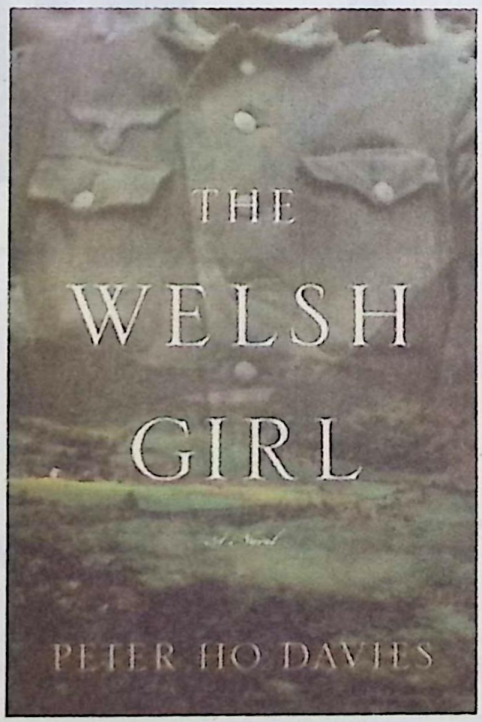
A Wartime Tale of Displacement

JESSICA MANN



When Peter Ho Davies was included on Granta's 2003 list of the best young British novelists he had only published short stories, but this first novel justifies the prophetic accolade. The Welsh Girl, set in 1944, is a moving, memorable and beautifully written book about displacement and its opposite, the powerful sense of place which in Welsh is called cynefin. The word originally described a sense sheep seem to be born with, an instinctive knowledge of their fields and hillsides.

In Snowdonia shepherd and sheep have equally deep roots. Esther, at 17, fantasises about escape to the outside world but is emotionally tethered to her farm, flock and xenophobic father. Her mother is dead so life is hard and busy. advertisementShe cooks, housekeeps, takes care of a stroppy evacuee, milks cows, feeds lambs and works as a part-time barmaid, being one of the few local people who can speak English to the soldiers encamped in the neighbourhood.

These soldiers are building an unidentified installation. Only when they leave do the villagers discover what has been foisted on them: a POW camp. To the locals its inmates seem hardly more alien than the English did. 'This is a nationalist village, passionately so. It's what holds the place together, like a cracked and glued china teapot.'

Karsten is one of the camp's prisoners. His German roots were once as strong as any Welshman's but now he is too ashamed of having surrendered even to imagine going home.

The third principal character is Rotherham, who has no home to go to, being a refugee from Germany where he lived with his Aryan mother. His father was a British Jew. Rotherham is an intelligence officer but always an outsider, identified as Jewish at sight by the Nazi Rudolf Hess and refused a drink in a Welsh pub because, the barman says, 'we don't serve no English here.'

This is a gripping human story rather than a philosophical investigation, but it leaves one thinking about the nature of cowardice and patriotism, identity and roots. Cynefin sounds like an enviable attribute.

But Ho Davies, with a Welsh father and Chinese mother, brought up in England and living in America, reaches a different conclusion. The rootless Rotherham comes to see that to be without a country is 'pure freedom'.

This review first appeared in The Telegraph.