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## Reviews

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# (LYNETTE WRITING ABOUT) 'NESTA': RECOLLECTION, RECLAMATION AND RECONSTRUCTION IN LYNETTE ROBERTS'S LOST NOVEL

Daniel Hughes

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## Abstract

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This article furthers the nascent re-discovery of the Argentine-Welsh writer Lynette Roberts, whose poems returned to print in 2005. Written by Roberts in Llanybri, Carmarthenshire, during the 1940s, 'Nesta' is an unevenly experimental re-construction of the life of the Welsh medieval princess Nest ferch Rhys, and was read by figures such as Robert Graves and T.S. Eliot, who considered the novel for publication at Faber. This essay argues that the triple aims of 'Nesta' are as follows: to recollect the Welsh woman Nest ferch Rhys and the background of her life; to reclaim Nest from these male-dominated histories; and to ultimately reconstruct Nest as the character Nesta. In analysing this tripartite strategy, this article will demonstrate that Roberts's text uses the intersection between history and imaginative speculation to position Nest, in the form of the character Nesta, as a woman of national and historical significance.

**Keywords** Lynette Roberts, women's writing, modernism, historical fiction

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Lynette Roberts's unpublished novel, 'The Book of Nesta', has only ever been read by a handful of individuals.<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves was one such individual, and in his correspondence with Roberts he suggested that, while he liked the text as it was, 'you can't make up your mind about whether the story is called "Nesta" or "Lynette Writing about Nesta."' <sup>2</sup> This article will contend that Lynette Roberts's 'Nesta' is very consciously

and intentionally ‘Lynette writing about Nesta’ and that this formal device encapsulates the triple aims of the text: to recollect the Welsh woman Nest ferch Rhys and the background of her life; to reclaim Nest from male-dominated histories; and to ultimately reconstruct Nest as the character Nesta. In analysing this tripartite strategy, I will demonstrate that Roberts’s text uses the intersection between history and imaginative speculation to position Nest, in the form of the character Nesta, as a woman of national and historical significance. Despite the relatively recent republication of Roberts’s poems, diaries, and short prose, ‘Nesta’ remains sequestered away in Texas.<sup>3</sup> It is time to recollect and reclaim it.

An unevenly experimental historical novel based on the life of the medieval Welsh woman Nest ferch Rhys, ‘Nesta’ was written by Roberts during 1941–4, the period in which she composed many of her most important texts, including *Poems*, *An Introduction to Village Dialect: with seven stories* and *Gods with Stainless Ears*.<sup>4</sup> The novel exists as a typescript, some 425 pages long and, as with Roberts’s poetry, was read and considered for publication by T.S. Eliot at Faber & Faber. Although he eventually declined to publish the text, Roberts recalls that he called the novel ‘both interesting and original.’<sup>5</sup> In a January 1944 letter to Robert Graves, Roberts suggests that the actual writing of ‘Nesta’ took only a month:

I wrote within a month direct on the typewriter a novel with 2 clear cut purposes. (1) as a test of will to see if I could finish the damn thing in a given interval (I did not consider it a good thing to spend more than a months [*sic*] energy on a pot boiler.) (2) to make money for Keidrych & I so that we could continue to write seriously & study for the rest of our lives without the need of financial aid.<sup>6</sup>

It is likely that Roberts’s ‘1941–4’ dates referred to in her introduction to ‘Nesta’ comprised the period of research leading into the novel. As with *Gods*, Roberts’s archaeological and anthropological interests are abundantly clear throughout ‘Nesta’. Yet, despite Roberts seemingly hedging her bets with ‘Nesta’ in this letter to Graves – perhaps managing expectations for her unedited novel before Graves sees it – the unfinished novel is a text that is immensely valuable in the continued study of her work, given the ways in which it extends our understanding of Roberts’s gender politics, use of formal innovation, and approaches to historiography and cultural reclamation.<sup>7</sup>

Nest ferch Rhys, the primary inspiration behind 'Nesta', was the daughter of the last king of Deheubarth (South Wales), Rhys ap Tewdwr, and it is likely that she lived from circa 1081 to 1137. Nest is usually only noted in historical accounts due to her large number of children and grandchildren, one of whom was Gerald of Wales (the medieval chronicler and the first topographer of Britain), a progeny which gave rise to the Fitz-Gerald dynasty, Cambro-Norman nobles involved in the twelfth century conquests of Ireland. Due to both her nationality and gender, it is probable that the details of Nest's life were never recorded in any detail. As Kari Maund, author of a recent study of Nest's life, argues, 'like the majority of women in this period, her life went largely unrecorded', observing that Nest's life 'is recorded only thinly and by and large in relation to men.'<sup>8</sup> Maund's book gained the attention of the columnist Simon Jenkins:

Where are you, Hollywood? Where is the dozy BBC? She was a king's daughter, another's hostage, and mistress of a third. Her beauty made men tremble at the mention of her name. She was seized from the Celts by the Normans, abducted from her husband's bed by an infatuated rebel, vanished into the hills with him, and plunged a nation into war. She loved conquerors and conquered alike and had at least seven children by four different men. She was Helen of Troy. But in the pantheon of female history she suffered one handicap. She was Welsh.<sup>9</sup>

Despite acknowledging 'Welshness' as the primary reason for Nest's obscurity, Jenkins finishes his column by over-riding Nest's national identity, simplifies and romanticises the events of Nest's life, and reduces the complex conflicts of the era between Welsh lords and Norman-French imperialism to 'a true marriage of peoples, a mingling of Norman, Celt and Saxon blood. They fought each other for centuries, but whatever quality is meant by Britishness was the outcome'. If, as Jenkins argues, Nest is a 'progenitor' of Britishness, then her progeny indulged in not only largely erasing the Welsh Nest from historical record, effectively committing textual matricide, but also – through the Fitz-Gerald dynasty – in the subjugation and colonisation of both Wales and Ireland. In this light, 'Nesta' is best perceived as an act of reclamation and reconstruction, which reimagines Nest ferch Rhys as a woman of historical, national and imaginative significance.

Moreover, the very act of beginning to discuss 'Nesta' as a text of literary and cultural significance marks an important contribution to the restoration and reclamation of Lynette Roberts herself. As Katie Gramich suggests, 'suffering triple or quadruple marginalization, Welsh women writers have been until very recently invisible.'<sup>10</sup> Gramich's study provides 'a corrective to extant works of Welsh literary history, which tend to focus on male authors, sometimes exclusively so'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, despite being published by the most powerful and influential editor of her time (T.S. Eliot), Roberts's work has, until very recently, remained unavailable and largely unacknowledged by critics. Such neglect of Welsh women's writing is not confined to the modern period. Jane Aaron, for example, has convincingly argued that although nineteenth-century Welsh women writers, such as Emily Pfeiffer, were sometimes well-known and enjoyed 'a degree of influence on Welsh culture', 'their influence was short-lived; very little of their work is in print today, and their names have been forgotten'.<sup>12</sup> The work of critics such as Aaron and Gramich has been essential in the recovery of Welsh women's writing, as has the work of Honno Press, a publisher based in Aberystwyth and established in 1986, which has published both classic and contemporary Welsh women's writing. The study of Welsh women's history is also a relatively recent development. As Deirdre Beddoe has persuasively demonstrated, 'women's history is new history and has only been in existence in Wales for some twenty years'.<sup>13</sup> Susan M. Johns' study of *Nest* confirms this view and challenges gendered assumptions of Welsh history, arguing that the common conception of the high middle ages in Wales as the 'Age of Princes' is 'a fundamentally gendered approach which has privileged male power and action as the significant forces which shape the history of the country'.<sup>14</sup> In short, much of Welsh history and Welsh literary history is andro-centric and Roberts's unpublished novel anticipates later scholarly efforts to challenge such histories. Like many other Welsh women of cultural significance, both *Nest* and Roberts, by virtue of their gender and Welshness, are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the dominant values of ongoing historical and literary studies in Britain and the wider world, which have often omitted women and, in the British context, Welsh writing. Diana Wallace notes that 'women's historical novels are often *about* the ways in which women are excluded from (public) history' and with this in mind, any discussion of 'Nesta' becomes a dual reclamation of Welsh women's writing and Welsh women's history.<sup>15</sup>

The primary focus of this analysis of 'Nesta' will expand on Roberts's arguments from her introduction to the text and demonstrate that key to 'Nesta' is an understanding of its narrative voice, which itself proceeds with a tripartite process of recollection, reclamation and reconstruction from its own 1940s vantage point. The 'modernistic' credentials of the text are in fact strengthened by Roberts's use of medieval sources and textual fragments, enhancing the sense of a modern voice reconstructing the past from textual fragments that are not only mythic-historic, but which also demonstrate a particular sympathy with quotidian culture.<sup>16</sup> By drawing on similar thematic concerns expressed in some of Roberts's essays, I will demonstrate that for Roberts, the process of writing 'Nesta' engendered an imaginative link with a 'still-living', yet residual, Welsh culture. This culture is hidden (as Roberts sees it) in the lives and practices of the Welsh peasantry, from the early twelfth century to the modern day and can thus be made emergent. I use the terms 'residual' and 'emergent' as they are defined in Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*, which defines residual culture as a culture which

has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.<sup>17</sup>

Williams defines emergent as 'new meanings and new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships'; emergent culture, Williams suggests, stems from 'a new class', and in his view it 'depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form.'<sup>18</sup> 'Nesta' itself is an emblem of a residual culture that can be made emergent in the modernist search for new meanings, and in the search for a modern Welsh culture.

Indeed, Roberts begins her text with a modern voice, by way of her introduction. This introduction is of course, a para-text, but it is also a *post*-text: an opening frame to the narrative, written after the narrative is complete. Or, in Jacques Derrida's terms, a preface, which 'announce[s] in the future tense ("this is what you are going to read") the conceptual content or significance [...] of what will already have been written.'<sup>19</sup> Roberts's opening lines also immediately refute the kind of historical factual accuracy that Graves desired:

This book is to be read as it was written, as an imaginative piece of work recollected around the hearth. There is little, about two paragraphs in all, that can be said to be authentic about the life of Nesta.<sup>20</sup>

The scene around the hearth alludes to Welsh traditions of oral poetic performance and story-telling, echoing Roberts's use of Welsh traditions in her poetry.<sup>21</sup> The phrase 'modern voice' refers to the narrator and Roberts here frames and explains how the narrative voice operates in the text and what it is: a narrator speaking at the time in which the text was written (i.e. 1940s Carmarthenshire), imagined as a figure at the hearth. The narrative voice therefore speaks (and is read as originating) from the point in time in which the text was written in the twentieth century. In a letter to Roberts, Robert Graves criticises both the anachronistic diction ('Lynette is always breaking in with "hoodoo", "frou-frou", "aluminium", "Knossos", S. America, modern painters and so on') as well as anachronistic objects present within the text ('I notice a sack of potatoes & fuchsias & simnel-cake & fishing-tackle of a shape not earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> Century').<sup>22</sup> The difference between the two sets of anachronisms is that the use of anachronistic diction is a marker of the modern narrative voice and a deliberate stylistic choice, whereas the presence of potatoes in twelfth-century Wales is a mistake in the historical background Roberts has created.<sup>23</sup>

Roberts queries – before the narrative of 'Nesta' begins – the nature of historical truth:

When truth in history is penetrated we too often find that it does not exist. Facts are insufficient. Think of the record our enemy will interpret at Dunkirk, and our own conception of it ... of any event which may have been experienced in this re-occurring war. Do the writers, factual historians, Ministries, newspapers, near friends in letters or in the repetition of a story interpret the truth? No. But what can be suggested, and what I have tried to do, is to use the imagination, and bring all these facts to life. This is one of the writer's qualifications: and it is this, for the reader's pleasure, which I have tried to establish.<sup>24</sup>

Roberts suggests that for her, historical fiction balances imaginative speculation with historical fact and that by extension, truth, or history,

is constructed. This selectivity, when combined with imaginative speculation, allows history to be redefined. The implication – inferred by invoking Dunkirk – is that in this way, a losing side can re-write and reconstruct history. Indeed, Dunkirk is a prime example of how a historical defeat can be re-written into a triumphal present. In his Parliamentary address regarding events at Dunkirk, Churchill warned that 'we must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations'. Churchill, in using the word 'deliverance', implies divine intervention, and in the following sentence immediately assigns to that 'deliverance' the attributes of a victory: 'But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the Air Force.'<sup>25</sup> Diana Wallace argues that Welsh women's historical novels of the early twentieth-century are typified by 'histories of the defeated', which disappear 'in the 1940s when an emphasis on defeat might have been seen as counter-productive to the war effort', potentially providing another reason behind Faber's decision not to publish the novel.<sup>26</sup> Yet Roberts's nuanced use of Dunkirk as an example demonstrates that she intends to rewrite a Welsh history of defeat through the *act* of recollection. Ultimately this process focuses *as* a reconstruction – and not a reflection – of 'historical truth' and this imaginative act makes the absent history of Nest ferch Rhys *present*, in every sense of the word. In this light, we can view Roberts's modern voice not as a stylistic anachronism but as instead a consciously-constructed, if unevenly applied, stylistic choice. I would argue that consequently, there are two forms of time in 'Nesta'. Firstly, there is narrated time, the point at which the narration is voiced, and, secondly, narrative time, the time in which the narrative occurs.

As with her much more concise introduction to *Gods*, then, Roberts's introduction serves to defend and define her textual paradigms before the narrative begins. Roberts demonstrates the number of historical sources she has surveyed and reworked into her narrative, such as Geraldus Cambrensis (Nesta's grandson, Roberts tells us), which, 'connected up with the adventures of Nesta's sons provide the background which I have tried faithfully to reproduce.'<sup>27</sup> Roberts also suggests that those historical sources are insufficient: 'When truth in history is penetrated we too often find that it does not exist.' This insufficient background, which Roberts has tried to reproduce, is also a male background. As Roberts asserts, her narrative concerns the woman, and not the men who are the focus of many Welsh medieval

histories: ‘I have omitted the stirring adventures of Owen Gwynedd son of Gruffydd ap Cynan, but this was intentional on my part as the story concerns Nesta.’<sup>28</sup> Roberts, in immediately (and literally) introducing her narrative with the notion of recollection, followed by the justification of the historical sources she has used and omitted, provides a demonstration of how her text is reconstructed on a structural level. Broadly, Roberts’s narrative reconstruction is feminist, seeking to redress male-gendered histories. She also demonstrates how her textual reconstruction operates on an orthographical level. Roberts explains the spelling of place names, which ‘cannot be said to be exclusively Mediaeval; for the spelling of that period wavered in the mind of the scribe.’<sup>29</sup> More significantly, in the case of spelling the Welsh name ‘Nest’ as ‘Nesta’, Roberts also uses a specific spelling in order to control meanings and connotations within the text:

As this story is written in the English tongue, and the word already suggests another image, not exactly one which is appropriate, I have altered the name to Nesta. And it is Nesta, and not Nest, which is used today when Welsh parents name their children after this historical person.<sup>30</sup>

Speaking from the present, as the narrator is, the name is ‘Nesta’, and not ‘Nest’. The historical figure is reconstructed as the character ‘Nesta’, rather than ‘Nest’, to avoid certain connotations (such as the notion of a bird’s nest), but also to link the fictional Nesta with the present day. In her introduction, Roberts justifies how her narrative is recollected, what is reclaimed – and who it is reclaimed from – and how these fragments are reconstructed.

Before examining the linguistic experimentation and fragmentation of the text, it is necessary to consider the over-arching structure of Roberts’s text. ‘Nesta’ is split into eight parts, each of which is split into between four and twelve chapters.<sup>31</sup> This fragmented structure is used to disperse and relocate events and situations within the narrative. For example, Roberts uses a single-page chapter titled ‘A Heironymous Dream’ to foreshadow the introduction of Owain, the young warrior who literally interrupts Nesta’s marriage to the Norman noble Gerald de Windsor by abducting her, and to demonstrate Nesta’s own deteriorating mental and emotional state (*N* 204).<sup>32</sup> The following chapter, ‘The Haughty Warrior’ (*N* 205), begins with a textual fragment of

another kind, a partial extract and a sample of the work of the medieval Welsh bard Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr (c. 1155–1200), the court poet of figures such as Madog ap Maredudd, Owain Gwynedd (Owain the Great) and Dafydd ab Owain Gwynedd. The full excerpt (Roberts omits the first line) reads:

Llys Owain hael–  
Ynys mae yfed, heb neued, heb nag,  
Heb nebawd eisiwed.

[The Court of Owain the Generous–  
Where there is drinking, without anxiety, without a refusal,  
Nor any kind of want.]<sup>33</sup>

Through this extract, Owain's presence is further foreshadowed, as is the feast at which he will appear. This fragment simultaneously situates Owain within a line of *other* Owains, who exist outside of the narrative time of the novel. A little later in the same chapter ("The Haughty Warrior"), Roberts uses English-language excerpts (a more common practice in 'Nesta' than using extracts in Cymraeg) to suggest both the importance of Owain, as a young bard sings 'A few lines from a well-known ballad' ('Who is the haughty warrior before me?' *N* 207). These are translations of Welsh poetry from *Literature of the Kymry*, a text Roberts consulted for both 'Nesta' and *Gods*.<sup>34</sup> The "haughty warrior" of the poem is Llewelyn ab Madoc, and the author of *Literature of the Kymry* suggests that such a ballad 'shows the influence of the Norman manners in their proximity to the people of Powys,' as well as clearly showing 'Llewelyn was a young chief of no ordinary promise.'<sup>35</sup> Roberts, then, suggests the importance and the daring of *her* Owain ap Cadwgan within the novel, positioning him in a tradition of heroic Owains and heroic chiefs of Powys. She creates a fictive Owain from differing textual fragments and reclaims him from the notoriety of historical record.<sup>36</sup>

This use of literary fragments (and allusions) parallels Roberts's *Gods with Stainless Ears*, which features fragments from both *Literature of the Kymry* and *Lives of the Cambro-British Saints*.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Roberts uses the same textual extract that prefaces *Gods with Stainless Ears* within 'Nesta,' albeit an English translation, rather than the Cymraeg original:<sup>38</sup>

‘Hast thou heard what Avaon sung,  
 The song of Taliesin just lay?  
 The cheek will not conceal the anguish of the heart.’

‘A crow sang a fable on the top  
 Of an oak, above the junction of two rivers.  
 Understanding is more powerful than strength.’

‘Take the best of all occasions.  
 Of what you already possess;  
 Better than nothing is the shelter of a rush.’

‘Cattwg the wise sang it’, whispered one of them. (‘Nesta’, pp. 14–15)

Interestingly, these lines – presented in *Gods* as a single poem – derive from three different fragments that Roberts has combined into a single text, demonstrating the level of modernistic ‘quilting’ at play in Roberts’s work.<sup>39</sup> In ‘Nesta’, the three different stanzas appear to come from different speakers, multiple bards singing ‘some old aphorisms of their masters’ (N 14). Roberts also has characters from the novel read the textual fragments she has actually drawn from in composing ‘Nesta.’ Across pages 61–4 of the novel, for example, Nesta reads extracts from pages 491–3 of *Lives of the Cambro-British Saints*. Such passages demonstrate the physicality and, consequently, the artificiality and constructedness of Roberts’s text, emphasising the way in which texts can be composed of fragments while also suggesting continuity between Nesta-as-reader and the reader-reading-‘Nesta.’

Similarly, analysing the modern punctuation and anachronistic diction that Graves criticised provides further evidence of modernist experimentation, both in terms of the language employed and Roberts’s use of the narrative voice. For example, even at an extremely early stage in the narrative, Rhys ap Tewdwr – Nesta’s father – is framed by the narrative voice as ‘our old friend’, an epithet perhaps designed to positively position Rhys ap Tewdwr within the reader’s mind. The simple but pointed use of capitalisation in these early pages strengthens the idea that Roberts is forcibly introducing authoritative figures into the narrative, as two Welsh kings meet, their full names are capitalised (‘RHYS AP TEWDWR’, ‘GRUFYDD AP CYNAN’, N 5). This

capitalisation punctuates the narrative, and is also used to indicate that the narrative voice stands outside of the time it is narrating:

THIS WAS AFTER THE VICTORY OF MYNYDD CARN 1081.  
RHYS THEN WITH A KINGDOM UNDER HIS FEET WAS  
AGAIN KING OF SOUTH WALES (KNOWN AS  
DEUHEUBARTH), IN THE SAME WAY THAT GRUFYDD AP  
CYNAN WAS KING OF NORTH WALES (KNOWN AS  
GWYNEDD), *though neither had been recognised by the Norman  
Crown.* (N 6)

This stylistic interruption of the narrative serves to demonstrate at what time narrative events are taking place, and to introduce the reader to a partial context (relating the medieval names of Welsh kingdoms to their modern geography). Already, it is indicated to the reader that the narrative voice has a far wider frame of reference – a contemporary, twentieth-century frame of reference – than a 'historic' voice would. Similarly, the narrator also reveals that the modern voice knows what could not have been known in narrative time, informing the reader of the evolution of Welsh castles *beyond* the timeframe covered by the narrative: 'These gay Welsh Castles had nothing of the Norman humdrum about them... Later a Romanesque style evolved' (N 7). Furthermore, the narrative voice also demonstrates uncertainty: 'Did WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR go to greet Rhys ap Tewdwr or to visit the Shrine of St David? Which is it?' (N 8), suggesting that narrative events are not *fixed* in accordance with one historical truth, implying the artificial and constructed nature of the text, and of truth itself, as well as the speculative and imaginative nature of the narrative voice. The 'modernistic punctuation' is not just used in these early pages to emphasise particular characters or indicate a break from narrative time to narrated time, but also to fragment the narrative into different perspectives, demonstrating the differing reactions to the visit of William the Conqueror, for example. The narrative splits the reactions thus: 'FOR THE PEOPLE :-', 'FOR BROTHER NON:-', 'FOR RHYS AP TEWDWR:-' (N 9). The visual effect of this device is to remind the reader of a script, perhaps for radio or theatre, and within the narrative, it allows Roberts to explore a range of reactions to the Norman king from three different perspectives: social, religious, and noble. Beyond this, though, Roberts's typographical innovation infers that history is

both performance and performative. Roberts also employs a similar punctuating technique later in the text to demonstrate a shift in geography: 'And on the third day they reached:- The Border of Wales' (N 73–74). Here, the typography both indicates and actuates the passage of time and distance. Graves disapproved of these kinds of typographical shifts; yet, when these shifts occur, they serve a clear purpose, fragmenting narrative perspective, geography, and temporality, and demonstrating the performative nature of both history and text.

Similarly, Roberts's use of 'anachronistic' diction (another of Graves's criticisms) reinforces the sense of the modern narrative voice speaking in a time outside of the narrative events. Nesta is described in seemingly anachronistic terms: 'The woollen texture hung about her like an aluminium night, distant, cold, and elusive'; 'She stood like a mediaeval statue' (N 69). By employing diction ('aluminium', and on the same page, 'tinsel') beyond the frame of reference available in the narrative time, Roberts demonstrates, I would argue, not an anachronistic text, but rather a schismatic text: that is, a text in which the chronological gulf between its medieval setting and its modern (1940s) narration is utilised as a means of drawing attention to the text's own fictionality. Aluminium might not be 'of the period' or historically accurate, but it is a reference whose connotations are available both to the modern narrating voice *and* the modern reader. There is, therefore, no reason to exclude such terminology. Aluminium is not of the text's narrative time, but it *is* of its narrated time. The use of the 'mediaeval statue' simile simultaneously distances the narrative voice from the period of the text – by consciously using a label that would only retroactively be applied to the period – and also presents Nesta herself as *like* a medieval figure, rather than simply affirming her belonging to the period. This demonstrates both the schism between narrated time and narrative time, as well as the performative, self-aware nature of the text. Similarly, the narrative voice at times adopts a conversational and uncertain tone and register, which achieves a comparable effect. This often occurs close to the beginning of chapters, and sometimes reminds readers of previous narrative events. For example, chapter three of the fourth part of the novel begins 'To Cwmcelyn again. The snag is this..' (N 176), while on the second page of part three chapter five, the narrator remarks of two guards having a conversation 'The two guards did not exactly use these words but on the other hand they have!' (N 99). This combination of conversational tone and speculative phrasing

again emphasises the schism between narrative and narrated time, as when, for example, later in the narrative, the narrator remarks 'So many children are supposed to be of Nesta's parentage! It may have been here that another child was born ...' (N 328–329). Roberts's historical sources intrude into the narrative shortly after this: 'as her grandson Gerald Cambrensis wrote some forty years after her death: "They do not engage in marriage, until they have tired, by previous cohabitation, the disposition, and particularly the fecundity, of the person with whom they are engaged"' (N 329). By opening such an overt schism between narrative time and narrated time, and referencing one of the sources of the text, Roberts not only reinforces the modern *position* of the narrative voice, but also uses events and information from outside the narrative time to justify events within the narrative. In turn, the modern voice allows Roberts to link her narrative with the present day.

This speculative, schismatic narrative voice not only draws attention to the artificial nature of the text but demonstrates the role of text and narrative in performing history, and therefore in defining the present. The modern voice is self-consciously *performing* Nesta's story for the reader; through its diction, register and tone, it is performing this story in the modern day. There are numerous other intrusions by the narrative voice across the text that suggest the act of recollection around the hearth, with the reader imagined by the narrative voice as a listener. This narrative conceit links the culture constructed by the text with the culture extant in the present day. For example, people in the time of 'Nesta' are remarked to be 'politer than we are today' (N 339), and as one character is dying – the narrator first asks, in that speculative, conversational, and meta-textual tone 'Have you forgotten Merwydd?' – the narrator links the character to the village from which the modern voice is speaking: 'She passed away as so many in my village' (N 355). Similarly, the narrator even comforts the reader: 'Do not lose heart because Nesta is old. This is just a fallacy of youth' (N 363). The most important effect of these stylistic choices may be that they serve to link the reader in a cultural continuum with the characters, events, themes and culture that Roberts constructs in 'Nesta', which, in turn, demonstrates the immense value 'Nesta' has in enhancing our understanding of Roberts and her literature. To this end, Roberts does not just use medieval fragments in 'Nesta', but also includes a sample of an 'Essay on a Ramble', a piece by a boy called Hugh Davies, whom Roberts

thanks in her introduction to 'Nesta' for allowing her to reprint his essay.<sup>40</sup> Within the text, Davies's essay is a piece of tutorial work being examined by Brother Non, a monk and teacher, who then reads pages 576–7 – which, like the sample Nesta reads, are transcribed directly into the text – of *Lives of the Cambro-British Saints* (N 254–6). By inserting a modern fragment (the Davies essay) and an older fragment in close proximity to one another, Roberts shrinks the temporal gap between narrated time and narrative time, textually constructing a cultural continuum between both periods. This connection imagines a level of continuity between the everyday – quotidian – Welsh medieval culture of Nesta's reclaimed past, and Roberts's Llanybri/Wales of the 1940s. Indeed, Roberts seems to suggest that a kind of generational, Welsh femininity and maternalism exists, as when Brother Non, observing Nesta carrying a baby, realises that 'Every Welsh woman that he had met carried their young in this way'. When Non asks Nesta why she does this, she responds 'I do not know really, my mother carried us like that' (N 137).<sup>41</sup> Throughout 'Nesta', there is also a particular attention to rural Welsh peasantry, a peasantry that notably includes positive feminine figures, such as Merwydd, who acts throughout the novel as a maternal and domesticating presence. In Roberts's 'Notes for Serialization', she describes Merwydd as 'a woman of old peasant stock who carries the characteristics of her culture with her'.<sup>42</sup> Katie Gramich suggests that 'the peasant may be seen as embodying the contradictions of nationalism itself in the context of modernity, since the figure contains both residual and emergent cultural formations'.<sup>43</sup> Gramich's essay also demonstrates the centrality of masculine depictions of the present, and the ways in which feminine peasants are often perceived entirely negatively. Seen in this light, Roberts's constructions of maternal and feminine aspects of Welsh culture – peasant or otherwise – suggest a reclamation of Welsh women's culture.

Gramich suggests that in the face of modernity the peasant includes both the residual and the emergent (again using the terms as defined by Raymond Williams): 'The residual and the emergent may be seen to coalesce in the figure of the Celtic peasant'.<sup>44</sup> I would argue that while Roberts – through figures such as Nesta – presents a Welsh culture which is not limited to just the peasantry, she does, ultimately, argue that the Welsh peasantry is the resting place of the residual, and will therefore eventually be the source of emergent formations. This is clearly demonstrated in the notes of her planned radio adaptation of

'Nesta', in which Roberts ends her summary by stating that 'only the heads of the Welsh peasantry remain haloed against the skyline by the down setting of the sun' and, in a pen annotation, adds that there is 'an implication that the Welsh peasants haloed by the sun remain as the real future heirs to Wales'.<sup>45</sup> A similar image appears in the novel, as peasants join Nesta's funeral procession: 'the falling Sun catching and raising a halo around their Pastoral heads' (N 414). At the end of 'Nesta', it is clear that Roberts perceived Welsh culture returning to what she perceived as the authenticity of the peasantry – to the soil – for an eventual, future re-emergence:

For here at this time the aristocracy of the Welsh ceased. The blood and burden was transferred to the Norman Lords. But they do not represent the Welsh. The workers [*sic*] craftsmen, labourers of the soil knew at that moment as they stood apart, that now only they held the reins. That their's [*sic*] was the only line of pure lineage and through them they were to retain a gentleness of voice and manner; would be responsible for handing down the good and bad traits and culture of their Country. (N 414)<sup>46</sup>

Roberts links this with the importance of the practicality of Welsh peasant culture, demonstrating a belief that older, residual practices retained and even regained relevance in the modern era. One such example of this practical still-living culture is present in part four, chapter 2 of 'Nesta', 'The Thatcher Sion Goch', in which Sion Goch and Mair, a peasant couple, are building a home, and thatching its roof.<sup>47</sup> Roberts's letters to Graves demonstrate her belief that this is a representation of a still-living culture, suggesting that 'rural villages in Wales are still so medieval in craft & manner', before continuing:

It was observations I had made on thatching etc: lining—I do my own for the cottage that enabled me to write of these again & probably correctly (since the custom has not changed & because in the method there might be some distinction from that of the (Engl:Med) [English Medieval].<sup>48</sup>

Not only does Roberts suggest that such methods are unchanged – again evidence of a cultural continuity between the fragments that comprise 'Nesta' and the modern day – but she also asserts a possible distinction between Welsh and English customs.

Similarly, in essays such as ‘Simplicity of the Welsh Village’, Roberts calls for solutions to everyday housing problems afflicting modern Wales by returning to Welsh tradition and remaking Welsh architecture from new materials. It is, in short, an appeal to make residual culture emergent and to enact a cultural revival:

[In Llanybri, there] exist the very buildings of the peasantry, together with the natural mode of life and craft which goes with it. And what are we doing to encourage and adapt these buildings to the living conditions of today? What are we doing with the severe frost and rain, with the younger generation gradually being transferred to England or conscripted to war.<sup>49</sup>

Roberts is actively pursuing the kind of generational transition she fictively asserts in ‘Nesta’, and, importantly, is looking to the past not just to reclaim heritage, but to use it in an effort of reconstruction that is both literal and metaphorical. Roberts concludes by asserting that the residual needs to be made emergent for the future sake of Wales: ‘let us give our generation a chance to go forward, and experiment with the new building processes now being manufactured.’<sup>50</sup> Roberts posits similar arguments in another essay, ‘Coracles of the Towy’, for example, where she tracks coracle use throughout Ancient Jewish history, through the early Egyptians and Britons, as well as Welsh texts such as Taliesin’s *Pillar of Song*, the works of Giraldus Cambrensis, and the *Book of Llanegwad* (1798), connecting coracles with oracles, and history with prophecy. Roberts then grounds this cultural tradition in her present-day locality, in the shape of a generational transference through one family of coracle makers, the Evans family.<sup>51</sup> Echoing her argument in ‘Simplicity of the Welsh Village’, Roberts asserts that there are two primary reasons for writing her essay. Firstly, to update existing information on coracles – in ‘Simplicity of the Welsh Village’, Roberts refuted outdated notions that no distinct Welsh architecture exists – and as an appeal for the construction of more coracles using new materials.

Roberts’s fascination with the coracle and her specific locality – and by extension, her roving archaeological and anthropological eye – is also evident in ‘Nesta’; specifically, in the seventh chapter of part three, ‘The Coygan Caves’. Coygan Cave is a limestone cave near Laugharne, which, while no longer accessible, has previously been explored

through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where 'evidence of human and animal occupation dating from the last (Devensian) Ice Age' was discovered.<sup>52</sup> The journey to Coygan Cave in 'Nesta' is preceded by an encyclopaedic sweep through plants – spindleberry, coriander, camomile, meadowsweet, hibiscus – and sea birds – gulls, gannets, plovers, sea-pies, snipes, whimbrels – reminiscent of the panoramic opening of *Gods with Stainless Ears* (N 121–3). Roberts is also obviously aware of the Ice Age origins of the cave, as Rhydderch, a soldier of the household guiding Nesta and her children to the cave, claims that within the cave they'll find 'Woolly Rhinoceros, Giant Mammoths, Cave Hyena, Cave Lions and Cave Bears; also a large Man with a Mouth' (N 124). The cave, which is largely underwater, must be navigated by boat, and one of Nesta's children spots a coracle, asking Nesta how old the coracle is, to which Nesta responds she does not know:

I don't think anybody does, it depends so much on which of the Dynasties arose first. From their tombs we know the Egyptians used it. From soil excavations Babylonians too I believe. And so the soil holds a lot of hidden secrets my beloved son; secrets of the dead, of life, it is probably one of the greatest enigmas we have ever known. (N 126)

Nesta displays a range of knowledge – Egyptology, for example – beyond what is likely for the historical figure on whom the character is based, again displaying her constructed-ness. The coracle also sparks in her a meditation on cultural fragments which seem to live in 'the soil'. After a brief interruption by her children, Nesta continues: 'Where was I? Ah yes; the soil. It is the greatest enigma we have ever known, not because of its mystery, my noble son, but because it holds the riddle of mankind, HUMANITY' (N 126–7). Nesta herself seems to have both a spiritual connection to antiquity, through her knowledge of the Babylonians and the Egyptians, and to Welsh culture, demonstrated by her understanding of coracles, inferring that the peasant knowledge Roberts sees as essential to Welshness rests in Nesta too.<sup>53</sup>

The imagery of the cave, and of things both preserved and lost to time, ties into the imagery Roberts uses in *Gods* to represent a subterranean Welsh culture. For example, the Welsh flag creeps 'like myth' into the earth (CP 49); the speaker offers 'cambric joy', alluding not only to the

woven fabric, cambric, but also playing off the Latinization – Cambria – of Cymru, and also implying the geologic Cambrian period, suggesting age, density and subterranean-ism (*CP* 50).<sup>54</sup> In another example, planes fly over ‘Cambrian caves where xylophone reeds hide Menhir glaciers’, again suggesting an ancient, frozen, subterranean, Welsh culture is thawing at the end of the poem (*CP* 65). This idea surfaces again at the end of Roberts’s essay ‘The Welsh Dragon’, an appeal to writers in Wales to experiment and represent their national culture:

For what the Welsh dragon lacks at present is fire [...] the younger generation must rediscover the source of that fire before the particularities of the Celtic imagination are once again submerged in an Anglicised culture.<sup>55</sup>

In short, this is what Roberts is doing with the historical figure of Nest ferch Rhys, and the varied fragments – quotidian, still-living culture, Welsh medieval poetry – that comprise ‘Nesta’. Roberts reclaims Nest, reconstructs her as Nesta, and in doing so reformulates medieval gender roles to present her as both an active participant in events – such as convincing her brother to rebel against the Normans (*N* 159–60) – and a matriarchal symbol of Welsh culture, typified by her connection with ‘the soil’ and the mysteries it holds. Similarly, the events of Nesta’s life, are often presented as central to Welsh history. For example, the consequences of Nesta and Owain’s affair become clear in the light of Norman retribution, as other Welsh princes remark that Owain has ‘spoiled the small chance we had of regaining Wales’ (*N* 275). Similarly, the narrative repeatedly returns to instances of Welsh rebellion against Norman rule, and Henry I – earlier in the novel he engages in an affair with Nesta – makes Nesta synonymous with Wales: ‘Nesta had left sufficient impression on his mind to connect Wales with her; he still felt very much the Master where she was concerned’ (*N* 293). Henry also later acknowledges the Welsh – despite his governing policy – as the true inheritors of the land (*N* 341). Nesta’s death is the ultimate testament to these recurrent tensions, as Nesta becomes a matriarchal figure, an independent figure of female authority yet also somehow synonymous with the nation and its fate:

And Heavy-hearted, for now they saw that the nucleus of the family had gone, that in the future there would be distinct

opposition between the sons; those of Pure Welsh and those of half Norman Blood. Already such disputes and aggression had taken place. But the rift now would be serious without this central person who gave them birth ... uniting them. (N 414)

Without their matriarch, the sons will now turn against one another, the absence of Nesta's authority marking a turn towards fracture in Wales. Nesta ultimately ends up embodying the culture she belongs to, reclaiming Welsh history from dominant historical narratives. This is, as Katie Gramich notes, a recurring feature of Welsh women's writing in the twentieth-century: "Time and time again in examining the constructions of Wales presented in the work of twentieth-century Welsh women writers, we observe the construction of a particular "ethnoscape", in which notions of Welshness and belonging are embodied in the female character inscribed within an ancestral landscape."<sup>56</sup> The Welsh national anthem mythologises Wales as the 'land of my fathers', encapsulating a seemingly self-perpetuating male-centric view of the Welsh nation; yet Roberts's text implies that those historic fathers – Nesta's sons – are responsible for a violent, conflicted nation. Significantly, Roberts's text shifts attention away from national patriarchs and towards a symbolic mother figure, reminiscent of Mam Cymru.

As well as exemplifying the paradigms of twentieth-century Welsh women's writing, Roberts's idealised Nesta echoes some aspects of nineteenth-century Welsh women's writing. Deirdre Beddoe suggests that women in Wales have been 'subjected to a particularly "virulent strain" of patriarchy', partially shaped by the particular cultural conditions of Wales.<sup>57</sup> In response to the Treachery of the Blue Books (1847), for example, Beddoe illustrates that 'ministers of religion, politicians and other male public figures zealously promoted the domestic ideology and the role of women as a civilizing force within the home.'<sup>58</sup> As Jane Aaron suggests, 'to win appreciation for Welsh difference and create a homogeneous Welsh nation [Welsh women writers] were, in part, following English value systems' and that in response to the Blue Books report 'what was needed were role models for the nation's women that were virtuous and worthy of admiration, but distinctively and unquestionably Welsh.'<sup>59</sup> As Aaron goes on to demonstrate, the colonial connotations of such a response are clear, and their echoes in 'Nesta' indicate the ways in which such tropes had been embedded in

the Welsh psyche: Roberts presents Nesta as an unquestionably Welsh matriarch and in conflating her maternal role with peace and prosperity in Wales, Roberts depicts Nesta as a civilizing force for the Welsh nation.<sup>60</sup> Aaron argues that many nineteenth-century Welsh women writers 'did much to advance a renewed recognition of the richness and value of the Welsh heritage.'<sup>61</sup> Given that it was never published, 'Nesta' obviously cannot have achieved the same recognition. Yet Roberts's text clearly contains tropes and themes recognisable in Welsh women's writing of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is a text which fundamentally engages with Welsh heritage, utilising it to construct a new expression of Welsh culture. Ultimately, Roberts's modern narrative voice performs 'Nesta' – the character, the narrative, the history – and in doing so, offers a radical form of historicism, which demonstrates that histories can be un- and re-made in the present, providing writers with the opportunity to re-make the present itself.

This article offers a long overdue critical appraisal of 'Nesta'. The renewed availability of Roberts's work has allowed a nascent critical re-evaluation to begin, yet it is worth considering just how precarious such texts are. Indeed, at the time Roberts's poems were re-published in 2005, 'Nesta' was still assumed lost.<sup>62</sup> Correspondence with Tony Conran reveals that by the late 1970s, Roberts herself no longer possessed any copies of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, or her published novel, *The Endeavour*.<sup>63</sup> Even to their authors, out of print texts are easily lost. Unpublished manuscripts occupy an even more uncertain space. 'Nesta', by virtue of never being published, has for decades been lost to the reading public; and given Roberts's own unsuccessful attempts at editing the typescript 'Nesta' was in some senses lost to Roberts herself. It is long past time that 'Nesta' was reclaimed. Roberts demonstrates within her text the artificiality and performativity of historical narrative, and the writer's ability to reconstruct histories and presents. 'Nesta' serves as a reminder that our critical mission to recollect, to reclaim, and finally, to reconstruct, is ongoing: always problematic, though vital nonetheless.

By extension, 'Nesta's radical historicity defamiliarizes dominant literary and cultural understandings of presents and pasts, and opens up new understandings of how a minority culture and minority writer can reconstruct pasts and renew presents. Roberts's experimental, inventive modern voice – her deliberately schismatic narrated time and narrative time – bears out but also over-turns R.S. Thomas's claim

'There is only the past/ brittle with relics'; the past might be brittle with residual relics, but these are still active, and therefore emergent, in the present.<sup>64</sup> Or as Roberts herself said, the 'past / Is not dead but comes uphot suddenly sharp as / Drakestone' (*CP* 48). By reclaiming the residual relics of the Welsh past, Roberts demonstrates the continued presence of those formations in the present moment, always shaping our experience, and always available to re-shape the present, as 'Nesta' itself should be. Indeed, the act of writing about 'Nesta', and reading about (me writing about) 'Nesta' re-shapes our present and expands our present understanding of Welsh literature's past(s). This is not a 'true' nor 'factual' account of the history of Nest ferch Rhys, nor even of Lynette writing about Nesta; but it does, perhaps, 'bring those facts to life'. And that is one of the writer's qualifications.

- <sup>1</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'The Book of Nesta', Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin; Lynette Roberts Collection, MS-3561, Container 1, Folders 4–6. The TS is dated 1941–4 and was possibly revised in 1955–6 [see note 7 below]. 'Nesta's' paratexts (the introduction, contents, bibliography) are unnumbered; further references to numbered pages from the typescript of the text itself will be marked *N*. My sincere thanks to Angharad and Prydein Rhys, who have granted me permission to publish quotations from the typescript of the novel as well as associated documents.
- <sup>2</sup> Lynette Roberts and Robert Graves, 'The Correspondence between Lynette Roberts and Robert Graves', ed. Joanna Lloyd, *Poetry Wales*, 19/2 (1983), 51–123 (68).
- <sup>3</sup> The typescript of 'Nesta' was assumed lost before it was rediscovered in 2008 by Stella Halkyard (The John Rylands Research Institute, University of Manchester) in the Harry Ransom Center [subsequently HRC].
- <sup>4</sup> Lynette Roberts, *Collected Poems*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005); Lynette Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> These comments are on a page attached to the mixed TS/MS, 'Nesta: Serialization for Broadcast', HRC, MS-3561, Container 1, Folder 6. Roberts also suggests that 'Nesta' was turned down because Faber could not afford to bring the book out 'in all its quality'. Roberts states that she did not want a 'precious' edition, but rather something cheap and 'within most peoples [*sic*] reach'. On the same page, Roberts says that she pitched the novel to Faber in 'the mid-war years', so it is possible that paper rationing also contributed to the decision not to publish what was a substantial novel.
- <sup>6</sup> Roberts and Graves, 'Correspondence', 60.
- <sup>7</sup> There are also pencil annotations, often marginal, which appear to be editorial in nature. These annotations may belong to T. S. Eliot or Robert Graves, or perhaps both. At the end of her introduction, Roberts includes 'Carmarthen, 1941–4'. Though the typescript is dated as 1941–4 in the unpaginated introduction – which also confirms that the typescript was originally composed in Llanybri – there are blue ink annotations throughout the first quarter or so of the novel, which appear to be later insertions on Roberts's part. Above the contents page of the typescript, the first ink annotation appears, and reads 'LYNETTE ROBERTS, The Caravan, Chislehurst Caves, Kent'. Additionally, there are also pencil annotations – in Roberts's handwriting – throughout the text. It would appear that

Roberts's ink annotations are later additions to the text, and that Roberts revisited 'Nesta' in 1955–6, the period in which she lived near the Chislehurst Caves whilst managing an art exhibition. I would argue that it is quite likely that at this time Roberts may have felt confident enough to return to 'Nesta'. In 1954, another novel by Roberts, *The Endeavour: Captain Cook's first voyage to Australia*, had been published. Following Eliot's refusal to publish a third poetry collection by Roberts – 'Fifth Pillar of Song' – the successful publication of *The Endeavour*, as well as the ongoing publication of her work in journals, may have led Roberts back to 'Nesta'. The Chislehurst Caves project, however, was to end in disaster, with a collapse in the caves injuring the sculptor Peter Danziger. This contributed to Roberts's mental breakdown and, consequently, her decision during her recovery in 1956 to become a Jehovah's Witness: see Patrick McGuinness, 'Introduction', Roberts, *Collected Poems*, pp. xi–xxix (p. xviii). The ink alterations are incomplete, ending less than one third of the way into the typescript. While Roberts may simply have given up on 'Nesta' and ceased her alterations, it is possible that Roberts was partway through 'Nesta' when the accident in the caves occurred – though further research is required to properly establish the history of the typescript.

- <sup>8</sup> Kari Maund, *Princess Nest of Wales: Seductress of the English* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), pp. 9, 154.
- <sup>9</sup> Simon Jenkins, 'This Progenitor of Britishness has been denied her place in the pantheon', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/dec/21/britishidentity.uk> [accessed 18/7/2018]
- <sup>10</sup> Katie Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales*, p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Jane Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Nation, Gender, Identity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 6.
- <sup>14</sup> Susan M. Johns, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the High Middle Ages: Nest of Deheubarth* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2013), p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Diana Wallace, 'Mixed Marriages: Three Welsh historical novels by women writers', *Moment of Earth: Poems & Essays in Honour of Jeremy Hooker*, ed. Christopher Meredith (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2005), pp. 171–84 (pp. 172–3).
- <sup>16</sup> Writing to Roberts after first reading 'Nesta' in January 1944, Robert Graves remarks that he is the reading the novel 'with great interest', but that his one certainty is that 'the modernistic punctuation will have to be altered before it goes to a publisher's reader.' Roberts and Graves, 'Correspondence', 61.
- <sup>17</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 122.
- <sup>18</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 122–6.
- <sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Lynette Roberts, 'Introduction', HRC; Container 1, Folder 6, unpaginated.
- <sup>21</sup> On this note, see: Anthony Conran, 'Lynette Roberts: The Lyric Pieces', *Poetry Wales*, 19/2 (1983), 125–33.
- <sup>22</sup> Roberts and Graves, 'Correspondence', 68.
- <sup>23</sup> Graves highlighted the anachronism in a letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> February 1944; Roberts responded: 'Potatoes! I had no idea they were not introduced until the c16'. Roberts and Graves, 'Correspondence', 70.
- <sup>24</sup> Roberts, 'Introduction', unpaginated.

- <sup>25</sup> Winston Churchill, 'War Statement', HC Deb (4 June 1940) vol. 361, cols.787–98, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/04/war-situation> [accessed 18/7/2018].
- <sup>26</sup> Wallace, 'Mixed Marriages', p. 176.
- <sup>27</sup> Roberts, 'Introduction', unpaginated.
- <sup>28</sup> Roberts, 'Introduction', unpaginated.
- <sup>29</sup> Roberts, 'Introduction', unpaginated.
- <sup>30</sup> Roberts, 'Introduction', unpaginated.
- <sup>31</sup> Roberts's 'Notes for Serialization' indicate that the text was to be further fragmented in her broadcast adaptation, with the adaptation subtitled '12<sup>th</sup> Century Wales in 12 Parts'. HRC; MS-3561, Container 1, Folder 6.
- <sup>32</sup> The name of the chapter may allude to the meaning of the name Hieronymus, 'one of or with a sacred name', or to the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, given Roberts's interest in visual art. The chapter is originally titled 'A Hieronymous Dream', but a pencil annotation suggests the alternate spelling 'Hieronymic' (N 204).
- <sup>33</sup> W. Owen Pughe, *A Dictionary of the Welsh Language: Explained in English* (Denbigh: T. Gee, 1832), p. 110. It is likely that Roberts found this passage in Thomas Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1876).
- <sup>34</sup> Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry*, pp. 51–4.
- <sup>35</sup> Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry*, pp. 51–4.
- <sup>36</sup> See the entry on Owain ap Cadwgan in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*: <http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-OWAI-APC-1116.html> [accessed 18/7/2018]. Roberts's romanticised version of Owain may owe something to Henry Morton, whose *In Search of Wales* (1932) 'was responsible for bringing the romanticized view of Nest's abduction to a wider audience'. Johns, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the High Middle Ages*, pp. 196–7.
- <sup>37</sup> W. J. Rees, *The Lives of the Cambro British Saints* (Llandoverly: William Rees; London: Longman, & Co; Abergavenny: J.H. Morgan, 1853).
- <sup>38</sup>
- A glyweisti a gant Avaon  
Vab Taliesin, gerdd gyfion,  
Ni chel grudd gystudd calon.
- Brân a gant chwedl ar uwchder  
Derwen uwch deuffrwd aber,  
Trech deall na grymusder.
- Gwna y goreu ym mhob angen,  
O'r peth fo'n dy berchen,  
Gwell no dim gwasgawd brwynen.
- CATWWG DDOETH A'I CANT
- Roberts, *Collected Poems*, p. 42. An English translation is given on p. 70.
- <sup>39</sup> See Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry*, pp. 7–8. Roberts's decision to use Cymraeg in *Gods* can be attributed to her desire to 'give the conscious compact and culture of another nation': Roberts, *Collected Poems*, p. 76. This marks a notable development in the use of Welsh culture in her work.
- <sup>40</sup> Roberts cites Hugh Davies in her 'Introduction' to 'Nesta'. Hugh Davies is, presumably, a child from Llanybri, perhaps related to Rosie Davies (who features in Roberts's published poems and diaries), marking another modern voice within 'Nesta'. See, for instance, Roberts, *Collected Poems*, pp. 4–5, 137–8; Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, pp. 11, 16, 30–1.
- <sup>41</sup> Roberts is presumably referencing the custom of carrying babies in a shawl, again demonstrating her sustained engagement with quotidian Welsh culture. See the entry in the

- BBC's *A History of the World* (2010), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/G7tAcrGyRZqNVZ3Y-i7DwQ> [accessed 18/7/2018].
- <sup>42</sup> Roberts, 'Nesta: Serialization for Broadcast', unpaginated.
- <sup>43</sup> Katie Gramich, 'Creating and Destroying "the man who does not exist": the peasantry and modernity in Welsh and Irish Writing', *Irish Studies Review*, 17/1 (2009), 18–30 (19).
- <sup>44</sup> Gramich, 'Creating and Destroying "the man who does not exist"', 19.
- <sup>45</sup> Roberts, 'Nesta: Serialization for Broadcast', unpaginated.
- <sup>46</sup> On the surface of it, Roberts's views seem problematic, given their war-time context and the nineteenth-century *Blut und Boden* ('Blood and Soil') ideology of German nationalism, which was adapted and co-opted by the Nazis during the 1930s. Unlike the racially-focused thrust of *Blut und Boden*, however, Roberts's construction of the peasantry is more concerned with customs and practices than racial purity or superiority. Nonetheless, the suggestion of a mystical relationship between peasantry, nationality and land is certainly reminiscent of ethnic nationalisms. The relationship between ethnic nationalism and cultural nationalism in both Roberts's work and the work of other Welsh writers at this time is worthy of further study. See, for example, H. J. Fleure's essay, 'The Welsh People', published in *Wales* (the magazine edited by Roberts's husband, Keidrych Rhys): H. J. Fleure, 'The Welsh People', *Wales* 10 (October 1939), 265–9.
- <sup>47</sup> Roberts intersperses chapters that take place from the perspective of the peasantry throughout 'Nesta'. The chapter cited in this example contains only one other character, Merwydd, who is of old peasant stock.
- <sup>48</sup> Roberts and Graves, 'Correspondence', 60.
- <sup>49</sup> Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 128.
- <sup>50</sup> Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 132.
- <sup>51</sup> Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, pp. 133–4.
- <sup>52</sup> 'Coygan Cave', *Coflein*, Royal Commission of the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, [www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/103399/details/COYGAN+CAVE/](http://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/103399/details/COYGAN+CAVE/) [accessed 18/7/2018].
- <sup>53</sup> Towards the end of this chapter, Roberts has crossed out a short poem titled 'JAGGED REFRIGERATORS', in which an unidentified voice briefly meditates on time, geologic formation, and the cave as a site of memories both lost and preserved. The brief poem is ambiguous, but it may be that Roberts was suggesting a kind of psychic, spiritual connection between Nesta and the cave itself, which is speaking to her, or perhaps through her.
- <sup>54</sup> A reference to trees as 'palaeozoic sentinels' also alludes to the Cambrian era, which was part of the Paleozoic. See, Roberts, *Collected Poems*, p. 56.
- <sup>55</sup> Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 142.
- <sup>56</sup> Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales*, p. 3.
- <sup>57</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 180.
- <sup>58</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 179.
- <sup>59</sup> Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales*, pp. 80, 86–87.
- <sup>60</sup> Johns has demonstrated that 'elite women served as emblems of national pride [...] in the writings on Wales in the early decades of the twentieth-century in the popular understanding of the medieval past'. Johns, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the High Middle Ages*, p. 191.
- <sup>61</sup> Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales*, p. 192.
- <sup>62</sup> McGuinness, 'Introduction', p. xv.
- <sup>63</sup> Lynette Roberts, Letter to Tony Conran, October 5<sup>th</sup> 1979, private collection.
- <sup>64</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: Dent, 1993), p. 37.