

HOPKINS, GERARD MANLEY (1844 - 1889), poet and priest

Name: Gerard Manley Hopkins
Date of birth: 1844
Date of death: 1889
Parent: Manley Hopkins
Parent: Catherine Hopkins (née Smith)
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet and priest
Area of activity: Poetry; Religion; Education
Author: Eugenia Russell

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born on 28 July 1844, at 87, The Grove, Stratford, Essex, the eldest of eight, or possibly nine, children of Manley Hopkins (1818-1897), the founder of a marine insurance firm, and his wife Catherine (née Smith, 1821-1900). His parents were devout High Church Anglicans with family connections in intellectual and artistic circles. In 1852, the family moved to Hampstead and Gerard was sent to board at Highgate School. He considered himself to be half-Welsh on the basis of his surname, which is common in south Wales.

In 1863, Hopkins went up to Oxford where he graduated with a First in Classics. Here he met one of his closest friends, Robert Bridges, who would become the Poet Laureate and the editor of his poetry. It was while he was at Oxford that he turned to a more ascetic way of life, one that would lead him to convert to Roman Catholicism, a move that led to his estrangement from his family. After graduation he was helped by (Cardinal) John Henry Newman, the leader of the Oxford Catholic converts to obtain a teaching post. At this time he turned away from poetry, even burning his poems, and decided to enter the ministry as a Jesuit. While he was studying for the priesthood at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire he came under the influence of the Franciscan philosopher and theologian Duns Scotus, whose idea of *haecceitas*, or 'this-ness' led to the coinage of *inscape* by Hopkins.

In August 1874, he went to continue his training at St Beuno's College, Tremeirchion near St Asaph in Denbighshire, north Wales. His three years there are regarded as the most influential and happiest of his life. Here he fell under the spell of what he called the 'instress and charm of Wales', responding enthusiastically to the landscape of the Vale of Clwyd.

Locality is vital to much of Hopkins's work. St Winifred's shrine at Holywell was an important local site for him, and he began a verse play on Beuno's miraculous resuscitation of *Winifred*. Garreg Fawr ('Great Rock') just south of St Beuno's - of which the poet wrote in his diary: 'The Rock is a great resort of hawks and owls' - inspired the poem he considered in 1879 to be 'the best thing I ever wrote', 'The Windhover', dedicated 'to Christ Our Lord'.

In a Dominican, a practice sermon for trainee Jesuits, delivered on 11 March 1877, Hopkins went so far as to compare the geography of the Vale of Clwyd with the Sea of Galilee. Drawing inspiration from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola, which required those involved to relive and invest emotionally in the geography and events described in the Bible, Hopkins invited his fellow students to imagine the geomorphology of the Sea of Galilee in terms of the landscape familiar to them. In a complex attempt at superimposition of geographical features, he fixed Bethsaida Julias, the river Jordan, Capharnaum and Tiberias on the map of Wales and located the place of the miracle of the loaves and fishes at the refectory at St Beuno's College, where he and his fellow Jesuits were taking their meal. That audience found the sermon less than convincing and even comical, as Hopkins himself testified. Damian Walford Davies, however, sees it as a 'confession couched as cartography', a manifestation of his Welsh identity and 'a rich example of Welsh writing in English'.

Hopkins began learning Welsh, taking lessons from a local Catholic woman, Miss Susannah Jones, despite discouragement from his superiors unless he was to use it to convert local people. He mastered the language sufficiently to compose some poetry in it, although his compositions are stylistically awkward and unconvincing. His 'Cywydd' celebrating the silver jubilee of the Bishop of Shrewsbury, written in 1876 under the bardic name 'Brân Maenefa' (The Crow of Maenefa, a mountain overlooking St Beuno's College), in which he laments that land and water bear witness to the old faith of Gwynedd more strongly than the people of the region, employs the Welsh strict-metre verse form with its alternate stressed and unstressed rhymes, but achieves only two correct examples of the requisite *cyghanedd* in its eighteen lines.

Hopkins found that the consonantal correspondences and internal rhymes of *cyghanedd* aligned well with his own poetic practice, and adapted them to the purposes of his English poetry, most notably in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. These are mostly employed loosely, such as 'Stanching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind', and only occasionally do they form full *cyghanedd* (e.g. 'The down-dugged ground-hugged grey' which is *cyghanedd sain*). Hopkins coined the term 'sprung rhythm' to describe the technique he used in the poem, suggesting it was derived from classical, Old English and Welsh models. His use of prosody was influential on many poets of the 1930s writing in English, including *Dylan Thomas*.

'The Wreck of the Deutschland' was written at the suggestion of the Rector of St Beuno's College, Father John, to commemorate the drowning of Franciscan nuns fleeing persecution in Germany in December 1875, and in it Hopkins expressed his sense of guilt at the contrast between his physical and spiritual safety in Wales and the peril and martyrdom of the nuns. Having given up poetry for seven years to devote himself solely to God, this was the beginning of a surge of creativity during which Hopkins produced a third of his poetry.

'In the Valley of the Elwy' is one of a number of lyrical responses to the beauty of 'this world of Wales' composed in 1877. He wrote of Wales fondly to his friend Robert Bridges referring to 'my Welsh days... my salad days'. Hopkins wrote to Bridges of his use of *cyghanedd* in another poem deeply influenced by locality, 'The Sea and the Skylark', written during a stay for the sake of his health at the seaside resort of Rhyl.

Hopkins had to leave Wales in September 1877 when he was ordained to the priesthood. Over the next seven years he held various posts in England and Scotland, before eventually taking up the post of professor of Greek and Latin at University College Dublin in 1884. Hopkins had felt at home in the surroundings of what he called 'wild Wales', but found himself out of place in Ireland. His final burst of creativity came during this dark period towards the end of his life when he produced his gloomy and much admired 'terrible sonnets'.

Gerard Manley Hopkins died of typhoid fever in Dublin on 8 June 1889, and was buried in the Jesuit plot in Glasnevin cemetery.

Author

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Sources

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