

Angharad Price

## Between Môn and Arfon

To those of us who live on the banks of the river Menai the Atlantic's ebb and flow are part of our daily lives, as the sea twice a day fills and empties the gap that forms the border between Môn and Arfon. To us in Arfon, this river defines us, especially at high tide. At low tide, with its blue ink paling away, the Menai threatens to deny our very existence.

I say 'river', but the Menai is no real river, for its water is salty. It is rather a channel: a sleeve of sea about a mile wide and twenty miles long linking Caernarfon Bay in the west and Conway Bay in the east. Its bed is unstable, always changing as the sands move with the powerful currents and cross-currents. It is a perilous place for both ships and men.

I suppose I'm typical of Caernarfon people in feeling ambiguous about this river that reminds us every day how far we can go. We thank it for coming between us and Môn's flatland farmers. We thank it for bringing the world to our ancient town; for making us more familiar with Hamburg, Bordeaux, Sydney and Valparaiso than with the mountainous villages of Snowdonia; and for bringing oils and wines and shag tobacco to our eager palates.

But only a few Covies, as we call ourselves, have ever travelled along the Menai. And only a few would want to, considering the terrible shipwrecks of the past.

The pilots of River Menai were a breed apart from your average Covies, and only one of them survived until my day. His name was Abram Janeiro Jones.

His father had been Mate on the *New World II*, and the son - strong and rosy-cheeked - was born in the docks at Rio. The mother took ill on the voyage home to Wales from Brazil and died on the Atlantic Ocean. His father had learnt his lesson. He gave up sailing and became a pilot on the Menai, like his father and grandfather before him. His son was brought up a pilot from the cradle.

That same son, Abram Janeiro Jones, was the last of the honourable line of Menai pilots. Though a ship may have sailed the world's roughest seas, and Liverpool dock may have been finally within its sights, the Menai pilot was always needed to guide it through that final perilous strait between Môn and Arfon.

These days, cargo ships only rarely come this way. Now, the Menai's traffic consists of pleasure boats. Janeiro had been idle for years, not wishing to stoop to guiding yachts. He had fathered no children, as far as we know, and he half taught his craft to a neighbour's son, so that someone was there, at least, to deal with the small, shiny white boats. He spent a year or two fishing for plaice in Caernarfon Bay, but got tired of the monotonous shoals and threw his nets to the bottom of the sea at the narrow gap of Abermenai.

He found work, in the end, as Keeper of Caernarfon's Estuary Bridge, where the river Saint carries the mountains into the sea. When a ship signals, the walkers are stopped and the bridge divides in two and swings open, to let a boat out of the town's harbour, or into it.

Janeiro lived in the Bridgekeeper's cottage in the twilight of Alun Woods. He sat every day at the door of his house, the boats' masts like a forest in the quay, and the castle's Eagle Tower coming between him and the town square. Whenever a boat signalled, he would get up from his chair and go

into his house to press the red button that worked the bridge. When the boat had gone through he would press the green button and the bridge would return to its place to let the walkers cross the estuary.

Very seldom did Janeiro himself cross the Eastuary Bridge to the tavern or into town. Indeed, no one knew how he kept body and soul together. Some said they'd seen him wandering Foryd beach in early morning to the laments of the oystercatchers, and that he fed himself on cockles and periwinkles and crabs' claws. They said he smoked seaweed in his pipe and drank seawater. Of course no one dared approach him. He was a man who liked his own company.

Yet, as when a boy whose roots lie deep in dry land sometimes feels an unfamiliar wish to go to sea, I had - from the first time I had seen him - desired to sail on the surge of this oceanic man. There I was, a boy of ten, crossing the Estuary Bridge to the playground on the far side, when I saw the silver buttons of his coat shining in the twilight of Alun Woods. I was drawn to them as to a lighthouse.

He did not see me coming. His eyes were on the sea and had a distant look. Were they blue? Or was it the Menai I saw in them?

Only at the last minute did he turn and see me coming, slight and purposeful, between him and the castle. He became very agitated. I shall never forget his roar, nor the sting of the rope's knot as it whipped my naked legs while I was scarpering back over the bridge.

I did not venture over the estuary for many years after: neither *Mr Whippy's* ice-cream van, nor the Foryd's summer fair, nor the promise of girls' kisses in Alun Woods, could tempt me over the bridge and into Janeiro's view. But I knew all along that he was there, in the doorway of his house opposite the castle, waiting for me with a distant look in his

eyes.

Only when my voice had broken, and my chin was sprouting a beard, and when we had begun drinking in the *Anglesey* tavern, did I dare get close to him again. This was my final year in Caernarfon. I shone in the geography lessons at Sir Hugh School and my mind was set on going to Liverpool University to graduate in the subject.

My research project during the Easter holiday was the river Menai. I discovered many facts in the town library and in the archives at Victoria Dock. I came to understand the Menai's borders: the structure of its unsteady banks; the water's movements at high tide and low; the location of its rockiest areas, the eddies, where the deep channels and shallow waters lay, as well as the special pattern of red and green buoys in a river that has two mouths. I learnt of those who had lived from the Menai: fishermen, seamen, smugglers, quarry owners, and the flat-bottomed ferry men of Abermenai, Tal y Foel and Moel y Don. I saw the life it had in it: its mackerel and herring and plaice and crab and lobster and cockles and mussels, and a myriad of creatures and plants of whom we had not yet learned to take advantage...

My work made steady progress. But I somehow felt that something was lacking, a personal touch... Though I had not then thought of asking Janeiro.

It was Good Friday when I left the town square and rounded the castle in order to reach the quay. There, between the Estuary Bridge and the *Anglesey* gathered the old seamen to pay tribute to the Menai. I interviewed them thoroughly, and they were more than willing to talk of the 'River Caernarfon', especially for the price of a pint.

In fact, they became quite animated in their talk of the Menai, half

memory, half rumour: of Irish pirates from Carrickfergus; of a smugglers' ship trying to escape the taxman and getting stuck on Caernarfon Bar; of the old drunken ballad-singer who used to hang around the Slate Quay; of importing 'soap-waste' from Dublin's shops to use as manure in the gardens of Arfon; of children pulling the ropes to drag the schooners along the quay; of the annual August regatta, and of the days of the 'little steamer' that linked the town with the island of Môn. They talked of the wreck of the *Speranza*, the *Mon Amour* and *HMS Conway*, and the time the *Queen of the Sea* ran aground near Melynog beach, drowning twenty passengers, eighty pigs, two cows and a ton of butter.

And as they talked the Menai's placenames sounded like the names of faraway places to a boy from the town: Mussel Bank, Belan, the Limehouse, Melynog Beach and Wild Beach, Frydan Rock and the Cribiniau, the island of Gored Goch, Pwll Fanogl, the rock of Craig y Pwll, and Pwll Ceris itself...

'Pwll Ceris!' I interrupted.

But then they all became silent. Little Îf and Sven drank from their beer, and Deio started lighting matches on his trousers. Eyes and voices were lowered.

'You won't get to the bottom of that, son...'

'Our very own Bermuda Triangle.'

'They say there's a fort at the bottom of it.'

'*Ker Is*,' said Little Îf who was born in Brittany.

'We use the English name - The Swellies - in any case.'

'They say,' said Paddy, 'that only one man has been to the bottom of the Swellies.'

Amidst their murmuring I heard them mention the name of Abram

Janeiro Jones. And it was then that they all looked up and glanced at the Bridgekeeper's cottage.

'No one dares go anywhere near him.'

'What if I do?' I said, and saw Sven choke on his pint.

'You go to him, mate, and you'll be a gonner!'

'It's safer in The Swellies than with him.'

They all giggled nervously and downed a whisky each.

It was after the boys had gone home for their dinner that I ventured over the bridge.

I watched Janeiro looking at me approaching from the door of his house.

I closed my eyes and walked on. When the rope whipped my legs I stayed my course. When I felt the loop slipping onto my leg and the knot tightening around my ankle I stayed my course. And when I felt the sudden jerk, I was ready to fall to the ground and strike my head on the pilot's path.

I awoke to the sound of a scolding.

'You've been drinking, haven't you, you little arse?'

The pilot dragged me by the scruff of the neck, not back onto the Estuary Bridge, as I had expected, but onto the jetty on the right, where the *Danger* sign hung and where the town's boys would dare each other to dive.

'Come back when you're sober...' said Janeiro, and before I knew it I was being thrown over. I felt my body fall like an anchor's chain through the air, and the Menai's polluted waters coming ever closer.

When I came to the surface again, and after swimming to the steps near the *Floating Restaurant*, and pulling away the seaweed that hung around my ankle, and walking through the Square like a drowned rat;

and after Mother had taken me for an injection to Gwynedd Hospital, and after drying my notebook where the seamen's words had run into one, I considered Janeiro's words again.

'Come back when you're sober...'

On Easter Saturday, therefore, I crossed the bridge again and stepped onto the pilot's path.

'Three tries for a Welshman!' he cried drily from the door of his house.

'Three..?'

'You came here years ago, didn't you?'

I blushed.

'I want to know about The Swellies.'

'Why?'

'School work.'

'I see.'

Pause.

'I call it by its Welsh name, myself,' said the pilot. 'Pwll Ceris.'

I blushed again.

'I've heard that you...'

'Come back tomorrow,' Janeiro interrupted me. 'If you're man enough.'

I was all happy as I crossed the Estuary Bridge. But half way over, the bridge's gates closed suddenly, stopping me in my tracks.

The earth moved under my feet, and the next thing I saw was that the bridge was dividing in two, and that I was moving with it. Or rather, I was moving with half of it, and my view become a panorama, moving from the castle's Eagle Tower, past the *Anglesey*, before coming to rest on the Menai, and beyond it those two trees in Môn between which the sun sets if you're looking from Golden Gate on midsummer's evening.

But neither boat nor mast seemed to be coming! I turned to the Bridgekeeper's cottage and there, in the doorframe, stood Janeiro laughing until the tears were rolling.

'Lovely view!' he cried, and disappeared into his house.

Fifteen minutes I was there, hovering between two banks with the queen's swans moving around beneath me. And perhaps I'd be there still, had it not been for the arrival of a bus-load of tourists intent on going for a walk, which forced Janeiro to press the green button and make a free man of me again.

Whilst Mother was in the chapel on Easter Sunday I crossed the Estuary bridge for the third time that week. I could see Janeiro lighting his pipe as I approached, and by the time I'd reached him the smell of seaweedsmoke filled the whole place and the pilot had started to speak.

'Pwll Ceris,' he said, 'has a bad reputation amongst all who claim to know it...'

He grabbed the biro from my hand and threw it into the woods.

'Pwll Ceris has a bad reputation,' he started again. 'And that how it's always been. It's been the demise of Celts, Romans and Vikings alike! If we'd been able to pass without it, we'd have done so centuries ago. But the Menai's main channel goes right through the bloody place.'

'Pwll Ceris is full of islands and rocks. Many visible to the naked eye, many others hidden away. There are patches of rocky shallows, and right next to them deep, deep pools, and this gives rise to the eddies.'

'And the other thing about Pwll Ceris is its narrowness. On the one side you have the rocky banks of Arfon. On the other the Cribiniau and Craig y Pwll rocks that stick up like razors. There is only a narrow gap between them, and the water accelerates like hell over there. And on top of

everything else you may get a sudden gust of wind through the trees on the Arfon side causing your boat to sheer badly.

‘Do you understand about the Menai’s tides, son? That the tide comes in from Abermenai gap on one side? And past Puffin Island on the other and that they collide in the Menai not far from Bangor?’

‘Good boy! These tides also complicate matters. For you can only pass through Pwll Ceris during the slack after high tide, when there is enough water in the channel to clear the rocks, but before the flow has turned against you. And even then, there’s little time to spare. You only have a few minutes before the tide turns. Do you hear me?’

‘That’s why we are so important,’ he went on. ‘The pilots. We have known Pwll Ceris for generations! We have been brought up to know where to go and where not to, when to go and when not to, and how much a ship should draw in relation to different tides...’

I watched him use the thumb of his right hand to compress the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. And I saw the black stain on his thumb when he reached into his pocket to fetch his lighter. He sucked fiercely as he lit his pipe, and his cheeks pulled in and pushed out as he drew the smoke into his mouth.

‘Yes, the whole world depended on us at one time! The world’s biggest ships used to come through the Menai, you know! The bastards wouldn’t have made a cent on the precious cargoes if it hadn’t been for us...’

‘You were very respected.’

‘Were?’ crossly.

I lowered my eyes and concentrated on the hole in Janeiro’s shoe, through which I could see his naked flesh. It agitated me strangely. When I raised my eyes again the pilot had turned to look at the sea.

'Respected? I should say! But any better off? No! No word of thanks, just a backhander from the captains and the blame when things went wrong...

'But what you need to know is that my forefathers went to their graves with nothing to their name but their good reputation. And nobody to commemorate them, except me. Here.'

'I'm here too!'

'Yes,' said the pilot slowly.

His face became wrinkled suddenly, as if the wind had agitated the sea.

His mouth was part open and the pipe hung limply from his lip.

I believed Janeiro was about to make a revelation. But in the end the tortured look on his face became too much for me to bear.

'Is that why you gave up?'

'I was not brought up to pilot pleasure boats. That isn't why I earned a certificate from the Board of Trade.'

'But to break the tradition..?' I insisted.

'It was broken for me!' he lost his temper. 'And anyway, I had no one...'

'Teach me!'

I saw Janeiro swallow hard.

'I'd like to be a pilot!' and I leaned forward.

But Janeiro stood up suddenly, forcing me to pull back.

'The pilot's work is useless today. The Bar's silted too much to let big ships through.'

'But what I can't understand,' I raised my voice so as to prevent him leaving, 'is why you don't use your knowledge for other things: surveying the Menai, or laying cables across it, or even write about it.... Anybody could do this!'

And as I stretched my arm to point to the Estuary Bridge I knew that I had

gone too far. Janeiro looked at me, and his words broke over us like a cold wave.

'You little bastard!' and he went into his house.

I waited over half an hour before he returned.

'Somebody said you'd been to Pwll Ceris.'

'Who said that?' the pilot was still angry.

'The seamen,' I nodded towards the tavern on the other side of the Estuary. 'Paddy, Sven and the others.'

'You've been gossiping with them, have you? Did you see that their bums had worn the quay wall smooth?'

I looked at him without saying anything.

'And what else did the lazy drunken dogs have to say?'

'Nothing... Only that you'd been to The Swellies.'

'Well, I haven't,' said Janeiro in the end. 'But I know what lies at the bottom.'

He didn't come to sit this time.

'And I'm not telling you, mate, so that you can go and laugh at me with those other devils.'

'I would never...'

'And anyway, why don't you find out for yourself? Surely there's a book or something in that school of yours?'

'I didn't come here to be mocked,' I said.

I struggled to get up and walk away. But by the time I was half way down the path I was regretting it. And when I did not feel the whip of the rope on my leg, nor the loop tightening around my shin, and when there was no jerk on the knot to make me fall again, I swore quietly.

I reached the Estuary Bridge a free man, my heart sinking.

But as I was about the step onto the bridge, the gates suddenly closed and prevented me from going any further.

I turned back and saw Janeiro smiling.

'It is another world!' he cried, as I approached. 'An unbelievable world lies at the bottom of Pwll Ceris! A multicoloured world, of which we know nothing!'

I sat a long time listening. He was in his element, talking of the Menai's splendid creatures. He talked not only of welks, and limpets, and mussels, and cockles, and types of seaweed, but also of sea scorpions and lobsters, crabs, red-eyed crabs, prawns, prickly sea urchins and jellyfish. He talked of multicoloured sponges and sea anemonies that were pink, red and purple, of feathered anemonies and blood-red starfish...

'You never know how it'll be from one day to the next,' said Janeiro. 'For the world at the bottom of Pwll Ceris is never the same.'

He turned to me, and was about to say more but was interrupted by the rude sound of a pleasure boat calling to the Bridgekeeper. I saw Janeiro shudder. He got up and stumbled into his house.

The bridge opened and the yacht sailed effortlessly from Caernarfon harbour and out into the Menai. The bridge closed and I began to move.

'Mother will be expecting me..'

'Your mother... yes...'

'Thank you for your information.'

'Yes,' said Janeiro again.

I gave him my hand but he did not accept it.

My journey back across the Estuary went without hindrance. The gates did not close when I reached the bridge. They did not close when I reached half way over. They did not close when I reached the other side,

and stepped off the Estuary Bridge to face the broad entrance of Eagle Tower.

I did not return home through the town square. Instead, I went on along the quayside, past the *Anglesey* and towards Golden Gate, in order to keep the Menai, and Janeiro, within my sight. Before going through Golden Gate I looked over my shoulder and saw the pilot at the door of his house. Standing with his eyes on the sea, and the silver buttons of his coat shining like a lighthouse in the twilight of Alun Woods.

I waved my hand but he did not wave back to me.

I did not go back to see Abram Janeiro Jones. I'm not sure why. Certainly not because he did not wave to me before I disappeared through Golden Gate, nor because he had called me names when he was angry.

The truth is that other things needed my attention over the following weeks. Exams, mostly. I got a good mark - the best in Wales - for my research project. On my eighteenth birthday in mid August I received a sum of money that had been kept for me since my birth. Mother contributed some more, so that I could go and 'see the world'.

When I came back it was time to go to university, as I had gained a place at the Department of Geography at Liverpool.

It was in the final year of my degree that I next heard of Janeiro. It was Mother, in a way, who told me.

A letter came from her soon after Easter. This was nothing remarkable. She wrote to me regularly enquiring after my health and including pieces of news about our neighbours in town. This letter was similar. But included with it was an extract from the *Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald*. This contained a rather detailed report on a shipwreck that had occurred in the Menai during Easter. I had not been paying attention to the news

at that time, as I was busy revising. The article, therefore, took my breath away.

The *Indefatigable* was an old 60-gun Jackass Frigate. I knew of it well.

It was a school ship, where young seamen were to learn their trade in navigation and plane geometry. She was brought to the Menai during the Second World War, to protect her from the air raids in Liverpool. There, in a small haven near Plas Newydd, to the west of Britannia Bridge, she had remained, a home and a school to generations of cadets.

The accident happened when it was time to move the ship back to the dry dock in Liverpool for repairs. She had no engine and the natural motion of the tide, along with two tugs, would have to be used to move her. This meant that the journey eastwards was far more perilous than the journey westwards had been fifty years before. And moving the *Indefatigable* through Pwll Ceris, that terrible mile between Britannia Bridge and Menai Bridge, would be no small thing.

Careful planning was needed, and most of all experience and specialist knowledge of the channels and tides. It was both a surprise and joy for the organizers when the Menai's most experienced pilot, said the *Herald*, Abram Janeiro Jones, agreed to guide the ship through the Menai, together with her Captain Superintendent, Captain J.E.A. Quinn.

After conferring with Dr Knight of the Bidston Observatory, it was decided to move the *Indefatigable* at the vernal equinox high tide.

The pilot asked for a third tug, in case anything went wrong. Captain Quinn refused, saying that two tugs would be sufficient to 'waltz her through'.

Saturday, April 14 was the big day, the second of the three days of the highest spring tides. It would be necessary to wait for the slack after high

tide before moving into Pwll Ceris. Moreover, the slack would only last for five minutes before the tide turned westwards again.

At 0820 the *Indefatigable* started its journey and at 0845 it came to stand to the west of Britannia Bridge. Here it was kept in place by the two tugs, to await the slack, when it could enter Pwll Ceris at 0920.

The wind was a light to moderate northwesterly, and the pilot knew that this would cause the slack to occur sooner. He insisted that the ship enter Pwll Ceris before 0920. Again Captain Quinn disagreed and insisted on keeping to the original timetable.

The operation resumed at 0915. But it was not easy to accelerate a ship of the *Indefatigable's* size and it was already 0923 by the time it passed under Britannia Bridge. The Cribiniau rocks were passed without many problems, but when the island of Gored Goch was abeam the tide had already turned westwards and was flowing rapidly against them. The pilot wanted to turn back. Again Captain Quinn refused. The operation had to be completed on this tide. Thousands of pounds were at stake.

By the time they had reached the Craig y Pwll rock, the tide against them had reached a speed of two knots, and the ship was not making any headway. It became clear that she would never make it to Menai Bridge.

Again, the pilot wanted to turn back, but Quinn did not accept his advice.

By now the *Indefatigable* was sheering badly in the fierce waters. At

1015 the stern tug was ordered to come and help the for'd tug pull the ship along. This succeeded for a while. But when the Platters rocks were abeam an eddy caused the *Indefatigable's* starboard to sheer badly.

The tugs failed to respond and counteract the sheer. The line from one of them was broken, disconnecting it from the other tug. That is when *Indefatigable* ran aground.

Attempts to refloat the ship on the afternoon tide were vain. Water flowed through the upper orlop deck ports, causing the ship to be dragged down. By night time the *Indefatigable* had been wrecked on the rocks and tides of Pwll Ceris.

A Sub-Committee was established to look into the 'accident', said the *Herald*, and it was to report to the Inquiry. At the moment, however, said the *Herald*, the main concern was the pilot, Abram Janeiro Jones, who had not been seen since the day of the shipwreck. His cottage in Caernarfon was empty.

There was one reported sighting of him under the chains of Menai Bridge. But the police were asking anyone with further information to contact them as soon as possible.

At the university in Liverpool the article's words ran into one another as the Menai's saltwater filled my eyes. I put my head down and let the tears flow for the pilot who had been like a father to me. Had I not spent my childhood in his faraway presence?

During the examination period I dreamed every night about the Menai. Of leaving the town square and rounding the castle in order to reach the quay. Of going to greet the old seamen near the *Anglesey* tavern, and of seeing them nod towards the half-open Estuary Bridge. The Keeper's cottage was empty, and when I turned back I saw the seamen laughing into their beer glasses.

I ran every night along the Menai's unsteady banks looking for you, Janeiro, and calling your name to the sound of the oystercatcher's cry. Past Waterloo Port and Llanfair-is-gaer, and the watersports centre at Plas Menai; past the port at Felinheli and Britannia Bridge, and past the rough rocks. Before leaping into the water at Pwll Ceris into the midst of

your fantastical creatures, Janeiro. I felt an eddy pull me down. And each time I would let it take me, but I never reached the bottom.

When summer ends I will have to leave Caernarfon again and go eastwards to find work. I intend to leave during the slack after high tide, and will only have a few minutes before the tide turns westwards again. I do not want it to drag me back towards the gap of Abermenai, that narrow gap whose bed has been scoured deep by the Atlantic's ebb and flow.

Meanwhile it is good to be on the banks of River Menai once again, watching the sea filling and emptying the gap that forms the border between Môn and Arfon. I recall all that the Menai has brought to this ancient town, and all that it has taken from it. But I think mainly of the Menai's complex tidal movements and of the special patterns of the red and green buoys in a river with two mouths. And I curse the pilot for not teaching me his craft.

*\*Môn, known in English as Anglesey, is an island off the coast of North West Wales.*

*Arfon (lit. 'on Môn') is the name of the area opposite it on the mainland.*