

“For years afterwards the farmers found them – the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades.” So run the blunt, grimly beautiful opening lines of the Welsh poet Owen Sheers’s elegy for the men, 4,000 of them from the 38th (Welsh) Division, who were killed or wounded in the Battle of Mametz Wood in July 1916 . . . Sheers revisits that chapter of carnage in a stirring, sprawling promenade show . . . He draws on the writings of two survivors in particular. One is the poet David Jones whose fractured, enervated, modernist response to his war-time experiences, *In Parenthesis* was hailed as a “work of genius” by T.S. Eliot. The other key influence is the writer Llewelyn Wyn Griffith . . . driven to wondering how the sun “could shine on this mad cruelty and on the quiet peace of an upland tarn near Snowdon” . . . we end up in dark woods and a place of numb desolation, bombarded by words that pierce the heart and vignettes that capture the stomach-churning sacrifice . . . The finest commemoration of the First World War centenary I’ve seen to date.’ Dominic Cavendish, *Daily Telegraph*

*Mametz* by Owen Sheers was premiered by the National Theatre Wales in June 2014. It is one of the set plays on WJEC’s A-level Drama specification. This dual edition combines the original English-language play with a Welsh-language translation by Ceri Wyn Jones, one of Wales’s most eminent poets.

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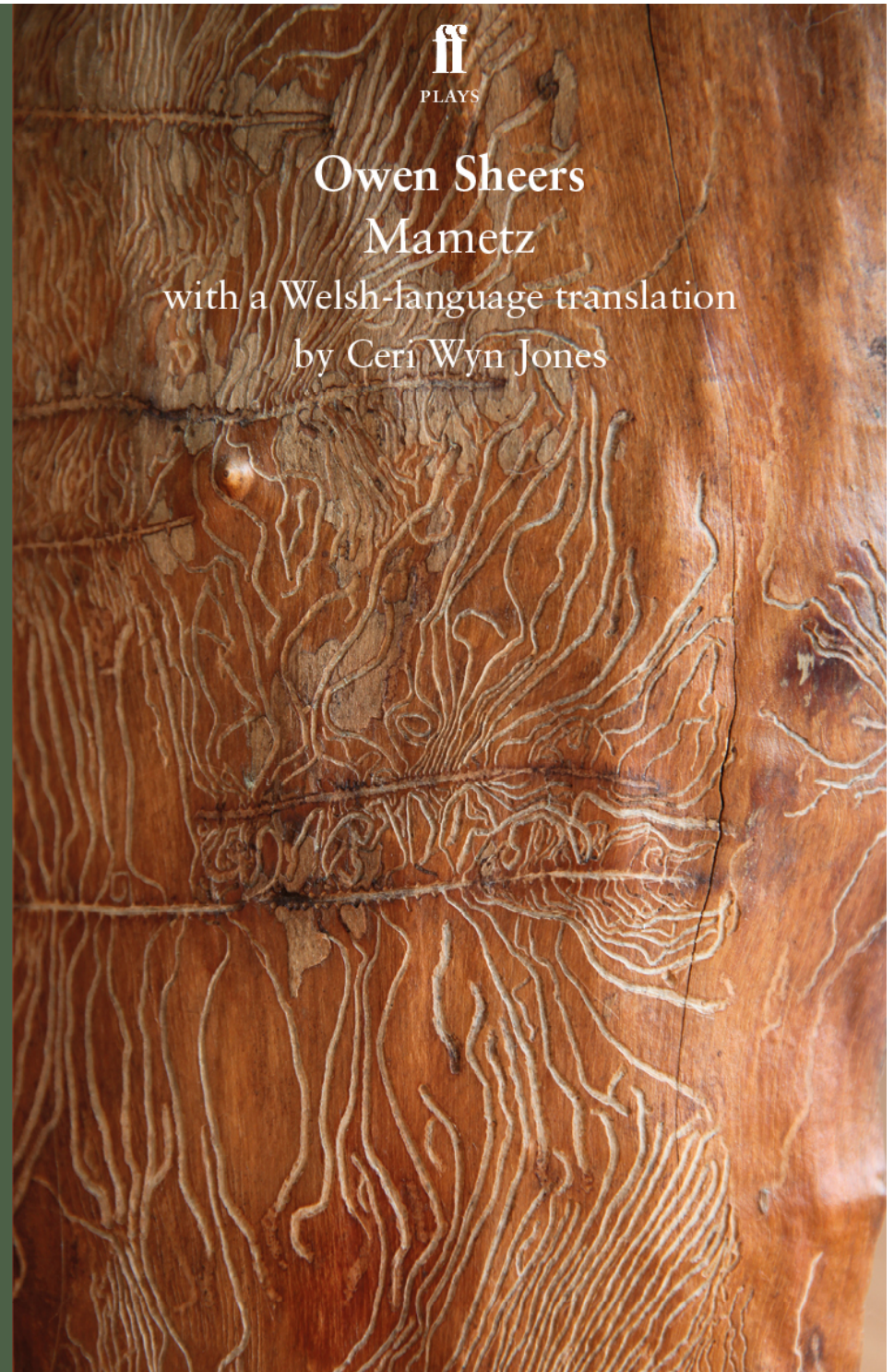


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PLAYS

# Owen Sheers *Mametz*

with a Welsh-language translation  
by Ceri Wyn Jones

Owen Sheers *Mametz* with a Welsh-language translation by Ceri Wyn Jones



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OWEN SHEERS

## Mametz

*with a translation into Welsh by*

CERI WYN JONES

*and an introduction by*

CHRISTOPHER MORRIS



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## Introduction

This play began by chance.

Rummaging in the bargain bin of a second-hand bookshop in Hay-on-Wye, I picked up a book called *Up to Mametz*. I knew nothing of the author, Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, and I had never heard of Mametz, but printed below an image of a blood-red dragon was the intriguing phrase 'Great War Classics'. The book was out of print and only £3.50, so I bought it, never imagining that twenty years later the story it contained would engage hundreds of people in the creation and staging of a massive theatrical production in an ancient Welsh wood.

*Up to Mametz* seized me; I consumed the quiet, brutal and haunting memoir of Llewelyn Wyn Griffith's time as a staff officer in the 38th (Welsh) Division during the First World War. His description of travelling through France and seeing an 'aeroplane' suddenly surrounded by little white clouds is a moment in the book that still resonates from that first reading. Griffith writes:

This was our first seeing of war and the intent of one man to kill another. It was difficult to translate this decorating of a blue background with white puff-balls in terms of killing.<sup>1</sup>

Griffith went on to witness one of the Somme offensive's bloodiest actions at Mametz Wood where, in the summer of 1916, 4,000 men of the 38th (Welsh) Division were killed or wounded.

I was a series producer at BBC Wales in Cardiff, running a weekly arts programme co-presented by Welsh poet Owen Sheers. Owen was aware of the Mametz Wood story through the poetry and prose of Robert Graves,

Siegfried Sassoon and David Jones, all of whom had witnessed the battle. So, to mark the 85th anniversary of the First World War, I asked Owen to travel to France with a BBC film crew to make a short film about *The Poet's Battle*; he returned with an evocative film and also the first draft of his poem, *Mametz Wood*.

After the war was over, the victorious generals were first in line to publish detailed accounts of their personal contributions to the victory. Some returning soldiers did commit their experiences on the front line to paper but most, like Wyn Griffith, simply wrapped their handwritten notes in brown paper and put them away in a drawer.

There was a societal desire for the population to move on and 'forgetting' seemed to offer them a positive way forward. In his poem 'Mametz Wood' (2005), Owen Sheers depicts the earth of the battle site: 'reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened / like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin'.<sup>2</sup>

The British attempt to forget and move on failed and within a decade there was a collective need to reach back into the wound of the war by those who fought it, for reminders of what happened. Many of the books that are now considered the classics of Great War literature were released in a flurry of publishing activity ten years after the armistice: *Undertones of War*, Edmund Blunden (1928), *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves (1929) and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Siegfried Sassoon (1930).

The British public consumed these powerful narratives, while the transcript of *Up to Mametz* (still wrapped in brown paper) lay unseen in a drawer. The book was eventually published in 1931 after a friend of the author insisted on reading the manuscript, and although it was well received by critics, the market for war memoirs had

become saturated and it failed to reach the audience it deserved.

It is no accident that poetry blossomed during the fighting and that prose was left to make sense of the aftermath.

'Poetry speaks to the immediate wound,' says writer John Berger.

All stories are about battles, of one kind or another, which end in victory and defeat . . . Poems, regardless of any outcome, cross the battlefields tending the wounded, listening to the wild monologues of the triumphant or the fearful. They bring a kind of peace. Not by anaesthesia or easy reassurance, but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been. Yet the promise is not of a monument (who, still on the battlefield, wants monuments?) The promise is that language has acknowledged, has given shelter, to the experience which demanded, which cried out.<sup>3</sup>

Owen and I knew that there was more to say about the writers who had witnessed the human carnage at Mametz. Owen was particularly interested in David Jones' elliptical and lyrical reminiscence of the battle *In Parenthesis* and he was intrigued by its potential synergies and tensions with Wyn Griffith's more direct prose memoir.

By 2006 I had left the BBC and was working at a university in South Wales. The university library regularly reviewed its stock of books, discarding those that were unread. A librarian saved a copy of *In Parenthesis* for me, which she told me had been taken out only three times, 1964, 1972 and 1996. This incredible book was to be discarded on the ninetieth anniversary of the battle, unread at a Welsh university for ten years.

Owen and I decided during the summer of 2013 that the approaching centenary of the First World War would be

the perfect moment to re-examine the story. Our decade-long conversation about the battle, the books and our desire to do something large scale, led us to one conclusion. A site-specific theatrical production would become our story vehicle, and the two neglected works would be the source texts underpinning that story. From the outset Owen had one key image in his head that would come to dictate and define the evolution of the production, namely that the audience and the cast would be situated in a trench system, and would go 'over the top' together, into a wood.

After a fruitful conversation with National Theatre Wales, Owen and I travelled to France to begin our research. I filmed and edited two short films during that initial trip, chronicling Owen's arrival in the wood and recording a visit to the Lutyens memorial at Thiepval, a monument to the missing of the Somme offensive.<sup>4</sup> The films were edited in my hotel room in France, the audio tracks simply reflecting the sounds we gathered from each location: rain at Thiepval and birdsong at Mametz.

The red notebook used by Owen in the films was brand new. One of the first things to go into the book was a leaf picked from the floor of the wood but within months its pages were filled with research ideas and production thoughts and then the writing began in earnest.

Ideas for the play came from many directions: museum artefacts, regimental diaries, battlefield visits, paintings, original photographs, written memoirs and expert historians such as Colin Hughes, who gave us invaluable support and encouragement throughout. An article in the *New Scientist* magazine that I had taken to France sparked the scientific elements in the play. It mentioned that in 1916 Albert Einstein had published his 'general theory of relativity'. The notion that in Germany, one of the great minds of our time was exploring notions of

gravity and time on a cosmic scale, while in France those same invisible forces were being exploited on a daily basis to butcher and destroy on a human scale, instigated further research that would influence the shape and intentions of the play.

Owen was writing on a tight timescale. The play was scheduled for an opening night in June 2014 and the play was still being written at Christmas. Throughout the opening months of 2014, Owen wrestled the play from an initial loose draft to a tight final text. I acted as a researcher, responding to Owen's need for detail on anything from artillery rounds and space-time to the names of the dead on a particular day. I was privileged to witness the intense but deft journey of the play and the juxtaposition of the existing texts within Owen's own written creation and characters.

A crucial element to the success of this large-scale site-specific production would be its location. I had been to a music festival at a farm near my home in Monmouthshire and was convinced that it was the perfect place to stage the play. An open field of grass was surrounded by a wall of conifers creating a natural amphitheatre that gently sloped up an ancient woodland of oak, ash and beech. The wood itself had grown through a series of concentric rings dug into the earth: the remains of an ancient Celtic hill fort. The impression on entering the wood was of a series of deep trenches that led into an open central glade. The place was imbued with the kind of ancient presence that Owen and I had sensed at the battlefield in France. The landowner was enthusiastic and so our location was confirmed.

National Theatre Wales began to attract talent to the production, the key appointment being director Matthew Dunster and a dynamic team of theatre makers, designers, actors, constructors and technicians. *Mametz* opened to

critical acclaim on the 24 June 2014, described by Dominic Cavendish of the *Daily Telegraph* as a work that ‘pierces the heart . . . the finest commemoration of the First World War centenary I’ve seen to-date’.

The photograph on the front cover of this book is of a piece of wood that I picked up on our first research trip to *le bois de Mametz*. It germinated, grew and fell in the same soil where thousands of soldiers had died a century before. There was something of Wales and Germany contained in its structure and form. When I was asked to write this introduction, I went online and re-watched the film that I had made the day I picked up the piece of wood. Scrolling down the webpage I found the following comment left by a member of the public who had recently visited. I will leave the last word to Colin Dyas, a person I have never met but whose great uncle was killed at Mametz:

Whilst in the woods, I put my hands deep into the earth. It is so rich. Rich with the dead I suspect, my Great Uncle being one of them. This is not the richness of leaf mould. It is something else. I suspect it is the memory left by the Queen of the Forest garlanding her dead. Today, the Queen’s work is being continued by the King of the Birds. His chorus has replaced her garlands as it really does seem as if the birds are singing for the dead. (Colin Dyas, 2016)

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October 2016

1. Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz* (Faber, 1931).
- 2.
3. John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (Bloomsbury, 1984).
4. *Wood* <<https://vimeo.com/70411744>>; *Stone* <<https://vimeo.com/70410656>>.

*Mametz* was first performed by the National Theatre of Wales on 24 June 2014. The cast, in alphabetical order, was as follows:

Jack Ayres  
Stephen Casey  
Tara D’Arquian  
Michael Elwyn  
Daniel Graham  
Chris Hoskins  
Rhys Isaac-Jones  
Mari Izzard  
Rhodri Meilir  
Kayed Mohamed-Mason  
Nicola Reynolds  
Rhys Rusbach  
Adam Scales  
Catrin Stewart  
Dafydd Llyr Thomas  
Sion Daniel Young

*Ensemble* Thomas David Carron, Christopher Charles, Jodie Currie, Lawrence Duffy, Ailsa Margaret Dunn, James Ellis, Laura Green, Matthew Ingram, Michael Kelly, Catherine Shipton-Philips, John A Thomas, Naomi Underwood

*Director* Matthew Dunster  
*Designer* Jon Bausor  
*Lighting Designer* Lee Curran  
*Sound Designer* George Dennis  
*Movement Director* Christopher Akrell







