

Belonging to Borders



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A Sojourn in the Celtic Tradition

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

Foreword by
Esther deWaal



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Peregrinatio pro eterna patria

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You are fire as a poem is,
element of the phoenix.

—“*Hymn to St. Efraid*,” Ruth Bidgood¹

1. Ruth Bidgood, *Symbols of Plenty* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), 12.



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Foreword

There is a question that is asked in Wales: Where do you come from? Where are you in your roots? That is a question that all of us must ask, both literally and metaphorically, if we are to live fully and freely. Here, in answering that for herself, Bonnie Thurston draws us, her readers, into that quest. As she discovers her role as a person of the borders, and draws strength and inspiration from the ancient Celtic tradition of those areas of Britain where that flourished in the early centuries, she makes it a journey in which we can all share.

The Celtic lands of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales which figure in this book are places where words become song, where words take flight, and not least those words which deal with what is innermost in our hearts. Theology in the Celtic tradition was never the preserve of professional theologians, and there is a delightful myth that a professor of theology at one of the leading Welsh universities today will tell his students that if they have come in search of theology they should “ask the poets.” This making of theological truth into song and verse in the Christian era followed on as a natural continuation from the role of the bards employed in the courts of warrior kings to sing their praises. These new

bards now sang the praises of a King who was both creator and redeemer rescuing them from the powers of darkness, inner and outer, and bringing them into a new freedom—which yet did not reject but which built on what had gone before.

One of the peculiar strengths of the Celtic tradition is its sense of the elemental, its connectedness with earth and stone, with fire and water, with clouds and rain. All these run as threads through the following pages and time and time again arrest us with the simplicity and power with which Bonnie uses her words to capture them. In these poems she is quietly reminding us to remain earthed and grounded in *this* reality. She is giving us the defense that contemporary society needs against the virtual reality that everywhere seems to be creeping up on us, besieging us with its all-too-easy accessibility. Instead, this book will remind us of “rock that gives substance, solidity, / a place for permanent belonging” (p. 43). Above all here we will be helped to recover elemental beauty (p. 48).

The “stark solidity of elemental things” (p. 46) is a most attractive phrase, coming significantly in a poem titled “The Christ of Iona.” You cannot read this book without being reminded of the important role of the tactile inherent in wood and rock, to feel the sense of touching stone. She allows us to stand there alongside her as she dares to place her hand on those megaliths, great stones in a field where, as she touches their rough-hewn sides, she feels “a faint, throbbing beat” (p. 90), aware of the energy that resonates around them.

This sense of the closeness of the natural elements and of their powers, is, as the poems show time and again, something found in the lives of the great Celtic saints. When St. David preaches, “the earth itself / rose up beneath his feet” (p. 10) St. Columba

sometimes sees the heavens on fire, sometimes feels one with the winds “of this pulsating place” (p. 14). But it is also there for us to rediscover, and the simplicity of her words allow the elements themselves to speak: “The howl of wind, dark sky, / rain blown horizontally” (p. 79). The power of the earth, the elements, the four seasons, equinox and solstice, woven together, are experienced by her in Iona, whose opening lines lay this bare: “Iona’s holiness and healing / is in the confluence of elemental things, / the wind that gathers primeval waters” (p. 43).

If we are to touch, to rediscover, what is primeval in the external world, what about the primal within ourselves? The breaking down of barriers, the bringing together of differing elements into a creative whole, is surely the gift that the experience of the borders brings to those who seek out their ancient wisdom. Above all it is in the wholeness that comes from the acceptance of the pre-Christian and its giftedness being incorporated into Christian understanding that comes over so forcefully in her poem “Green Man” (p. 64). Lurking around in the corner of a small church, such as at Rowlestone, gazing down imperiously from the central boss in the vaulted roof of the nave of a Cistercian abbey at Dore, it speaks of something never written down in those early days but that now can be best captured in poetic words. As we read her poem, Bonnie confronts us with the presence of a whole world of inner, secret knowledge of the livingness of matter, the whole natural world as a living thing, of which we, as humans, are a part. Are her final words a triumphant shout, a quiet prayer? Both of course: “Root it deep within us, / this healing wholeness, / this wild profusion of life” (p. 65).

It is no wonder that the Welsh Borders should have drawn her, and that coming here she should immediately have felt herself

drawn into kinship with the place and its people. Kinship is a form of relationship that underlies many other relationships, the connectedness of sharing common interests and concerns, whether human or nonhuman. So here Bonnie was welcomed and came to know what is given to us who have the great good fortune to be rooted here: holy places, legends and myths, timeless mysteries of ancient trackways, Celtic wells and shrines, mountains and small streams—that ever-changing landscape, with its pattern of hill rhythms and water rhythms. David Jones, artist and poet, who drew inspiration from the years that he spent in the Black Mountains, found that there was no stillness in this landscape but that the movement of streams, wind, rain, and cloud ceaselessly transform—in change which reveals the unchanging.

A borders person herself, in her family and in her geography, Bonnie Thurston delights in finding across the Atlantic places that connect her with her deepest understanding and instincts. Since Thomas Merton has been a profound inspiration in her life, and she has applied her very fine scholarship to deepening our knowledge of this complex and kaleidoscopic man, we can appreciate how his understanding of the role of “one good place” can be held in tension with the movement of spirit, the interior journey of self-discovery and growth into the knowledge of God.

All these differing elements flow into a book that is made for gentle, slow, prayerful reading—a book to return to time and again, at different times and seasons of the year, of our life. She takes us behind the all-too-easy trivializing of the Celtic which in recent years has popularized something that should remain

mysterious, elusive, something to be handled with reverence and respect.

Esther de Waal
The Feast of St. Michael and All Angels