

# Creative Research at Cardiff University

During the filming of the Creative Research at Cardiff University video, we spoke to three academics in the Creative Cardiff Research Network about their work. We've identified three particular and related strands of creative research at Cardiff: research that involves working with creatives or creative organisations; research that involves creative outputs or methodologies; and research that investigates the creative economy.

The work of Professor Damian Walford Davies takes place right in the thick of this, as we found when we spoke to him about his role as a researcher and writer. Damian has published creative writing as well as critical work, although he tries to collapse these distinctions, as he explains in this interview.

**Can you just start by telling us who you are, what your role at the university is, and just a bit of a background on your academic and professional career?**



My name is Damian Walford Davies, and I'm Head of the School of English, Communication and Philosophy at Cardiff University. My academic research falls into three main fields: the literature and culture of the Romantic period; twentieth-century literature; and Creative Writing. I've often wondered, when introducing myself, how quite to do that – in what order. My answer to that has always been that I want to do away with the idea that there is a hierarchy here.

That is to say, the poet and academic are, for me, part of a continuum. I don't make a distinction between those two identities.

One thing I've tried to do throughout my career – embodied in the type of writing I do as well as in my own academic choices – is erase that distinction between the 'scholarly' on the one hand, which has always been associated with discipline, with rigour, with evaluative analysis; and on the other, the creative imperative. I've tried to collapse those two things (always necessary bedfellows), whether I'm writing about Coleridge and the literature of shipwreck, or my own poetry.

**We've been talking to Professor Sam Warren in the Business School about work environments. That's part of her research focus. So we were wondering how your office space reflects your own work. If we went for a 'who lives here?', 'who works here?' scenario...**

In many ways my own office space is a reflection of a typical academic's room, as far as its collection of books is concerned. But what people coming into the office will also find, I think, are little trinkets, little prompts for creative thought that are sitting on my computer, that have been given to me by my kids, which always serve as grounding memories and also as prompts to think beyond the academy. So anything in my space that reminds me how to blow holes through these walls out to a public



out there, out to school kids, out to my own children, is always something that I need in my room.

**As well as being the Head of School, you've also recently been involved in all kinds of activities relating to the 2016 Roald Dahl centenary. Could you say a little bit more about that, and give us some background?**

Yes: 2016, the centenary of Roald Dahl's birth, good Cardiff boy that he was – or was he? That's what I wanted to explore, since in many ways, in celebrating Dahl, we were involved in bringing Dahl 'home', as was the Dahl Literary Estate. But what does that mean? We don't normally think of Dahl as a Welsh author. We don't normally think of him as a Welsh writer in English, and that prompted me to

go deeper into the full range of his writing for both adults and children. I grew up on a diet of Roald Dahl. I asked the question: what is 'Welsh' about Roald Dahl, and in what complex and often ambiguous ways does Wales figure in the imagination of the author we now know as 'the world's number one storyteller'? That prompted an academic book on Dahl. The results were surprising. The one thing I was not going to do in editing an academic book on Dahl is exile a sense of play, a sense of irony, speculative energy. So in that volume – *Roald Dahl: Wales of the Unexpected*, published by University of Wales Press – the contributors and I try to push the boundaries of what academic writing is (and needs to be) in relation to Dahl. If one can't do that when responding evaluatively and imaginatively to Roald Dahl...!

So again, that project prompted me to bring together the analytical and the scholarly and the creative and the intuitive – seeing them, as I do, as necessarily part of the same critical-creative project.

One thing I've also done in relation to Dahl (as in a great deal of my academic work) is combine my interest in the relation between literature, cartography and the distinctively layered locations of culture out of which an author writes. For the Dahl book, I invited poet and psychogeographer extraordinaire, Peter Finch, to explore the ghostly traces of Dahl in his 'native' Cardiff locations.

We're living through interesting times in the academy, the higher education sector, and in the field of English studies, which has always been a broad church. There is an ongoing debate, of course, as to the place and identity of the writer, the 'practitioner', in the academy. It's still very much an undogmatic space of opportunity out of which to write both academically and creatively, and collapse those disciplines in a self-conscious, innovative way.

To give an example from my own practice: writing recently, as I said, about Coleridge and the nightmarish world of that inveterately elusive poem, *The Ancient Mariner*, I offered a new reading of the poem as a shipwreck narrative told by a traumatised victim. What I chose to do is layer my engagement with this layered poem in the form of a creative-critical section that 'surfaces', in the form of a narrative, the traumatic event at the heart of the poem. That section was rigorously informed by a knowledge of contemporary shipwreck narratives in prose and verse. I believe we need such strategies as tools to excavate poems anew and defamiliarise them.

My poetry is grounded in history and the excavation of place, on historical violence and trauma. So if I'm writing about the witchcraft trials in 1640s East Anglia, or the complex figure of Judas Iscariot, or the docklands experience of Cardiff in the 1890s, all that has a research base with which I'll engage in a scholarly way. Then, of course, it's about incorporating that – transforming it – into poetry.

The question of audience is interesting. Will audiences quite be in the same groove as me? Will they be thrown, in some way, by a section in an article on Coleridge that is speculative and creative, that seeks to push the boundaries, when they expect a traditionally constructed essay on a canonical author? That may be the case, but such creative-critical engagements (which are always re-readings) are what excites me – hybrid engagements that draw on the various discursive tools that I bring to literature, culture, life. So it's another way of achieving a kind of interdisciplinarity, if you like, of ensuring that what I offer has a creative resonance and scholarly relevance.

It's about creating the audience by which one is to be enjoyed, too. Sure, traditional academic audiences may be resistant at first to some of the ploys, the creative tools, that I'm injecting into my scholarly work; but we need to reinvent the scholarly article.

### **Are there other creative hats that you wear?**

Committed as I am to breaking down the distinctions between different media, I'm interested in exploring the links between drama and poetry, so I'm a librettist as well. A recent project involved a collaboration with the artist Clive Hicks-Jenkins and composer Mark Bowden on a staged dramatic performance that engaged with the figure of the Mari Lwyd, the 'Grey Mare' – an old mumming tradition (now being revived in Wales) in which, at the close of the year, a sheet-covered mare's skull was taken around by a group of singers, demanding entry into village households. That border between new and old, the living and the dead, is another example of that hybrid space I like to explore, and what I wanted to do on a formal level was be part of a project that blurred the distinction, if you like, between poetry, art and performance.

That's another way in which I can get out of my comfort zone, refuse to be pigeon-holed. I enjoy and benefit from collaboration, and I'm very interested also in ways in which poetry engages with art. Projects that bring together different media always

interest me. When I lead workshops with kids of various ages, I find that they respond immediately to the alliance of word and image. Things that may not seem very intuitive to many adults, kids relate to spontaneously.

**Creativity is quite a broad topic, which can include ideas of innovation, cutting-edge research and newness, while terms such as 'heritage' can suggest history, fusty books and artefacts, and looking back. However, it seems to me that these two terms, creativity and heritage, are often vitally connected. How does creativity relate to heritage in the work that you do?**

My poetry in particular has always excavated and mined history. Heritage – how we process history, how history lives with us in different traces – needs to be current. Heritage is about the now: the ways in which we need our pasts, construct versions of it, thrive on memory, thrive also on forgetting, how we are all embedded in place. That makes my poetry not, I hope, *archival*, but a mode of contemporary speech.

The poetry volume entitled *Witch* that I published in 2012 – a multi-voice portrait of the 'making' of a witch in seventeenth-century Suffolk – is also, at some level, about the way we construct demons after 9/11. It worked on that allegorical platform. In fact, there is no way in which one can write in a historically demarcated way about the witch trials of the 1640s, of course. That kind of horrific, violent, traumatic event, that demonization of the other, is always going to resonate with contemporary global trauma.

My engagement with the figure of Judas Iscariot in my most recent poetry volume again seeks a new purchase on a problem, a crux, by splicing time and making this hybrid phenomenon wander around first-century Jerusalem fully aware of the Arab-Israeli war and of the ways in which culture has processed him as the arch-betrayer.

I want to jolt readers out of history and bring them right up to the present, then jolt them back into, let's say, first-century Palestine, or the seventeenth-century Civil War. So history, for me, is now, and there's no such thing as a dry and outdated engagement with it – if it's done well. Never accept history as a dogma or a given. History is unknowable, other than through texts and memory.

**You recently worked on a word-and-image project entitled *Poets' Graves*. What was valuable about working with a photographer?**

I've worked with a number of photographers, and again the testing, teasing traffic between the verbal and the visual is something that energises both sides of the equation. The latest project with Paul White was, as you say, entitled *Poets' Graves*, and it focused on the gravesites of Welsh poets, revealing them to be multilayered sites of memory and memorialisation – troubling locations, in many ways, in which the texts and bodies are bound up with each other in complex forms. There are many interesting paradoxes here, of course, to do with life and death, with that which is buried but which is still in circulation. The project became a dialogue between me and Paul as I riffed off his images, and as he calibrated his photographs

in relation to my pieces. We managed it both ways. We wanted to get a different feel from every visit, from each site. Sometimes the site itself wasn't primary at all; sometimes it was either the poem or the image that generated the first creative inspiration.

**So you've been working on *Docklands*, a story set in the dock area of Cardiff in the 1890s. Why are you doing that?**

There's a story behind that. I believe that all my writing, academic and creative, is a mode of life writing. I realised this long since – that in writing about Wollstonecraft or Coleridge or R. S. Thomas I'm also writing about myself and those I know, and evaluating my own shifting place in the world. When I arrived in Cardiff from my previous post I was carrying with me my interest in maps and cartography. I wanted to embed myself anew in Cardiff with my family, and I thought that one way to do that would be to map Cardiff in some way in a creative project. I chose the docklands area of Cardiff, one of the most layered areas of the city – historically one of the most vibrant and now the most materially and culturally erased area in Cardiff. I chose to write a ghost story in verse, located in the 1890s in the docklands quarter of Cardiff. It involved my walking around what's now called 'Mermaid Quay' (Mermaid Quay – I ask you!), multiple maps in hand, in an attempt to layer the place in ways that are consonant with the whole idea of the ghostly, with the play between presence and absence.

**To finish up, would you mind sharing some thoughts on Creative Cardiff?**

We needed Creative Cardiff. So many creative practitioners in Cardiff, of course, are already collaborating, already have their own networks, are already plugged in. Many are also working independently from choice. I was one of those who need both a solitariness and connection. We certainly needed a most robust network so we can share good practice, test what we're doing against the practice of others, and learn from each other's disciplines. Hybridise ourselves. And Creative Cardiff has also bridged that divide between the academy and the wider community. That is key – key to the mission of Cardiff University, and something that's part of our job description right now as we work to erase those distinctions between the academy and the community in which it's embedded.

If Creative Cardiff can continue to be a catalyst for bringing us out of our comfort zones, it will have done its job very well.

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