

Elizabeth (Liz) Fleming-Williams

2 April, 1951-10 January, 2019

A Tribute by Ray Woods



This rare image of Liz (she was always behind a camera-rarely in front of it) was taken by Rory Francis of the Woodland Trust on the occasion when Liz had persuaded the Welsh pop group Brigyn to launch their second CD inside an ancient oak tree at Rhandirmwyn, Carmarthenshire to help publicise the plight of ancient trees.

With the sad death of Liz Fleming-Williams Welsh mycology lost a great supporter. Her name will not be familiar to mycologists outside Wales but within Wales she gave encouragement and support to those of us beating what at times seemed a very lonely path on the road to the acceptance that fungi needed active conservation measure too. Her home in the middle of Wales was always open to mycologists in need of refreshment on the long journey from north to south or vice-versa and it provided a useful and free meeting venue to gather the scattered troops together.

Her energies raised the money to safeguard the waxcap grasslands of Gilfach Farm, Radnorshire for future generations. She was captivated by the survival of a tiny fragment of hyper-oceanic lichen community on ancient hazels in a ravine near Maentwrog in Snowdonia and once the farm came on the market threw herself into helping raise the £1.3 million the Woodland Trust needed to buy it. Her images helped promote the site and the financial target was quickly reached.

As a keen photographer she brought together her own images and those of others creating one of the first ever publicity leaflet to raise awareness of the plight and importance of grassland fungi. Her love of the Welsh language ensured it was also bilingual. So professional was it that the then Countryside Council for Wales published it without any changes in a folded A3 format. Such publicity helped win the bloody battles fought in planning inquiries and even to the High Court to save such important grassland fungus sites as at Rhyd y Car and at Llanishen Reservoirs in South Wales.



Her long term partner Ray Woods wrote the following account of just a small part of her achievements when over 300 people came together to celebrate her life in February 2019 at Builtth Wells.

LIZ

I first met Liz in the late 1970's. She had recently moved to Pen y Crug, Llanafan, in mid Powys, giving up a job in the planning department of Clywd CC to be nearer her mum who had suffered a very debilitating stroke and to help her dad care for her. A friend in Clywd working for the Nature Conservancy Council-the very organisation I worked for had told her I was looking for someone to survey blanket bogs. Liz turned up at my office door at Llysdinam and-the rest is history.

With H & S so much to the fore now it seems somewhat inconceivable (and Liz was never slow to regularly remind me of this) that I should send this young lady out on her own in all weathers to survey some of the most remote bogs in one of the most remote parts of England and Wales. No

mobile phones, no planned reporting back to check she had got home each day etc.!!! She and her lovely sheep dog Griffy did a splendid job-only got lost in fog on a very few occasions- and her information provided the basis for the designation of a number of SSSIs and helped us understand that Welsh blanket bogs were internationally important.

She loved these wild and wet places and also the farming families that somehow earned a living there. She later celebrated them by producing a series of bilingual postcards-the first in Wales. But life is never straightforward. Liz was quickly precipitated into a major battle over the fate of Llanbrynmair Moors. The estate wanted to sell all its tenanted farms. For the tenants to raise the money to buy their farms they needed to sell the top land for forestry. As a result of Liz's surveys we knew this was one of the best blanket bogs in Wales-and the world. The wild life interests didn't want the forestry and didn't have the money to buy the land. The result was inevitable conflict. The forestry planting was dependant on government grants so in the end an independent government enquiry was set up and recommended that the best areas of bog which Liz helped to identify-should not be planted but most of the afforestation should go ahead.

As a geographer with a planners training the wholesale destruction of our last wild places and the human communities that they supported caused by ill-considered political decisions made by the pin stripe-suited men she hated making decisions that affected her beloved Wales in a smoke-filled room often late on a Friday in London was intolerable. These decisions were forcing her beloved traditional Welsh farmers to take the Queens shilling and drain, plough and reseed and destroy the very fabric of the countryside that had kept them for generations. The grants were so generous and ill-considered with no checks or balances and the peer pressure so great that it looked like no-one would escape the improvers' drains and plough.

She had a wonderfully touching faith in humans and even politicians. "The politicians need to know what's happening. Then they will take action" she would say. Remember even SSSI's had no protection from agricultural development then. So she hatched a plan and I persuaded my bosses to fund a resurvey of part of mid Wales. Jeff Sinclair in the early 1970's mapped by habitat all the surviving natural and semi-natural habitat in Wales. She would repeat this survey for parts of Mid Wales to determine the rate of loss. Ignoring the problems of how she measured all the hundreds of tiny mapped areas-she eventually turned up with a crayoned pie diagram produced on the kitchen table at Pen y Crug that showed that if we did nothing there would be no surviving wild land outside the commons within 10 years so successful were the grant schemes to stimulate agriculture and forestry.

The evidence she collected was irrefutable and within a couple of years the Wildlife and Countryside Act was passed to protect SSSIs and money found to trial the forerunners of the current agri-environment schemes.

It was not all plain sailing. She was involved in a community development programme in Llanwrtyd. In the smallest town in Britain with one grocers shop she recalls attempting to buy some spinach. "There's no demand here for exotic vegetables" was the reply. She got to know such lovely characters as Bryn from Lloftyardd. She often dropped off a bag of Welsh cakes for him at his gate and was deeply affected by the story of his family's coerced move from the family farm to make way for forestry. The forestry may never have used its powers of compulsory purchase to evict Welsh owner-occupied farming families but the story of the tenant farmers plight has yet to be told. When

a proposal was made to afforest one the last remaining sheep walks shepherded by almost the last Welsh speaking family in Abergwesyn she leapt into action. She produced such an extensive and well researched body of evidence that the then Sect of State declined to offer forestry grant aid and the large scale planting of upland Wales drew to a close. Ted Foukhard commemorated this victory in the shape of a sculpture of a naked nymph (rear view) tearing up young conifer trees!

Along the way as an active member of Friends of the Earth and with her knowledge of Welsh wetlands she helped Andrew Lees, then Welsh director (later national director) of FOE to challenge the capitulation of NCC to a proposal by Swansea to turn most of Crumlyn Bog into a refuse tip. Thank goodness Liz and FOE were successful. There is nowhere else quite like this primeval swamp left in Britain.

Apparently I turned up one day for work full of concerns about the recently discovered effects acid rain was having on the Cambrian Mountains. Her beloved dippers were in decline and the upper streams of the Wye, Severn and Twyi were now fishless. This was unthinkable and we had to tell the politicians who would then do something.

In 1985 she almost single-handedly organised the first conference on acid rain in Wales and brow-beat the likes of me to speak. She produced a conference report and went on to pursue the issue to London. She always felt disappointed at the result. We are still experiencing the problem but local measures are being taken and fish are back. And last year I was able to reassure her that with ships bunker fuel now having to be sulphur free for the first time we, the lichens, the fish and the dippers could breathe air free of sulphur dioxide in Wales for the first time in generations. When she held her acid rain conference only 3 species of lichen struggled to survive in Kew Gardens. Today there are over 150.

The environmental organisations she supported not just as a member but serving on committees were wide. The Cambrian Mountains Society, the Radnorshire Society, the Woodland Trust and the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust all benefited from her knowledge and council.

With Gordon Parker as chair and Liz as vice-chair she helped found the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust. I still cannot credit the optimism and foresight of this new organisation that with a tiny membership it should embark upon a plan to buy Gilfach Farm. I got Liz to recall that with her daughter Lorna, a babe in arms, she set off to help raise three quarters of a million pounds to purchase the farm. Unsuccessful in visits to the trustees of funds along the south coast of England she turned to London where armed with some of her wonderful pictures the heritage lottery fund were persuaded to give what was, I think, the largest land purchase grant at the time and one of Liz's images was displayed full page in their annual report. For her hard work we can all enjoy Gilfach today. Some would rest on their laurels as a job well done. Not Liz. She had a vision for Gilfach and felt there was still so much more to do. She saw it as a model for other farmers to follow and was always desperately disappointed that the wildlife trusts and farmers had never properly connected. Perhaps had she lived she might have seen some of her vision post Brexit being realised!

Her nature reserves were not just for the few to enjoy bird song and pretty flowers. I remember the shine in her eyes and delight when a recent scientific paper sought to identify the best places in Wales to find the relatives of our crop plants. The only inland site identified had Gilfach at its core. Here was the reservoir of genetic diversity we would need to feed ourselves in a world facing an

unknown climatic future. This was the breadth of her vision. She had a particular soft spot for tree lungwort-one of our largest lichens almost completely exterminated by acid rain. Somehow she had felt its importance so was not in the least surprised when recently the discovery was announced that it contained a unique enzyme that broke down prion proteins and might save us from mad cow disease.

To look after tree lungwort you had to look after their last surviving habitat-ancient trees. She loved old trees and supported the Woodland Trust, sitting for many years on their Welsh advisory committee. Ancient trees were rich in wildlife now lost from almost all of the rest of Europe and theirs was a rich history to tell of changing land use, fashions in landscape design and art all of which appealed to Liz's broad and eclectic thirst for knowledge. The Trust is well represented here today. Who else but Liz would have got the Welsh pop group Brigyn to launch their second CD inside an ancient tree! Even when ill we struggled over fences to wait for the light to be just right to capture evocative images of ancient trees in such amazing places as the medieval deer park at Dinefwr in Carmarthenshire or the Great Wood at Gregynog in Montgomeryshire to spark in others the desire to care for them. Thanks to her we got some large replacement trees in exchange for the old ones cut down in creating the new road between Newbridge and Builth which she had bitterly opposed. It should have been so much better planned in her eyes and she refused to use it for years.

She supported the Ancient Tree Forum and did interviews in Welsh, a language she loved, to publicise their importance. By sharing the driving together we were able to travel the length of Wales to help promote their conservation. One of her last and much loved projects was helping with publicity and images to raise the £1.3 million pounds needed for the Woodland Trust to successfully purchase Llennyrch farm near Maentwrog. The mist shrouded Celtic rain Forest there now had a secure future. She had helped create a second "Gilfach". I could go on and on about her foresight and achievements. How about pushing digital technology to the limit to produce the first leaflet to raise awareness of fungi in old grasslands? The work this sparked has now led to the recognition of the Epynt Ranges as being the most important site left for them in Western Europe. For Liz this was no academic exercise. She saw these fungi as an important resource we would need in the future to help our crop plants grow as our limited supplies of phosphate diminish.

Here was an exceptional character with the intellect and drive that led her to carry an extraordinary burden of concern. She bore it and turned words into action. We think she was the first girl to be taught in the all-boys school of Charterhouse where she did her A-levels. This must have forged a certain unique independence of mind and spirit. We have heard how in her youth she travelled the world and in the slums of Bombay became a life-long vegetarian seeing that to feed the world this was the best way to go yet would never have a harsh word said about the traditional stock farms of Wales

You could never pin a label on Liz. She took photos and her images regularly appeared in journals and magazines but she was more than a photographer. She was an environmentalist but cared so much more about people. She loved Wales and all things Welsh. She bore a scar on her hand from an apprenticeship in making the traditional local wiskets from hedgerow materials determined that the skill should not die out. She was a great supporter of the arts and culture in Wales. She was also a wonderful mother and friend to so many of us. I cannot believe the number of cards and letters of condolence that I and the family have received. We thank you all for them.

One friend remembered running a writing workshop with Liz. Liz was one of the winners in a prose competition entitled "Inspired by Nature". Her piece, "Snow on a Ravens Wing" recalled a day in the Glyders. I monitored rare lichens-she soaked up and beautifully captured the essence of the place. It was published in Natur Cymru-another of the gifts she has left us. She wrote a lot of verse but kept it to herself. I found this buried in a notebook full of notes on the awful treatments she endured so nobly in the last few years. Her strength she said came from the living world. From her bed she could see a beloved Scots Pine and a magnificent oak tree-with us today in the shape of some of its lichen-covered branches.

The goldcrest sparkles in the Scot's Pine.

Healthy backbone of life.

The machinery of nature goes

On, and we presume what

We do is sufficient to give

The world a future.

There was a post it note on the previous page on which she had written the following verse composed by Carolyn Hillyer but changed to the personal tense by Liz.

Buzzard call me back to the wildlands.

Heron fly me home.

Journey to the place of my homeland

Where the mothers wait for my return.

Heron fly me home.

Liz in her work captured and demonstrated to us the importance of the wind and the wild. We have so much to thank her for.