

## Transcript - Between the Ears: Rhythms of Remembering

Introduction from the announcer and Between the Ears webpage (not included in programme below) - Between the Ears: Rhythms of Remembering enters into the world of The Gododdin, weaving extracts of **Gillian Clarke's** new English translation of the poem with an immersive soundscape and music. Her new translation of Aneirin's words - the first complete one by a poet - read by Lisa Jen Brown, provides the backbone of the programme. The poem's history and resonance today is explored through interviews with Gillian, theatre director **Mike Pearson**, and **Ieuan Jenkins**, who recalls his experience of serving as a young soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With music specially composed for the programme by Georgia Ruth.

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[Music]

Gillian Clarke

What is the Gododdin? It's 100 laments for warriors who died in the seventh century. And it's as relevant in its grief and rage and poetry today, as it was when it was first sung.

Lisa Jen Brown reads from the Gododdin [Singer's Prologue]

Gododdin, gofynnaf o'th blegyd

Yng ngŵydd cant yn arial yn emwyd

*[Gododdin, I sing your epitaph, in the hall before the hearth]*

Mike

I think Gododdin resembles a swirling film. So, almost immediately we've plunged right into the middle of it into the chaos of battle. So it's something like the opening sequence of Steven Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan, we almost have no preparation. We don't have much context. We do know that this group of men spent a year carousing before the battle and then we're plunged straight into it.

Lisa reads from the Gododdin [Singer's Prologue]

Singer's Prologue - 1

Gododdin, I sing your epitaph, in the hall before the hearth

Gillian

We do know that it was heard in taverns in marketplaces. And of course, all the tribes of Britain would have a court and in those courts, the Lord would have a poet appointed as at his side. I'm sure that there was some sort of music associated with the remembering of it. I'm certain there was and certainly there were harps in the Great Halls that's for sure.

Singer's Prologue (sung by Georgia Ruth)

Gododdin, gofynnaf o'th blegyd

Yng ngŵydd cant yn arial yn emwyd:

A gwarchan mab Dwywai, dda wryd,

Poed gno yn un tyno treisyd.  
Nid oedd wan wael rhag tân feithin,  
O lychwr i lychwr lluch bîn,  
Lluch ddôr i borffor bererin.  
Er pan waned maws, mur trin,  
Er pan aeth daear ar Aneirin,  
Nw neud ysgarad nâd â Gododdin.

Lisa [translation]

*Gododdin, I sing your epitaph,  
in the hall before the hearth,  
here before the gathered throng  
where our soldier-poet sang,  
firewood burning dusk to dawn,  
the portal lit for a passing pilgrim.  
Now our gentle bard is lost,  
our poet, Dwyfai's elegist.*  
When earth covered him, Aneirin,  
poetry departed from Gododdin.

Gillian

We can say for certain that Aneirin existed. He was a real person. This is the name of the poet who made these songs. It is said he was one of the warriors who belonged to Gododdin who feasted in the hall for a year and then rode to the Battle of Catraeth. Maybe he was the official poet of the battle. I've often wondered that. I think he saw, heard, was there, when these things occurred.

Mike

Y Gododdin itself relates the earliest event to be described in anything that's recognisably Welsh. Gwŷr a aeth Gatraeth gan wawr - Men went to Catraeth with the dawn. Aneirin is our guide - almost a voiceover

Lisa reads from the Gododdin

Owain – Dai - Two

Mike

So he names names for us, He gives us a hint of their characters. He then describes just moments of battle in which they're engaged. And then he laments their fates.

Lisa – reads Owain, 2:

A boy with a man's heart,  
on fire for the front, restless for war,  
lush-maned, fleet-hoofed stallion  
between young thighs, shield  
laid on the horse's flank,

his sword a blue-bright blade,  
his armour burnished gold.  
As the singer of this song I lay  
no blame but only praise for him  
sooner gone to the battlefield  
than to his marriage-bed;  
sooner carrion for the crow,  
sooner flesh to feed the raven.  
I mourn him, laid in his grave.  
Dear friend, Owain. Marro's  
only son. Slain.

Mike

And then we are on to the next one and the next one and the next one. So it's very kaleidoscopic. It's almost as if you could begin anywhere within it.

Lisa

Madog – tri - three

Gillian

Brythonic, which is what we call that language is early Welsh. And when you look at it, you can see the connections between it on the old manuscript, and the sounds of things today. It was probably sung for a long time, as Welsh was pushed to the west, and eventually captured by scribes in the Middle Ages and written down, lost, found again in the early 20th century. And we can hear the words we use today as we look at that old manuscript, which is in Wales, it's in the National Library in Aberystwyth.

Lisa

Caeog, cynifiad, cywlad rwyd,  
Rhuthr eryr yn ebyr pan llithiwyd.

Cadfannan – pedwar (four)  
Flaunting a brooch, snare of the enemy,  
fish-eagle of the estuary...

Gwefrfawr – pimp – five

Flaunting a brooch, wolf-wild,  
in torque and amber beads,  
Gwefrfawr, mead-empowered,  
repelled the foe, led his men on,  
his face bloody and blade-torn,  
till, rallied by Ysgyrran's son,  
aid came from Gwynedd and the North,  
but shields were broken still.

Mike

And because of this repetition in the stanzas is it's almost as if whichever way we look, this way that way, there are terrible scenes, but they're occurring simultaneously.

Lisa [Hyfaidd Hir, 6]

Caeog, cynhorog, arfog yng ngawr...  
Flaunting a brooch, he rode ahead,  
warrior, princely leader,  
killed five times fifty with his sword.  
Two thousand of Deifr and Brynaich's men  
died in an hour in mire and mud and blood.  
Sooner meat for the wolf than to his wedding.  
Sooner carrion for the crow than priest-blessing.  
Before his burial, the field lay bleeding.  
In the hall where mead flowed free  
the poet will praise Hyfaidd Hir.

[music]

Gillian

Who were the Gododdin? The Gododdin were settled in Dun Edin, which is now Edinburgh. Incursions of Anglo Saxons were coming in from the North Sea across from the mainland of what is now Europe. So the Gododdin were a tribe who were trying to protect their bit of the British Isles.

Mike

But the gathered war band included warriors from Elmet, from Pictland and most notably from Gwynedd in Wales. The battle I think, constitutes a final desperate throw. That's followed by a shadowy period in which the Anglo Saxon kingdoms begin to form and take over the map of Britain. I think we have to imagine a post Roman Britain where a big power system suddenly disappears. And the only parallel I can really think of is, is the collapse of communism in former Yugoslavia, and all of the troubles that followed from that. But Britannia itself comes apart with local leaders and small kingdoms beginning to appear, but without any formal boundaries, and certainly nothing resembling nations. It's a dark, uncertain world. You have to imagine a world of turmoil that's trying to fix itself to come into being.

Ieuan Jenkins (former soldier)

So I remember the doors opening for the aeroplane and sort of come out down the steps and just instantly hit by that humidity and that heat and just the vastness of the place. Being from the Welsh valleys, you always see mountains and hills and everything was just sand-coloured and flat for as far as the eye could see. And I flew out to join my regiment a day after my 18th birthday. My name is Ieuan Jenkins and I served with 1<sup>st</sup> the Queen's Dragoon Guards between 2005 and 2015. I was deployed to Iraq where I served in Basra, and in 2008, I served in Afghanistan in Helmand Province.

## Mike

The action of the poem Gododdin takes place in an area of what's now the north of England and southern Scotland. In Yr Hen Ogledd, the Old North. It focuses on a battle around 600 AD, in a place called Cattraeth. That's conventionally taken to be Catterick. It describes the efforts of a cohort that assembles around a leader called Mynyddog Mwynfawr. The 300 men of Gododdin many times outnumbered against 10,000 or maybe 100,000 Anglo Saxon.

## Gillian

One of the devices to link a series of elegies together that Aneirin uses is beginning each elegy with a chain of words, which stress the sound as song. In the case of 'Gwŷr a aeth Gatraeth, oedd ffraeth eu llu', which translates in my words as 'Men rode to Cattraeth debonair, their snare, the honey trap gold mead', he's also using cynghanedd with very strict rules. I'm glad I'm not bound by such strict rules when I'm writing, we've got the G and the 'aeth', and then he goes on 'oedd ffraeth eu llu'. So the sound of the language echoes through that line, it's saying, I am repeating this, so that you remember it, so that you hear it, so that it rings.

## Lisa [reads a selection, music by Georgia Ruth]

Son of Bogdad – saith – seven  
Men rode to Gododdin, a boisterous band  
racing to war, their spears held high.  
In peace they'd partied for a year,  
till Bogdad's son wrought vengeance.  
Though they knelt in church in penance,  
the old, the young, the powerful, the penniless,  
in death they died defenceless.

Naw - nine  
Gwŷr a aeth Gatraeth, oedd ffraeth eu llu  
Glasfedd eu hancwyn a gwenwyn fu...  
Men rode to Cattraeth, debonair,  
their snare, the honey-trap, gold mead.  
Three hundred men called up to war –  
and after joy, the hush of death.  
Though they went to church for pardon  
just three survived, for their sins.

Deg – ten  
Gwŷr a aeth Gatraeth, feddfaeth feddwn...  
Men rode to Cattraeth, fearless,  
crazed with mead. I sing their praise.

Unarddeg – eleven  
Men rode to Cattraeth at first light,

fired up and fearless for the fight,  
a hundred thousand, at three hundred  
many times outnumbered.

Neirthiad - undegtri – thirteen...

Erthgi – undegpimp – fifteen...

Mike

It's a list of the dead, of named individuals in remembrance. So Aneirin heaps bodies upon bodies.

Gillian

Erthgi

A man rode to Catraeth with the dawn  
buttressed by a wall of men.  
Brutal in attack and plunder,  
thundering shield on shield.  
Proud, wise, a champion,  
though all was spear-ripped and torn.  
On the field of blood his blade  
slashed, sword on sword.  
At court the quiet one,  
yet before Erthgi armies groan.

[music ends]

In the silence after the battle, when he and maybe two or three others survived, he then remembered the men. But the battle was about 600. And the poem does belong to the very earliest seventh century. So he was there. He's the witness.

Ieuan

I remember on the night of the 28th of May exactly a week after I'd arrived in Iraq, we were all settling down into bed and the tent door was abruptly pushed open and one of the sergeants was stood in the doorway. 'Everybody down the smoking area now'. As soon as they got there could see despair in people's faces. After a little bit Major Craven, who was the Officer Commanding of A squadron announced that one of the troops on the patrol at been hit by an improvised explosive device. Lance Corporal Paul Farrelly had unfortunately passed away and Lieutenant Tom Mildenhall was in a critical condition in the field hospital. I didn't know these men as well as the people I was surrounded by. But I do remember playing football back in Germany with Lance Corporal Farrelly who was affectionately known as Faz. A little later on, maybe a couple of hours. we were all summoned into the smoking area again. Major Craven was stood there. I remember him being the first time I had truly seen an officer, in his position show his emotions. His eyes didn't lie the fact that he'd been crying, and he announced that

he'd been to see Lieutenant Mildenhall in the hospital and he had passed away as a result of his injuries.

Lisa

Gwrfelling – undegwyth – eighteen

Power in the front line,  
sunlight on the grass.  
Where will we find him,  
prince of Britain, our paradise?  
Rushing the ford  
behind his shield.  
Raising his drinking horn  
in the hall of Eidyn,  
famous, glorious,  
heady with mead,  
fuelled by wine,  
reaper in the field.  
He took sweet liquor,  
his mind on war,  
plucked a leek to wear,  
bright badge of the tribe,  
warbled a war-call,  
rode braced into battle.  
Winged for the field,  
with spear-scored shield,  
as his brothers fell,  
his war-cry a bell,  
he brought guts to the brawl,  
his vengeance quelled,  
until green grew the grass  
on the grave of Gwrfelling Fras.

Ieuan

Faz? Oh, he was 27 when he passed away. He was, he gave off a presence larger than his frame. He had brown hair. He had a very warm aura about him. I remember a lad Owain, his surname was Davis and obviously being Welsh regiment, there were a lot of Davis's so they're all known by either the last three numbers or they'd have a sort of nickname based on where they were from and he was Dav 220. He was sat down, head in his hands and you could just see this was a man who was hurting.

Lisa

Aeron and Cynon – dauddegdau – twenty-two

Men rode to Catraeth. Theirs the fame...

Buddfan – dauddegchwech – twenty-six

Hero, his brow freckled behind his shield...

Until he fell at the ford

in the falling dew, eagle of grace,

by the cliff in the spindrift of waves,

the world's poets named him brave.

Isag – twenty-nine

Esteemed man of the south, his

manners smooth as summer seas...

His blade cried in mothers' hearts.

Seiniesyd ei gleddyf ym mhen mamau.

Gillian

In the original manuscript, the names are kind of lost in the language. And one of the things that has struck me in these times we live in - the journalists bring home a name, and that is what makes us care. It was important for me to lift the name out of the elegy, place it at the head of the poem, so that we have Owain, Cadfan, a real person, with a page to himself.

Mike

As an archetypal lament for the fallen, it provides recurrent inspiration for subsequent authors and artists. David Jones begins each of the seven sections of In Parenthesis, his amazing first world war epic of 1937, he begins each of the seven sections with a quotation from Gododdin. So part six begins, men went to Catterick as day dawned, their fears disturbed their peace. And then in Pink Mist in 2013, Owen Sheers focuses on the lives of three young men in the conflict in Afghanistan, and he begins, Men went to Catterick with the dawn, their ardour shortened their lives. It continues to resonate, and it certainly did for us in our production in 1988. It had particular impact in Scotland, Glasgow was just on the point of becoming European city of culture. And I think there was suddenly a relation with very ancient material that could espouse a new kind of identity. Whereas in Germany, we had great trouble with the project because bare-torsoed men with flaming torches and drums in the night has a quite different set of resonances.



Lisa

Gwlgod – tridegpedwar – thirty-four

Men partied for a year  
then, fed for the fight, they rode to war.  
I grieve to tell – unbearable sorrow –  
their homes are bitter and childless now,  
long-lamented, passionate men,  
lost to those who nurtured them,  
Gwlgod of Gododdin, his bequest  
the famous feast.  
Its price  
the battle of Catraeth.

leuan

We deployed to Afghanistan in September of 2008. And then on the second of January 2009, I was hit by a rocket propelled grenade, took shrapnel into the chest. And that ended my time in Afghanistan. I was on rest at home. And I remember I was playing a game of online poker early in the morning and my mobile phone rang. And it was my good friend Ben's mother. She called me up and said have you heard the news, leu? Stiffy is dead, was the next line. Graham Stiff was an electrical engineer attached to our squadron. Him and his crew were driven over a roadside bomb. Stiffy, Graham, Graham Stiff he was a really funny guy. Always first to have a laugh. Really intelligent guy he was he always had a smile on his face. He had sort of blonde wildish hair that always used to look spiky and just, he's someone I miss quite a bit.

Gillian

As I worked on them, because don't forget, I wasn't just sitting reading it. I was working, working working through every single one. I felt an accumulation of sorrow and horror that war continues, I felt more and more angry at violence. There are elegies where you feel he really knew the person. Others where you feel he's lamenting someone he didn't know well.

Lisa

Geraint - wythdegtri – eighty-three

Gillian

I love the lament for Geraint. And I think this is beautiful.

Geraint

When there comes over me  
a crowd of cares,  
I ponder my fears,  
breathless as if  
I'd been running,

and I weep.  
I grieve for the dear one,  
the dear one I loved,  
the glorious stag.  
Alas for him,  
who arrayed himself  
with the men of Argoed.  
For the gain of kings  
well he stormed  
the hostile hordes,  
spears bristling,  
a flood of grief  
as fee for the feast.  
He'd led us to a blazing hearth,  
a white-fleeced couch. Geraint,  
his war-cry before men of the South.  
White limed his shield, spear-lord,  
generous as the sea. I know his sort.  
I knew you, great-hearted Geraint.

leuan

Yeah there's quite a few Welsh soldiers killed in Afghanistan - 32 in all. If you put it into perspective, it's quite a lot for such a small nation. 32 too many, if you ask any other soldier isn't it?

Lisa

Gwawrddur – nawdegnaw – ninety-nine

Gillian

Almost at the end of the series of poems, but here we will hear for the very first time in literature, the name of Arthur. And the suggestion is that he was already a mythic hero. By the sixth and seventh century.

Lisa

Ef gwant tra thrichant echasaf,  
Ef lladdai a pherfedd ac eithaf...

Gillian

Charging ahead of the three hundred  
he cut down the centre and the wing.  
Blazing ahead of the finest army,  
he gave horses from his winter herd.  
He fed ravens on the fortress wall  
though he was no Arthur.  
Among the strongest in the war,

Gwawrddur, citadel.

Mike

It is in a language that's three English that is still ours, I think in Wales, so it does speak of cultural depth and continuities. But what I think Gododdin does is it reminds us as much of the power of words to remember as bronze and marble really. So I think when you read a text like this in relation to battlefields, which are often very nondescript places now with little left to show, but I think what Gododdin helps us to do is to project onto them and into them, to imagine this and picture that.

Lisa

Cibno – cant – one hundred

He hand-fed the crows.

I honour him, great lord,  
savage ravager.

He wore gold  
in the front row  
in the war of heroes.

Freckled fighter,  
third avenger,  
foe-hunter,  
wild bear,  
attacker,  
fierce saviour,  
the army's honour won,  
Cibno the handsome,  
Gwendad's son.