

JANE RENDELL

## COMING TO WELSH





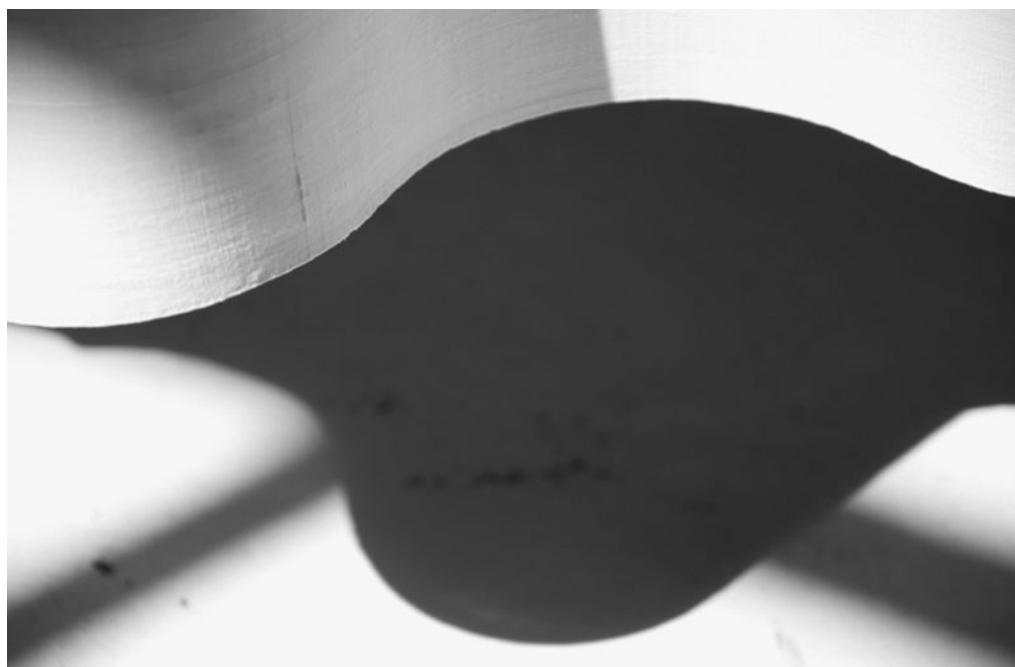
**Dresser:** a sideboard or table in a kitchen on which food is or was dressed; formerly also, a table in a dining-room or hall, from which dishes were served, or on which plates were displayed.<sup>1</sup>

What is subject to the work of distortion and rearrangement in memory are not the childhood events (intrinsically inaccessible), but the first traces of them. . . . The result of the secondary elaboration which is Freud's interest here is the conscious memory: very precisely, the "screen memory". But to evoke this term (Deckerinnerung) is to indicate that it both covers over and presents the resurgence of something: precisely, the repressed.<sup>2</sup>

*The Welsh Dresser: Constructed in the 1830s, and made of light oak in a form typical of dressers of its age from South Wales, the Welsh Dresser has an open rack with three shelves, a base with four side-drawers and a short centre drawer with a shaped apron beneath. The open potboard base has four turned front legs, terminating in block feet. The Welsh Dresser has been in the family at least five generations; in my childhood it occupied the dining room of my great aunt's house in a small mining village near the Black Mountain (Y Mynydd Du). This was one of two rooms that faced the street—immaculate, seldom used and always cold. The Welsh Dresser stood opposite the window, screened by a layer of net, and a pair of heavy curtains, slightly faded where the fabric met the light.<sup>3</sup>*

*Coming to Welsh* is inspired by a Welsh Dresser that is part of my childhood and my mother's family. I remember it in the dining room of my great-aunt's house in South Wales. It held delicate ornaments—lustre jugs I might break, but also lots of other more useful things—rubber bands, pencils, rulers, buttons, needles and thread, and, rather strangely, a red die. There were also cuttings placed between the jugs, taken from local newspapers reporting births, weddings, and deaths in the family. I had written about the Welsh Dresser in an essay that artist Bella Kerr had read, and as part of her work, *Keeper*, she invited me to inhabit the Mission Gallery, Swansea, and to develop this essay in response to the sculptural elements—towers and tables—she had created for gathering and holding objects relating to childhood.



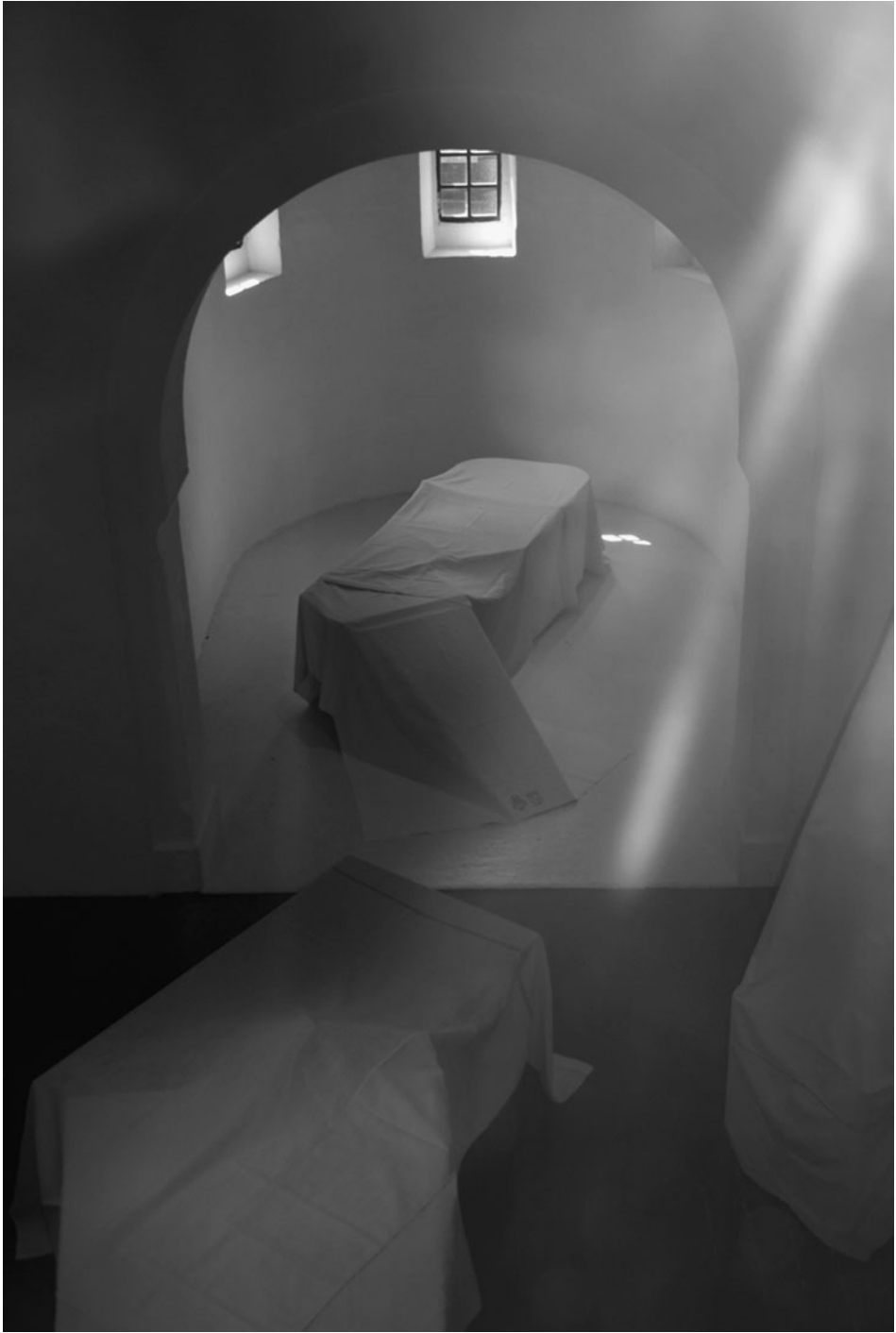


**Die:** a small cube of ivory, bone, or other material, having its faces marked with spots numbering from one to six.

A screen memory may be described as “retrogressive” or as having “pushed forward” according as the one chronological relation or the other holds between the screen and the thing screened-off.<sup>4</sup>

*Red Die:* The table next to the Welsh Dresser had six settings; my place was between my sister and great aunt, facing my mother, and diagonally opposite my grandfather, with a chair by the window for my father, which was only sometimes occupied. In the scene I am poised cautiously on a turquoise cushion perched on the polished surface of my wooden chair, nervously waiting for that moment when it slips sideways . . .

The Welsh Dresser essay combines photographs of objects from the dresser, with dictionary definitions of those objects, and memories from childhood, which those objects have triggered. The theoretical ideas about what it means to use childhood memories as a way of writing the history of a piece of furniture, and how autobiography and experiential memoirs can be valuable forms of evidence, are key to my conceptual interest in historiography. This informs the ways in which I examine personal history and private life in the Welsh Dresser essay. Although I trained and worked as an architect, I returned to university to do a Master’s in architectural history, a course which was really my introduction to the philosophy of history, to thinking about why we value some objects and not others, how we interpret pieces of evidence, and also the different ways in which history can be written. I am interested in what feminist theories, which focus on the personal and the subjective, can offer architectural history in terms of placing emphasis on subjectivity and positionality.



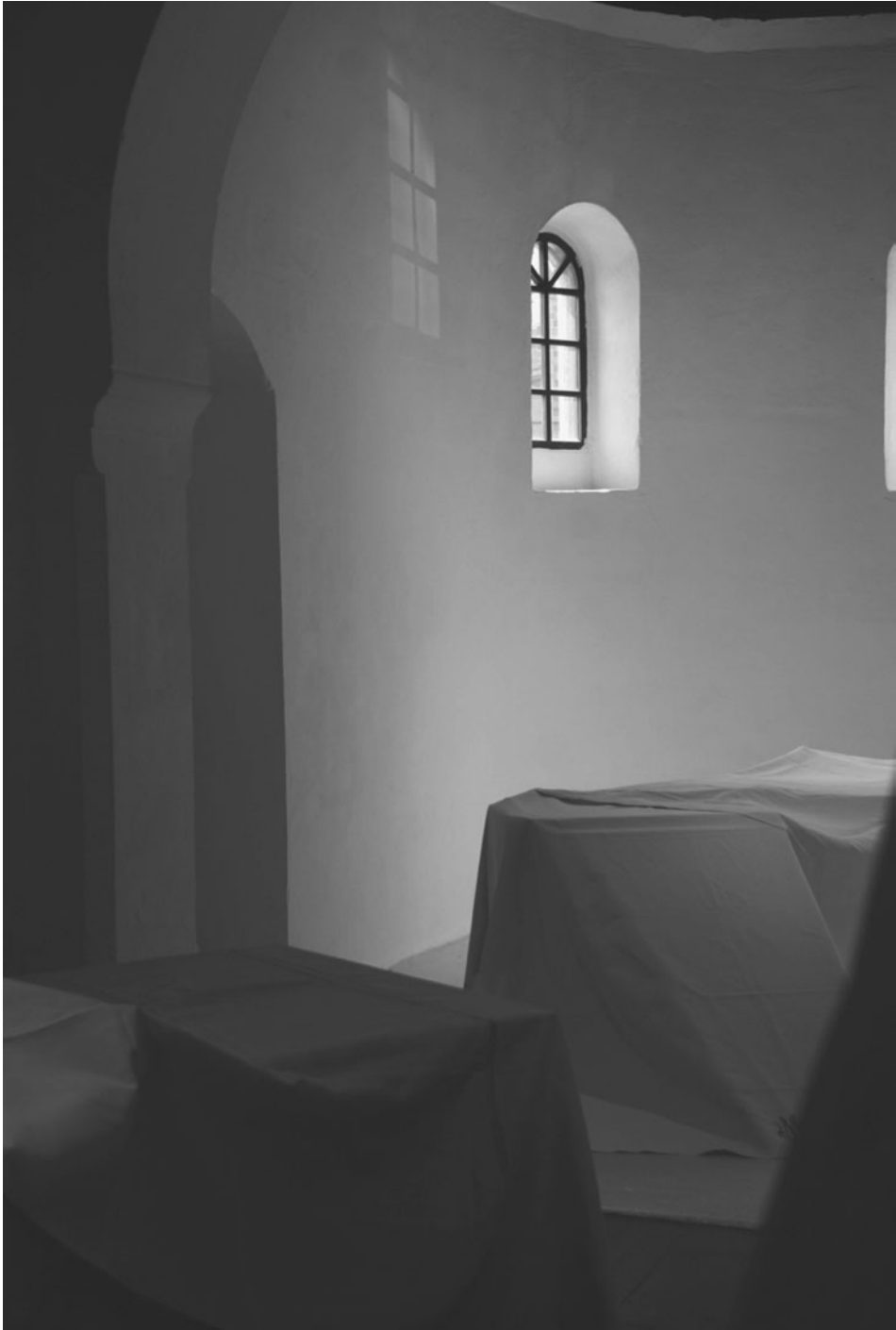


**Cutting: a paragraph or short article cut out of a newspaper, etc.**

The indifferent memories of childhood owe their existence to a process of displacement: they are substitutes, in [mnemonic] reproduction, for other impressions which are really significant. The memory of these significant impressions can be developed out of the indifferent ones by means of psychical analysis, but a resistance prevents them from being directly reproduced. As the indifferent memories owe their preservation not to their own content but to an associative relation between their content and another which is repressed, they have some claim to be called "screen memories" . . . .<sup>5</sup>

*Cutting: Tucked in between the lustre jugs on the shelves of the Welsh Dresser were smaller pots and tins that held many useful things: needles, threads, elastic bands, but also a selection of yellowed local newspaper cuttings registering key events in the family. Reading them reminds me of my motherland, not the country of my own birth, but that of my mother, and the coming together of the family around the dining table, on ordinary days, at special times of the year and for big occasions—births, marriages and deaths.*

Shortly after my great-aunt died, I dreamt about her home. In the dream, I enter a room and all the furniture is far too big and covered in white linen. But then I walk to the mantelpiece and when I look at myself in the mirror; I find that in the reflection, the room is not dead but alive—it is full of plants. The Welsh Dresser is inherited down the female line. My great-aunt did not have children, and so my mother, her eldest niece, inherited the dresser. So, as the eldest daughter, tradition has it that one day, the Welsh Dresser will be mine. I talk of the Welsh Dresser as a difficult thing in the essay—the jugs that could smash, the drawers that stuck as you pulled them out. The memories are not altogether comforting, they are disquieting; but at the heart of it, the difficulty the Welsh Dresser raises for me is the fear of my mother's death.







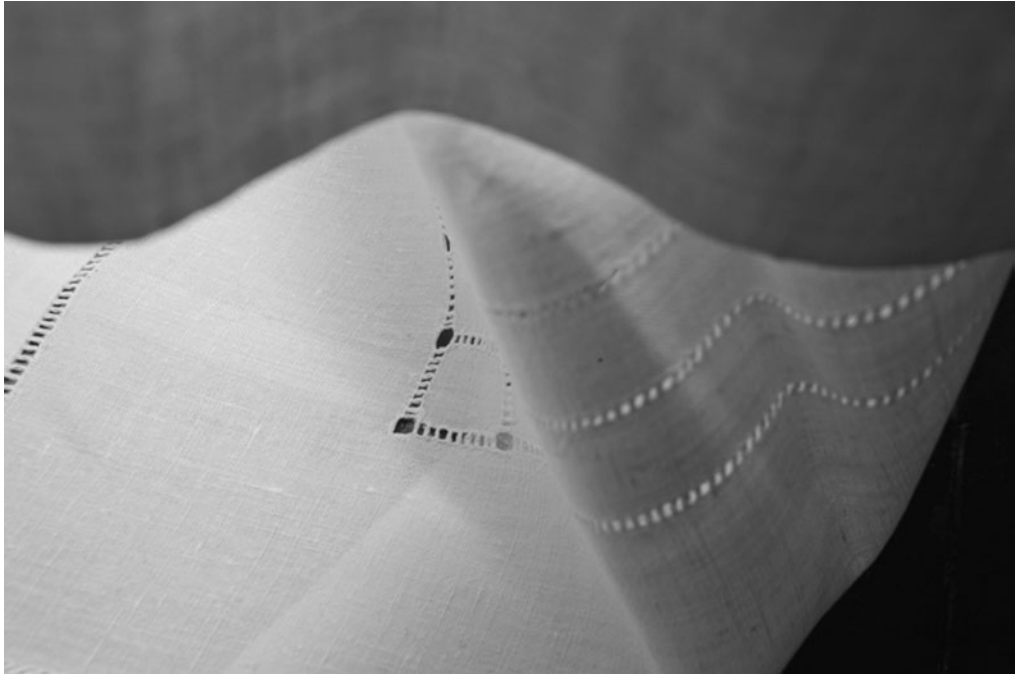
**White:** having that colour produced by reflection, transmission, or emission of all kinds of light in the proportion in which they exist in the complete visible spectrum, without sensible absorption, being thus fully luminous and devoid of any distinctive hue.

... I would like to say that Freud's concept of afterwardsness contains both richness and a certain ambiguity, combining a retrogressive and a progressive direction. I want to account for this problem of the different directions, to and fro, by arguing that, right at the start, there is something that moves in the direction of the past to the future, from the other to the individual in question, that is in the direction from the adult to the baby, which I call the implantation of the enigmatic message. This message is then retranslated, following a temporal direction, which is, in an alternating fashion, by turns retrogressive and progressive (according to my general model of translation—detranslation—retranslation).<sup>6</sup>

*Coin:* My grandfather had a favourite joke. At Christmas, having bathed the pudding with brandy and set fire to it, he would cut slices, placing one in each dish and then distribute the portions around the table. On discovering a copper coin in my own pudding, I would be delighted, thinking I was the lucky one. My grandfather would search in his own dish and feigning surprise would pull out a piece of folded foil. On unwrapping it, a pound note would be discovered. As my disappointment registered across my face, he would laugh and hand it over to me as a generous gift. After his stroke when he failed to find the words he required—objects were still able to speak for themselves.

Although I am half Welsh through my mother, I have only ever visited Wales, I never lived there, so the country is a bit of a stranger to me, yet Welsh as a language is extremely familiar. I recognise the sounds of words—intimately. They always take me back to feelings of protection and comfort, being surrounded by family; however, I understand only a very few—*bach, cwtch, nos da*... —and I do not recognise the ways these words look. Covering the objects suppresses the visual, giving priority to the spoken voice. But while white linen screens the objects and their histories, the act of screening-off somehow makes absence come alive as a kind of presence—absent presences, perhaps, or present absences.





**Dresser:** one who or that which dresses . . . one who dresses . . . one who attires another . . . A surgeon's assistant in a hospital, etc., whose duty it is to dress wounds, etc.

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original . . . The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.<sup>7</sup>

*Random Buttons (in a Bag with Needle and Thread):* Buttons are odd things. Each one is of little interest, yet as a collection they fascinate. Singular and unattached, they are seemingly insignificant, but sewn in a row onto a garment they hold things together. In sequence and in juxtaposition things look different when they are next to one another. As my grandfather, the butcher, faced up from his dark coffin, tea and tongue sandwiches were served from the Welsh Dresser in the room next door.

Interested in psychoanalysis, and in how the human psyche works, I am fascinated by the insights psychoanalysis offers us in terms of processes like identification, repression, and resistance, and its understandings of how the ways we feel and behave towards one another have roots in childhood relations. The unconscious does not think, says Sigmund Freud, on the one hand; and on the other, Jacques Lacan posits, very contentiously, that the unconscious is structured like a language, though André Green adds a corrective a little later, like an affect, says Green—the unconscious is structured like an affect. The unconscious resists being explained or uncovered, like an affect it operates more like poetry, it suggests, it constructs, it invents, it free associates—and, most importantly, the more we try to cover it over, to screen it off, the more it seeks to return—in bungled actions, surprise reactions, slips of the tongue, dreams . . . And in Hélène Cixous' exquisite essay, "Coming to Writing", from which this work takes its cue, the unconscious merges with love, with honey, with milk, and with the mother tongue.





**Cutting: a small shoot or branch bearing leaf-buds cut off a plant and used for propagation.**

Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.<sup>8</sup>

*Key: Hung with gorgeous antique lustre jugs—which could never be touched—and that rattled every time a coal lorry passed by on the road outside, the Welsh Dresser gleamed through my childhood, through Christmas dinners and Sunday lunches, through rice puddings, cherry corona, beetroot chutney, faggots and chips. My great aunt taught needlework and cookery; not a day passed without being asked to go from the kitchen to the Welsh Dresser to fetch an item for some kind of domestic task. These trips were fraught with anxiety for the Welsh Dresser was a little unsteady on its feet, the drawers stuck as you pulled, causing the delicate jugs dangling above them to sway a little and chink. The drawers still smell of the items they contained—a wooden ruler, pencils with rubber tops, carbon-copy notebooks, buttons, coins, needles and thread, tailor’s chalk, and a key. The Welsh Dresser is an archive: it holds a key to my past, and the past of a place where it always rained in the holidays.*

The spatial aspects of psychoanalysis intrigue me as an architect—the fold of the déjà vu, the return of the uncanny, the triangular structure of the oedipal complex . . . When Freud talks about screen memories, he talks of how one memory might screen another and, somewhat controversially, he states that we do not really have memories of childhood, just memories related to childhood. Psychoanalysis tends to consider the history of the psyche in terms of scenes, rather than the events of history, and these psychic scenes are not chronologically ordered—the unconscious, it has been argued, has no concept of chronological time; memories, and traces of them—visual, tactile, audio—are arranged in layers, some screening others. The writer, Virginia Woolf, also talks of scenes; for her, scenes are memories from childhood, which are somehow preserved intact and come to the surface as what she calls “sealed vessels”.





**Die: to lose life, cease to live, suffer death; to expire.**

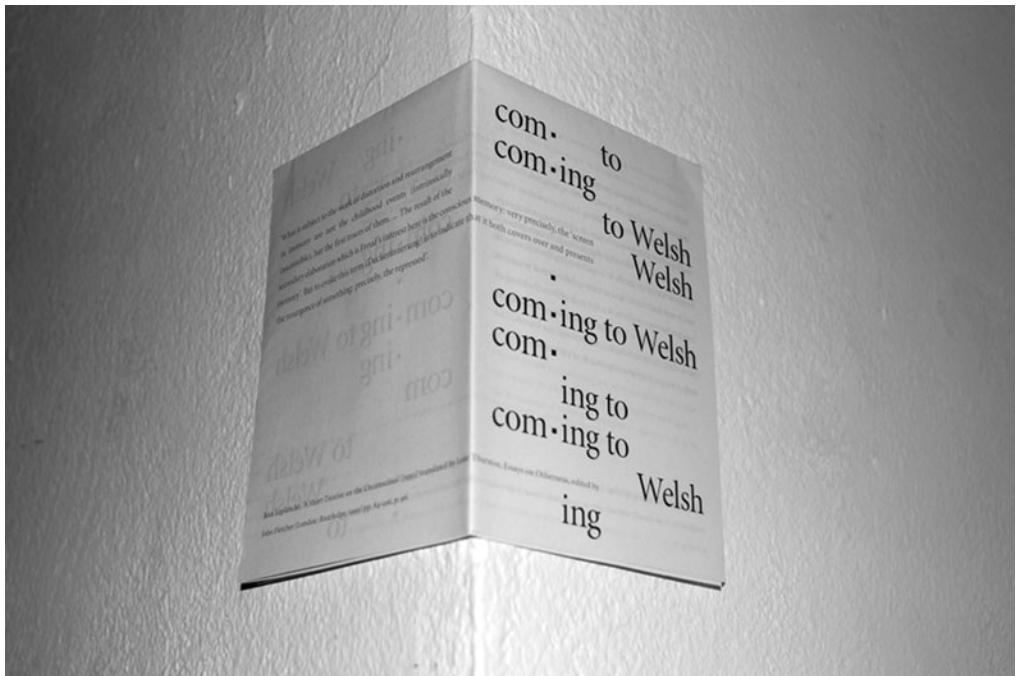
These scenes, by the way, are not altogether a literary device—a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable little threads. Innumerable threads there were; still, if I stopped to disentangle, I could collect a number. But whatever the reason may be, I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged, representative.<sup>9</sup>

*My Junior Jet Club Badge: The Welsh Dresser tells the story of my mother's family. A traveller, with more than one home, it has made several journeys, from a farm, to a house in the next Welsh village, and then to my mother's home in England. From mother to daughter, the Welsh Dresser travels between women. My mother sometimes regrets how far she travelled from home, from her mother. How she left Cwmgors for Aberystwyth, Aberystwyth for London, Wales for England. When she married my father, she went to live in the Middle East. Pregnant with me, she arrived alone at night on a desert airstrip.*

The French analyst, Jean Laplanche, talks of how childhood events are inaccessible since they are screened by the first traces of our memories of them, which cover them over, preventing and presenting the resurgence of something repressed. So, there is a tension that *Coming to Welsh* tries to approach, the space between what is screened and the screen itself. Laplanche links this act of repression and its recovery to translation, to detranslation, and to retranslation—he understands repression as a kind of translation. This brings me to Walter Benjamin, who talks of translation as issuing from the original as a kind of afterlife, and of how the translator, located on the outside of language facing it like the edge of a forest, tries to find an echo of the original in a new language.







### White: of the colour of snow or milk.

Writing: a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss. Of never becoming resigned, consoled; never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift asleep again as if nothing had happened; as if nothing could happen. . . . There is a language that I speak or that speaks [to] me in all tongues. . . . In each tongue, there flows milk and honey. And this language I know. I don't need to enter it, it surges from me, it flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious. . . . In the language I speak. The mother tongue resonates, the tongue of my mother . . .<sup>10</sup>

*White Linen: I dreamt of the house last night, my mother's home in Cwmgors, South Wales. As a child it was the place where it always rained in the holidays, but now, as it slips away from me, it is a place I already begin to miss. I was in the dining room; the rest of the house was empty except this one room. The furniture was far too big and covered in linen. The air was thick with silence. With the curtains drawn, it was dark, but the linen glowed white. As I went towards the mantelpiece to take a look at myself in the mirror, I saw for the first time in the reflection, that the room was full of plants, so alive I could smell the moisture still on their leaves.*

Even though when I hear Welsh, it sounds familiar; I still feel on the outside or edge of it. In *Coming to Welsh*, rather than translate a work written in English into Welsh, I decided to work towards constructing an echo or afterlife of the original in response to my return to Welsh. I have been exploring how my memories and dreams of the Welsh Dresser expressed in words can be translated into spatial materials and experiences. I have also produced a new written text for *Coming to Welsh*, it is an accompaniment and takes its lead from the main act of screening. So, the paper on which the text is written is folded like a white linen sheet; certain words are screened and cannot quite be seen, while others are reflected, especially words which have two meanings, where one is usually dominant and the other suppressed. Reading aloud this written element of *Coming to Welsh*, I respond to the Mission itself, to the light coming in through the windows, over my shoulders, onto my eyelids, to the folds in the corners of the walls, to the undulation of the horizontal planes, to the tilts of the not-so-vertical edges . . .<sup>11</sup>

### Image credits

This visual essay is arranged in eight parts. Each part is composed of a double page spread with two images facing one another; on the left is a portrait image (a) and on the right a landscape image (b). Four voices are positioned under the landscape image: the first one is

in bold (a dictionary definition); the second one is indented (a quote taken from a work of psychoanalysis, philosophy or literature); the third one is in italics (a personal memory); and the final one is in plain text (a commentary on the work). All photographs by Jane Rendell, except 1a, 4b, 5b, 6a and 7a by Inger Birgitte Richenberg.

### Notes

1. All definitions, in bold, are taken from the online *Oxford English Dictionary*. See <http://www.oed.com> (accessed 16 April 2013).
2. Jean Laplanche, "A Short Treatise on the Unconscious" [1993], trans. Luke Thurston, in John Fletcher (ed.), *Essays on Otherness*, London: Routledge, 1999, 84–116, at 96.
3. All scenes, in italics, are taken from Jane Rendell, "The Welsh Dresser", in *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2010, 121–133, 141.
4. Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories" [1899], in James Strachey (gen. ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume III (1893–1899): Early Psycho-Analytic Publications*, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1962, 299–322, at 320–321.
5. Sigmund Freud, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" [1901], in James Strachey (gen. ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VI (1901): The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1960, 44.
6. Jean Laplanche, "Notes on Afterwardsness" [1998], in Fletcher (ed.), *Essays on Otherness*, 260–265, at 265. These "notes" are based on a conversation between Jean Laplanche and Martin Stanton recorded in 1991. They appeared in John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (eds), *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992, and have been added to and revised by Laplanche for the 1998 volume.
7. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" [1921], trans. Harry Zohn, in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume I, 1913–1926*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, 253–263, at 258–259.
8. Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", 258–259.
9. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* [1939–1940], ed. Jeanne Schulkind, London: The Hogarth Press, 1985, 142.
10. Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing" [1977], in Hélène Cixous, *"Coming to Writing" and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, 1–58, at 3, 21.
11. Jane Rendell, *Coming to Welsh*, was a site-writing, comprising a text-work designed by Marit Muenzberg, and an installation at The Mission Gallery, Swansea, 7–11 May 2013, as part of *Keeper*, by artist Bella Kerr, along with artists Kathryn Faulkner and Karen Ingham. Deepest thanks to my partner David Cross for his advice, critique, and support.