it. When they merge in just the right way, the *hwyl* may just descend, and we're suddenly made capable of a larger life.

Sometimes we remember a place (as I remember that pub), for the little sparks of life that shone within us there, alone or with others. I felt it in the Library in Hart House at the University Toronto, in a shack I inhabited up north for a long summer in my youth (now torn down, but its beautiful setting is still intact), my Kindergarten in the Hall of an Anglican Church (also torn down), my first Elementary School (burned to the ground by an arson when I was ten...hmm, there's a theme here).

Sometimes we remember a place for the overwhelming effect it had on us whenever we encountered it. The 'old' Entrance Hall to the Royal Ontario Museum (now ruined by the addition of a 'monstrous carbuncle', as HRH The Prince of Wales would say) did that to me when I was twelve. So did a College Chapel in Cambridge, in my twenties. I never did get around to worshipping in it, but I visited it often in solitude.

I may never live to see it in person again. But back then, there was something within or around the Chapel of Pembroke College that instilled me with what might, perhaps, have been the *hwyl*. It was an historically significant building, and much more so than anything in my Canadian youth could possibly have been.

But *that* wasn't it. If it were, I'd have been spoiled for choice. You couldn't throw a stone in Cambridge without hitting a dozen buildings of historical significance and architectural value (and then be arrested).

Pembroke College Chapel was Christopher Wren's first commission. The return to 'classicism' is already evident, but more restrained and less 'baroque' when compared to St Paul's Cathedral in London, his crowning glory. If St Paul's is Grand Central Station, then the Chapel of Pembroke College is a comfortable domestic room with well made furnishings that are *used*, not just 'looked at'.

Celtic faddists like to say their favourite setting is a 'thin place'. What they mean, usually, is that the veil between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, God and us, is more transparent to them there. But their faddishness puts me off.

A grumpy and pointedly agnostic poet I love, Philip Larkin, nearly lost control of himself and *almost* spoke in this faddish way in a poem called "Church Going". But not quite. Somehow, he doesn't put me off.

The poem pictures him bicycling through the English countryside. He stops at an empty Church to goggle at it, inside and out. Its dusty beauty and silence get to him. He begins to wonder what will happen when it finally falls into disuse, this 'special shell' that housed and witnessed the remarkable

moments that visit every life – “marriage, and birth, and death, and thoughts of these...” – moments when the *hwyl* descends, and we’re made better and larger, for a while at least. Larkin approaches his conclusion with these words:

*A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete...*

But when it comes to Pembroke College Chapel, I suspect, in my case, it was Beauty itself entrancing my Soul, or perhaps, even, the God of Beauty. Beauty approached me there through the loveliness of architecture, its design and proportions, the glow of brick, wood, stone, tile, and glass, smoothed and burnished by time and constant use. In this Chapel, beauty marries utility.

For there’s an altar there too, a lectern and a cross, and a place to kneel “where prayer has been valid,” as T.S. Eliot said of ‘Little Gidding’, *his* version of a ‘Pembroke College Chapel’.

Our buildings and cityscapes are mostly useful and ugly. Sometimes they’re just ugly. I wish, in this country driven by crass utilitarianism, we’d learn and resolve to build, not just ‘usefully’, but *beautifully*. We need places where our spiritual and bodily being can be seriously at home, affirmed, nurtured, and matured. Beauty is not a ‘frill’ for the moneyed class. It’s everyone’s birthright.

Perhaps that unpronounceable mood and muse that the Welsh call the *hwyl* would descend and marry us, then, making our lives larger.

Closer to Home

I’m sorry to tell you that Maysie Reid has died. In a few weeks she’d have turned 103 years old. When she was born, the Great War had many months to go and the flu pandemic was all the rage. Maysie’s personality was strong, and it will remain so in memory. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Please remember Lindsay and Marjorie Martyn in your prayers. Lindsay suffered a heart attack. He’s getting excellent care at University Hospital.

I’ve attached a photo of the re-named pub my Welsh friend and I once haunted, and also two views of Pembroke College Chapel, Cambridge, within and without.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew

