

Katharine Darby Speech

Of all the father's novels, *The Owl Service* is the one closest to my heart. I was 3 years old, and I remember the day when we first arrived in the valley, collected the keys from the caretaker Dafydd Rees, and walked in to the house which was later, to become the setting for the story of *The Owl Service*. A few years later, when the book was turned into a film by Granada Television, I, by then aged 7, along with my older brother and sister, had the unique opportunity to join the actors and crew for 9 weeks filming on location.

Today's story begins in 1956, when my father was writing his first novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. He was looking for names for the characters in *The Everyman's Dictionary of Non Classical Mythology*, when he came across the story of Math ap Mathonwy in the *Mabinogion*. I'm sure many of you here are familiar with the story, but for those not, within it is the concept of a woman trapped in an arranged marriage, of falling in love with another man and conspiring to kill her husband in order to escape him and be with her lover.

Both physical and spiritual consequences of this, stayed in my father's mind. The seed for the story of *The Owl Service* was sown.

Four years later, in 1960, my father, along with Griselda, who later became his wife, went for a meal at her parents' house in Mobberley in Cheshire. The meal was served by Griselda's mother, Betty, on a dinner service which had been given to her by her sister. The sister had previously hidden it away in a barn, because she said, that the owls watching her eat gave her indigestion!

Betty described to my father how she had first seen the plates in the barn. 'A whole dinner service. Squat towers of plates. A mound of dishes and all covered with grime, straw, droppings and blackened pieces of bird's nest. Green and gold shining through the straw.' Betty's first sight of the dinner service became Gwyn in 'The Owl Service'

Betty saw on the plates, that the flowery patterned between the owl's heads were the bodies of the owls. Griselda saw that if the heads were turned through 90 degrees and juxtaposed to the body of the owls, you would see them flying. She also saw how to make the owls in to 3D paper sculptures.

However-when my father ate off the service, he saw Blodeuwedd, the woman mad of flowers by Gwydion, for Lleu Llow Guffes. Blodeuwedd was turned into an owl as punishment for her betrayal in revealing the secret of Lleu's immortality to her lover Gronw Pebr.

That evening, the dinner service and *The Mabinogion* had come together in my father's mind.

The seed of *The Owl Service* story had begun to germinate, but the story still had no setting. That was until 1963, when our family went to Wales for a holiday. We stayed in a house in Llanymawddwy called Bryn Hall.

Within minutes of arriving there, my father knew that he had found the setting he wanted for the story.

Dafydd Rees had worked as caretaker and gardener at the Hall since 1898. When my father met him he knew he also had found his first character for the book. Dafydd was Hugh Halfbacon in The Owl Service, Gwyddion in the Mabinogion. Now the story had both a setting and a character in place.

Over the next 3 years we spent 2 weeks in the Spring and 1 week in October at Bryn Hall. Under the pretext of family holidays, my father physically and mentally researched the setting, which partly involved us climbing (more than once) all 6 of the mountains which surrounded and looked down onto the valley. For those of you who may be familiar with them, they are Pen y Gelli, Foel Frith, Tap Mawr, Pistyll Gwyn, Cwm Pimryd and Troed y Foel.

Over these years, Dafydd Rees Cilwern told my father stories of the valley, and those stories coloured the ancient Welsh myth from The Mabinogion, to shape the story that is The Owl Service.