Optimism and Life Force: Raymond Garlick interviewed by Alexandra Trowbridge-Matthews, *originally published in Roundyhouse magazine in 2004*

Raymond Garlick was born in London in 1926 but came to live in Llandudno during his childhood. He studied at the University College of North Wales Bangor. Raymond has taught throughout his professional life, firstly in Pembroke Dock where he was the founding editor of ***Dock Leaves*** *which later became* ***The Anglo-Welsh Review.*** *During this time he began broadcasting with the BBC Welsh Home Service while he moved to Blaenau Ffestiniog to continue teaching. After a teaching post at an International school in the Netherlands, Raymond returned to Wales, teaching at Trinity College Carmarthen until his retirement. Alexandra Trowbridge-Matthews interviewed Raymond at his home in Carmarthen in 2004 and wishes to thank Byron Beynon for additional questions.*

Alexandra: As a boy you looked on Gwynedd and Ynys Mon as a paradise, could you tell me about your childhood in London and the escape to Wales from suburbia? You have written about this time in ***August Country***.

Raymond: Yes, I was born in London and I was brought up in London suburbia until the age of twelve and then came to Wales because of the War (WWII). I was evacuated to Gwynedd but I had been coming to Wales throughout those childhood years because my grandparents and various other relatives had settled in North Wales. Wales was the *August Country* in that sense; a holiday country, until just before the War when I came to Wales permanently as an evacuee. I haven't looked back since that time.

Alexandra: You have written movingly and unsentimentally about your childhood illness and many of these poems have a particular resonance for me. Do you feel that it instilled a determination in you: 'what doesn't break you makes you stronger'?

Raymond: That's right; because I've been disabled since about the age of five and I have had a whole lifetime of it. I am sure that it has affected every area of my life, quite often positively, I think. It strengthens the life force: you either survive or go under. It has given me, in writing, an obsession with form and shape and order and elegance - or the pursuit of those things, simply because in one's physical life they were not possible. One sought compensation in a literary way.

Alexandra: Were you aware as a child of your father's suffering during WWI? I wondered if this had any bearing on your lifelong pacifism?

Raymond: I don't know. I was vaguely aware that my father had been wounded and gassed in the First World War but he never talked about it really. I don't know what the origin of that was, possibly a grandfather who was very much a committed pacifist and to whom I felt close. Maybe it was from him that the seed of the conviction came. Certainly from boyhood on, I felt a huge distaste for war and the ceremonies of war; for soldiers and shouting and militarism in any form. I still feel that in an undimmed way—even more so after Iraq.

Alexandra: You were 18 when Rhys's ***Modern Welsh Poetry*** was published, were you aware of the implications of a book which described itself as being of Welsh writing being written entirely in English?

Raymond: I was very well aware of its publication: I was a student at the time and one could hardly avoid it. I was, in fact, being taught at the University of Bangor by one of the contributors to that anthology, Charles Davies. The impact that that book had for me was, primarily, the way in which it intensified the gap between Welsh language writers and Anglo-Welsh writers. The title of the book, ***Modern Welsh Poetry***, infuriated the Welsh language side of things because they said that there wasn't a single poem in Welsh in the book. So that was the origin of my own adherence, which I don't give up even to this day, to the term 'Welsh' for me is Welsh language and 'Anglo-Welsh' is English language but with a Welsh commitment or content. In a way that derives from that book which was very controversial .The division has now been bridged but was very intense at the time.

Alexandra: Before you started your degree in Bangor you began a theology course; did you realise then that language was more your vocation?

Raymond: I was wonderfully taught at Llandudno County School by two teachers of English who really awoke in one a consciousness of words and of their beauty and of their sound, so that l became fascinated by spelling, pronunciation and grammar, in which I delight to this day. Even now I will analyse a piece in ***The Times*** to see what is wrong with the English. These teachers also sowed the seed of a love of literature as well. I think, from that time on, I knew that I wanted to study the English language, and perhaps to teach it, but then I got diverted as one does in one's teenage years by various idealisms. Indeed for a number of years - I find it a curious thought now - I wanted to be a Franciscan friar. However, that was a diversion that came to nothing, and by the time I went to the University College of Bangor, I knew that I wanted to teach English and that is what I've done. ***Alexandra***: Who else taught you at Bangor?

Raymond: There was a great Welsh historian, R. T. Jenkins, who taught me and a very remarkable Professor of Philosophy, H. D. Lewis. It was a time of illumination for me, those four years I spent at Bangor – they were the formation of all my life since then.

Alexandra: I have read that you were not very pleased with your first efforts as a poet; who encouraged you at this time and who did you read and respond to?
Raymond: I don't know that anybody encouraged or discouraged me. I began writing as a student, as so many people do, for the student magazine. I thought 'if this is poetry, anyone can do it,' and the stuff poured out. After a while I realized that anybody could do it but it wasn't necessarily poetry; just verbosity and self-indulgence. So I began to think about what made the kind of poetry that I admired and I realized it was form and structure and craft and so forth. By this time, Dylan Thomas was a dominant figure on the scene and I was much influenced by the structural side of his poems, ***Fernhill*** and ***Vision and Prayer***: the shaped poem. He was a master of the craft of poetry. So that was important and also, I forget how, I discovered the South African poet, Roy Campbell. He certainly had a very considerable influence on me - again in structural terms. I was very impressed by the almost crystalline quality of his poems, although I was not an admirer of his views. So this was (for me) a giving up of lazy, verbose writing and the beginning of an attempt to write controlled, structured and formal poetry.
Alexandra: When you taught English at Pembroke Dock you became part of a circle of writers and you were a co-founder of ***Dock Leaves*** (which became the ***Anglo Welsh Review***). How did you find moving from North Wales to what has been described pejoratively as 'Little England beyond Wales'?
Raymond: All my life I have loathed the expression, 'Little England beyond Wales'. I felt at the time it was quite untrue because as an Englishman, South Pembrokeshire seemed to me to be a very strange and un-English place. I moved there from Gwynedd which was intensely Welsh-speaking to the extent that there were many elderly people who were monoglot Welsh. Moving from that to South Pembrokeshire was a shock but what I found there was not Englishness but another Wales. Wales is multi-faceted but in those days there was the simplistic view that Wales was Welsh-speaking, eisteddfodic (sic), chapel-valued or English- speaking, London oriented, Labour : quite a false dichotomy. Eventually that committed me to a lifetime's study of the English language in Wales. Certainly since the late Middle Ages there have been Welsh poets who have written poems in English. I have been fascinated that there has been an Anglo-Welsh literature going back to the Middle Ages when English was adopted as a second language by some Welsh people and used for literary purposes.
Alexandra: It is interesting that you made parallels between Anglo-Welsh and American-English writing, in that writers in American are not expected to adopt native-American languages to consider themselves American.
Raymond: Yes, I felt it was about time. It was partly the shadow of Caradog Evans who one can see now as a very interesting writer, a view not possible then, when he was considered to have let Wales down by writing in English. It was a matter, for me, of constructing a way of looking at the English literature

of Wales as something distinct from the English literature of England, of exploring, researching and seeing how it had been used in the past.

Alexandra: You were very young, just 23, when you became editor of ***Dock Leaves*** magazine, the only Anglo- Welsh periodical in existence at that time.

Raymond: Not only very young - callow and inexperienced. It suddenly happened, I didn't envisage it but somehow it was taken for granted that I would do it. The leading light of the ***Dock Leaves*** writers was very much Roland Mathias the headmaster of the school where I taught, a man of extraordinary gifts and ability. It was his strength and vision that kept this group of people together.

Alexandra: Was the magazine important to you?

Raymond: Yes, after I had been thrown into it, it was important because there was no other Anglo-Welsh magazine at the time. I think that the first issue was going to be a one-off thing and then because it seemed to answer a need, it gradually took off and grew. It became a regular thrice-yearly magazine but it was quite random at the beginning. One hadn't foreseen where it would lead or the amount of work it would involve. In those days, there was no Arts Council and no public money so that we financed it out of sales and our own pockets. My job was editing but there were others who, for years, organised fundraising just to keep the magazine going.

Alexandra: As editor you came into contact, and became friends, with writers such as R. S. Thomas, John Cowper Powys and also Welsh language writers such as Saunders Lewis and Waldo Williams. This must have been a rich vein of experience for you?

Raymond: Yes, I was very fortunate. Actually the writers I knew personally, for a long while were Welsh language writers rather than Anglo-Welsh ones. Waldo was a very dear friend of ours and came to stay with us from time to time. Later in life I came to know personally the Anglo-Welsh writers that I had published at this time. Quite early on, R. S. Thomas wrote to us offering his support, offering to review and contribute poems. A number of his famous early poems were published first in ***Dock Leaves***.

Alexandra: Your first volume of poetry, ***Poems from the Mountain House***, was published in 1950. Was this named for part of the house that you rented from Brenda Chamberlain before you moved to Pembroke Dock?

Raymond: Yes, when I was a student at Bangor I was in lodgings and then I came to know Brenda Chamberlain. She was the separated (first) wife of John Petts the painter and glass-worker. They had settled in an ancient cottage outside Bangor high up above the little village of Rachub. She was the first painter I ever knew and was a fascinating person. She decided to move to Bardsey Island and I rented Ty'r Mynydd, The Mountain House, from her. I lived there for two or three years and it was a very important learning experience.

Alexandra: You have talked about the invigorating physical challenges of living somewhere like that.
Raymond: Yes, especially for someone who is a disabled person and has been carefully brooded over. It was important to learn to stand, literally, on one's own two feet. One had to do this in quite a vigorous way because there was no running water at Ty'r Mynydd and no electricity and you had to gather wood and draw water from the well. There was a huge pleasure to be got from these physical operations. I like to be a survivor.
Alexandra: It is echoed in your poetry: 'Life is the tautening of nerve and limb'.
Raymond: I think I learned that there. I was close to nature with a vengeance and the winters were very severe but it was an important educational experience, ***Alexandra***: You converted to Catholicism on your marriage; did this have an effect on your writing?
Raymond: It did, I think, yes but when I put together my ***Collected Poems*** in '86, I left out any religious poems because it had long ceased to be a dimension in my life. There were quite a number of poems which had a Catholic element in them but looking back, I think it was forced and not entirely spontaneous. These days I should say that I was a born-again pagan and have been for many years, but my daughter said to me that I am an atheist but a Catholic atheist. I have a deep affection for the Holy Roman Church but as an art form or cultural vehicle.
Alexandra: Was ***Poems from the Mountain House*** well-received?
Raymond: I really can't remember, I looked at it again the other day and was appalled. Most first books should never be published but you have to begin somewhere. There is a sense of form but it doesn't say anything. By concentrating on form and craft, I had equipped myself with the way to write but I hadn't got anything to say: I was too young and inexperienced or simply hadn't digested experience enough.
Alexandra: I find the poems about the challenges you encountered at Ty'r Mynydd stronger than those that deal with Catholicism.
Raymond: Oh yes . . . but I think that I didn't really get going as a writer in my own vein until quite a few years later when we went to live in the Netherlands.
Alexandra: Before the move to the Netherlands, you lived for six years in Blaenau. Was your move there, in 1954, a conscious decision to give your son the chance to be immersed outside the home in an environment which was more bilingual?
Raymond: That was. I was very concerned that he should grow up with Welsh as a first language and that wasn't possible, of course, in Pembroke Dock, where really there was no Welsh except among professional people. I felt a huge responsibility, because I was not really a Welsh speaker at that time. My wife was a first language Welsh speaker, a graduate in Welsh and a fiery Welsh woman, it would not be wrong to say, so Welsh was the first language of the

family. I learnt my Welsh with the children: I have never really gone to classes or anything like that as I should have done. So when the opportunity came to move back to Gwynedd I applied for the job and we duly moved. It was a wrench in some ways; the school (where I was teaching) was lovely. There was a very warm community and there were outstanding people like Roland Mathias.

Alexandra: Did you start broadcasting when in Blaenau?

Raymond: Mmm . . . that would have been in Pembroke Dock too. I was commissioned to do quite a number of talks for the BBC Welsh Home Service (it often had a quarter of an hour talk at ten o'clock at night). Later, I was commissioned to do about three of the ***Radio Odes***. The most famous ode in that was R. S. Thomas' ***The Minister***.

Alexandra: Your ***Requiem for a Poet*** was in this series?

Raymond: Yes, that was the first one that I did and then ***Blaenau Observed*** was the next and finally ***Acclamation*** about the cannonisation of Welsh saints.

Alexandra: You dedicated ***Blaenau Observed*** to John Cowper Powys.

Raymond: Did I? (*laughs*) I never read these things now and can't remember. It would be very likely because he was much revered in Blaenau in those days. When I moved to Blaenau, JCP was my neighbour and I went to see him every week, year in, year out. Very few people knew him, he was an old man, in his eighties and he spent much of his time in his little house writing, but they knew his work and reputation. I regard him as the most remarkable human being I ever knew. It was natural, if one was writing about Blaenau, to dedicate it to him.

Alexandra: Did John Cowper Powys ever agree to be recorded?

Raymond: No, we tried to persuade him a number of times. He had a very memorable voice but he had a great antipathy to the idea of it being recorded. He didn't mind being televised as long as he didn't have to speak. He wouldn't even have his voice recorded, when the BBC filmed him receiving the medal of the Hamburg Academy. His life's companion was Phyllis, an American lady. On one occasion she told me that in America she once went into a cinema and the newsreel was playing as she arrived. The cinema was filled with JCP's voice. It was a debate between Mr. Powys and Bertrand Russell about marriage. Phyllis said that it was a glorious experience to hear his voice like that. It is a voice I still hear when I read things he has written.

Alexandra: You have already mentioned the move to the Netherlands to take up the post in an International School in 1960, did you fee1 that an additional stimulus was needed for your poetry?

Raymond: It was what my poetry needed at that time. It distanced me from my previous life, one was detached and you could see things a good deal more clearly. It also gave one all sorts of new experiences. It was there that I began to write much more seriously, there was also no longer the burden of editing. I edited Dock Leaves for about twelve years and every post brought manuscripts,

so it became a huge burden. When I went to the Netherlands, that came to an end of course. It happened at the right time: - through all sorts of intricate coincidences, I was invited to be head of the English language side of an International School. We were there as a family for most of the 1960s.

Alexandra: I was struck by the poems which were inspired by this time, particularly those that discuss Jewish persecution. The child who becomes the lone survivor from a Jewish family and a lonely woman guilty that she lived; was this someone that you met?

Raymond: She and her husband were colleagues of mine. She taught art in the school and I remember vividly finding her weeping one day. When she was a child during the War, the Germans issued an edict requiring Dutch Jews to turn up at their local railway station at a certain time with just hand luggage. The Dutch Jews obeyed this because they held the view that the Dutch State had always been benevolent. They duly went on this Saturday to the station. The train came in and her family was ushered to the train. Suddenly, my colleague, who would have been about fourteen at the time, had a huge impulse not to go and she hid in some bushes by the station in the melee. She could see her parents' anguished faces wondering where she was. That was the last she saw of them. She was hidden from the Germans for the rest of the War and she survived but all the rest of her family was exterminated.

Alexandra: I was interested that she was called Miriam, which means both 'wished for child' and 'rebellious.' In your poem she was both and it was her rebellion that saved her life.

Raymond: I didn't know that it meant that . . . that is so appropriate. As I said in the poem 'you chose life', it was the life force which I do believe in.

Alexandra: When were the first Dutch poems published? When you returned to Wales to take up the post teaching at Trinity College Carmarthen, three volumes of your poems followed fairly rapidly.

Raymond: I think that ***Landscapes and Figures*** was published while we were in the Netherlands and that probably had some of the early Dutch poems. The first Dutch poems were mainly concerned with the difference in the landscape, a very beautiful country the Netherlands. After we came back, ***A Sense of Europe*** came out, which had a lot of poems about the Netherlands and some about France too.

Alexandra: I am interested in the Camargue poems, I admit partly because it seems to be an area that seems to appeal to Welsh artists. The books, ***A Sense of Europe***, ***A Sense of Time*** and ***Incense*** cover many themes– celebration, people and landscape as well as your civil rights and biographical poems?

Raymond: I thought for years that what I was interested in was people and places, those seemed to be my themes but then events in Wales pushed me in other ways . . . (Welsh language) the road signs campaign took me to the courts. I went to the courts when my students were being tried for road signs offences.

Alexandra: Your wife and son were also arrested.
Raymond: My wife, son and sister-in-law were all on trial in the same week. My wife made a profound impression on the court; she was a woman of great presence. The judge was sitting up there, red like a geranium. My wife said to him, "How dare you sit there in that ridiculous costume and speak to me in English when our first language, for both of us, is Welsh! I am not staying here to be insulted like that." She stormed out of the dock and went out into the Wimpy cafe near the Guildhall with her fellow defendant. The police came looking for them and eventually found them in there, having a cup of coffee. My wife said that they would come back when they had finished their coffee. The Welsh people made the stand and faced the courts and prisons with great courage. When I had reports from all over Wales of shocking behaviour from the magistrates that made me angry and a lot of poems came out of that - to my astonishment. Every poem comes from an emotion but for me poems coming from anger were a new experience.
Alexandra: Did these poems come easily to you or was the revision of these angry poems a hard thing?
Raymond: No, the poems came fairly easily; there always had to be shaping of course. I felt so strongly and I suppose I felt subconsciously, 'this is what I can do' as an Englishman and Welsh citizen without play-acting. I don't know how relevant those poems are now because all the things which were being struggled for have been achieved now in bilingual notices everywhere. It has been won as a result of people's stand and suffering.
Alexandra: The development of the Welsh Studies course at Trinity College, Carmarthen must have given you, as principal lecturer, a great deal of pleasure. Your research has been a considerable contribution to the study of Anglo-Welsh literature.
Raymond: It gave me great pleasure because we created it. We were the first and we were copied everywhere; the university and other colleges came to us and set up their versions of it, modeled upon ours. Ours was the first University of Wales validated course involving Anglo-Welsh literature. Anglo-Welsh literature was at last recognized by the University of Wales via this course. I set, for many years the B.A. and B.Ed. questions on Anglo-Welsh literature. It was a great fulfillment because, when I was a student, one was told there was no such field as Anglo-Welsh literature.
Alexandra: The 60s were a time of fulfillment for you but also sorrow. ***A Touch of White***, which was written in response to your son's illness in 1968, has particular resonance for me because I have a daughter with an incurable condition.
Raymond: That was just after we returned from the Netherlands. My son was about sixteen and suddenly he contracted a terrible condition which caused the failure of his bone marrow. Then, after six months, it started to correct itself and he became well again. However, it was a terrible time. Emotions can be

stretched so far that, like a piece of elastic; they never really regain their previous tension. I, from the very beginning, had this perverse view that the disease would not be allowed to win; not another life was going to be disabled as mine had been. I felt all my will going out to support the life-force in him.

Alexandra: You mentioned John Peters earlier and of course he lived in Llansteffan when you moved there while you were teaching in Carmarthen.

Raymond: That's right. That was probably when I first met John though I had been, in a sense, under his influence for many years. Ty'r Mynydd, which I rented, had a big open chimney that you could sit in. There was a huge beam supporting the chimney into which John (when he lived there) had carved in beautiful Times capitals a text, which translated into English, said: 'Let There Be Peace In This House.' I had lived with these words, daily, for two or three years. I was so moved by the beauty of the shapes of the letters - the thought appealed to me as well of course, as a pacifist. It was there that I learnt that letters can be beautiful just to look at, visual things. John was a calligrapher as well, of course. The calligraphy up there (*Raymond indicates a piece of text on the wall behind him*), that's by Jonah Jones. I bought that recently; Jonah was a partner of John Petts.

Alexandra: It is interesting that you mention the beauty of letters. When were you first aware that you had synaesthetic ability? (*The ability to see letters and words as colours.*)

Raymond: Well, I've always been aware of that since being a child, really. I only became conscious of it much later in life, as a student, maybe. Then I thought it was something to keep quiet about because it sounds so barmy. I didn't know that it was a common experience.

Alexandra: It is often found in artists and musicians: Messiaen had that ability; Writers such as Rimbaud and Verlaine mention this experience, but of course that might have been down to their consumption of hallucinogens.

Raymond: I have no experience of that but when I first encountered the Rimbaud poem ***Voyelles***, (*where Rimbaud talked about the colours that he perceived the vowels to be*) I realised that was the same as my experience except that his colours are different from mine.

Alexandra: It has been shown that if you test people who really have synaesthesia, the colours that they perceive remain the same throughout their lives: - an A being green, for example . . .

Raymond: . . . and actually a specific shade. I once saw a paint chart and I could pick out the exact shade of each vowel. When I think of the vowels in isolation, A is just bright green. I am sure that is because it was A for apple in the alphabet books; E is yellow, I is black, a black stroke: O is white because it encircles a piece of white and U is blue. I think that may be because of the rhyme. I am always moved when I go into the National Museum in Cardiff when I see that great Renoir painting of the lady in blue: that's the blue for me of the vowel U.

Alexandra: Is it almost a physical adjunct to your poetic imagination?
Raymond: I am not consciously affected by it when writing.
Alexandra: Perhaps on the revision of a poem it might give you a more, shall we say, emotional response to certain words?
Raymond: That may well be so, the choice of words when writing a letter for instance. It may well be that certain words are used because of their colour values, subconsciously probably.
Alexandra: In 1984 the anthology ***Anglo-Welsh Poetry 1480-1980*** which you edited with Roland Mathias was published and you were responsible for the earlier poems?
Raymond: I was responsible for the first hundred pages, all the poetry from the Middle Ages up to about 1900 and Sir Lewis Morris, the Carmarthen poet. That said, Roland and I each contributed to each other's sections, it was the work of two friends. As a result of teaching on the Welsh studies course, I knew which poems worked with students and children and which I wanted to be in the modern part. I knew that it was going to be a book that courses would be based on and I also wrote quite a lot of the introduction. I read that again recently and thought, 'that is something I am really quite pleased with still.' It expresses quite clearly my view of literature in Wales. That is quite a vain thing to say but when you are my age, what does it matter?
Alexandra: I like your line in ***Notes for a Biography*** (your last poem before the hiatus) 'Art is successful failure' because I have always found that the best is indeed 'the enemy of the good'.
Raymond: At the time of finishing a thing, one may be quite pleased with it but then later on, when you look back, you see weaknesses in it sometimes. I was trained at Bangor in philosophy and Plato has this concept of the perfect idea which we aspire to: even our poems are but shadows of the perfect poem we have in our minds and which we never really achieve. All art is failure in that sense.
Alexandra: You said that poetry finished in 1979 with your disappointment over the referendum and that was when you stopped writing poetry for some years. Now, of course, we know that it didn't and you began to write again, but you thought that then.
Raymond: I did. It wasn't just the referendum. My marriage had ended and I had realised that I was now an atheist, albeit a Catholic one! After ***Notes for a Biography***, I felt that I did not have anything left to say writing poetry. I still continued to write in other ways of course, bringing out ***Anglo-Welsh Poetry*** with Roland and so on. I also edited my ***Collected Poems*** in 1986, omitting the Catholic ones in particular.
Alexandra: Given the benefit of hindsight, did you just need time to get some clear space for this to be absorbed into your work? ... ***Travel Notes*** in 1992 was a triumphant return to writing … the birth of Alys, your grand-daughter seems to have been a particular inspiration.

Raymond: That may be so. I think it was time for me to start writing poetry again and when my grand- daughter was born, one felt a strength of emotion that I had forgotten. It was a great joy really.
Alexandra: Your interest in Welsh politics and civil rights seems undimmed, has the setting up of the Welsh assembly cheered you?
Raymond: Yes, it is a very good thing. We have come a long way in thirty years. It has been difficult but I am really, in spite of all, an optimist. I shouldn't be here otherwise.

(Raymond Garlick - speaking to Alexandra Trowbridge-Matthews in 2004.)

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