

Tall Tale Telling

Shemi Wâd was a tall-tale teller. A Welsh-speaking North Pembrokeshire man, he died in 1897. Over a century later, he has not been forgotten in his native area. Pig-killer, fisherman, clock-mender, labourer, Shemi told his tales wherever he was – farms where he helped cut the hay, the Rose and Crown pub in his village of Goodwick, his tiny *clom* cottage in Duke Street which no longer exists, or the spot where he'd stand on Post-Office Hill where the stream where he washed his tools tumbled out of the hillside. Listeners were evidently gripped. People loved his humour, language, unique North Pembrokeshire accent and expansive imagination which on different occasions went flying across the Irish Sea, reached as far as the island of Fiji, twice had him fired out of cannons, or magnified the vegetables he grew in his garden so greatly that one cabbage eventually required a ladder and saw to get it cut down.

Shemi has inhabited my imagination since I was a child. Growing up in Fishguard across the beach from Goodwick I used to hear about him from my father, a Cardiganshire man who'd come to Fishguard as English teacher after the Second World War. My interest in Shemi continues. Since I started work on a book of his stories, he's kept raising new perspectives on the workings of oral tradition. One of these is that, oral storyteller though he was, much of the available knowledge about him would not have survived except for writers.



One writer Shemi inspired was Dewi Emrys. Son of a minister at the chapel where Shemi was baptised and buried, Dewi Emrys became a London journalist, a well-known poet and four-times winner of the Chair at the Welsh National Eisteddfod. He wrote a fascinating essay on Shemi whom he'd known as a child. Another writer who helped knowledge of Shemi survive was my father's predecessor in Fishguard School, the great Welsh patriot, D. J. Williams. In 1936, a year when local traditions were stirred by the National Eisteddfod coming to the area, D. J. recorded a radio chat about

Shemi with an old man called Bili John. Bili had also known Shemi in childhood. Shemi had taught him more, he averred, than any teacher ever.

My research on Shemi involved libraries, archives and talking to people. Some was done from my London home, some from my Pembrokeshire place. What was unexpected was the new information that began coming my way after my book was published. At adult performances and schools sessions on Shemi in and around the Fishguard area, I'd be approached by people bringing fresh details of his life and titbits of story I'd not heard before. It felt as if, now a book had come out, their knowledge was validated and they were able to share it. Sometimes it looked like people's memories were being jogged in front of my eyes. One headmistress suddenly remembered visiting Duke Street when she was about four; her memory as it surfaced was partial but sharp. It included blackberries, dust, bare feet and long toenails. Another woman had now realised the background to a surviving photo of Shemi was her grandfather's coffin-making workshop. New stories included one of the daftest. Shemi was building a wall of dumplings. When asked why, he replied at once: 'It'll keep me going through the winter.'

Much remains to be uncovered about Shemi and other Welsh country storytellers of his time and genre. Meantime, another provocative fact has been bearing in upon me with an accompanying sense of challenge. Knowledge of Shemi certainly survives among adults. But of the hundreds of local children with whom I've now worked in the course of my Tall Tales project, not one had previously so much as heard Shemi's name.

Disjunctions in oral traditions occur for varied reasons. Book literacy, TV and computers are well-recognised factors. More drastic situations today collude in places like Africa where deaths due to Aids exacerbate trends such as the decline in minority languages, migrations from rural areas and consequent loss of traditions. In Wales, the change to English as the more prevalent language has probably contributed to adult failure to pass on knowledge of Shemi. Shemi's stories were larded with local details such as names of farms. As these have dropped from conversational currency, adults who grew up with his stories may have ceased passing them on believing their children would not relate to the details. Something more profound arises from changes in storytelling itself.

Not many years ago, almost any evening in a Pembrokeshire pub would demonstrate the ways storytelling used to flourish in local Welsh culture. A person known to have entertaining tales – in pubs, usually a man – had gradually to be accorded attention until, when the *hwyl* was right and the spirit was rising, his stories would begin to flow out. Listeners had to be primed and ready. They didn't only listen. Their vital role was to elicit, feeding the storyteller with prompts and questions before and during the stories and, by commenting and quipping in response, encouraging the production of more.

The challenge today is fashioning new channels through which stories can flow. One elderly gentleman who phoned me about Shemi gave me three stories I'd not heard before. I later discovered he'd never told them – or indeed made any mention of Shemi – either to his daughter or his young grandson. Now a new link has been made. Because the grandson fell in love with Shemi when hearing his stories from me, grandfather and grandson now talk about Shemi together. Meantime the mother – who happens to be a local headmistress – has seen both at home and school the warmth of children's responses to Shemi. Boys especially love him but his appeal transcends gender, age and geography. Words on his gravestone described him: *Cyfaill i bawb a hoff gan bawb*. 'A friend to all and loved by all.' That he inspires the same feeling in adults and children today has been something worth working for and observing.

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