

Wales, A Distinctive Sense of Self

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Who am I? What events have shaped my identity, who I think I am and how I react in situations? Begin with an individual, but then look past them and look at the community, the people, the race; how have they become who they currently are? What events have shaped their national identity and brought them together? Could one moment, one act, have changed their destiny, who they might have been and bring them today to where they are? I speak today of the Cymru (pronounced CUMre), those who live in Cymry, what most people today call Wales.

If you look at a map of the United Kingdom, there are two main islands. One contains Ireland and North Ireland; the other, England, Scotland and Wales. Wales is located on the south western portion of the island. It is a land of gently rolling green hills and stark, snow-covered mountains and the sheep outnumber the people by almost 10 to 1. But there are secrets here, beyond the sheep, beyond the hills. A land where every year the population gathers together for the Eisteddfod, a competition that sprang from the bardic traditions and includes events in storytelling, choral and folk singing, drama, and prose, done completely in Welsh. This is a land where people gather yearly for Pilnos, preparing rushes to be soaked in fat and then stored to be burned for light over the winter months. As a pastoral nation, many of their celebrations revolve around the crops and herds they cultivate. Nos Galan Gaeaf, or All Hallows' Eve is the beginning of the New Year and is celebrated with ghost stories, bonfire contests, bobbing for apples and Wassail, which is drunk from a puzzle goblet, related to the original dribble glass.

Look with me, back through the mists of time, through the legends and the stories and men and let us discover together what catalyst has shaped, forged and ultimately driven these fiercely loyal and independent people into what they are today.

Let's go back, perhaps not to the beginning, for who truly knows when it began. History is like a fast-flowing stream, remembered differently by all those who passed by it as it hurried on. Williams claims people entered Britain by 2000 B.C., people who came from the Rhine River in Germany. These people were already expert in the use of bronze and metals and they passed this knowledge to any who may have already been living there. The Iron Age arrived by 1000 B.C., along with hill forts and settled farms. Interaction with people from the Mediterranean area influenced the designs, symbols and patterns we now consider Celtic and legends tell of a small group who fled from the battle at Troy and found refuge on the west coast of Britain.

When Julius Caesar arrived with his Roman army in 55 B.C., most of the people spoke a distinctive language which was derived from a branch of Celtic known as Brythonic.

After the Roman withdrawal in the early 5th century AD, Germanic tribes came across the North Sea to colonize Britain. These groups (generally known as the Anglo-Saxons) spoke a language that was the precursor of the English language, and the Celts in south-eastern Britain were absorbed into their culture. The Celtic west resisted fiercely, but Anglo-Saxon victories at Dyrham near Bath in 577AD, and Chester in 616AD, isolated the Celts of Wales from the Celts of south-west Britain and Cumbria respectively. (History)

Williams agrees,

Though it is now apparent that a great mingling of the different people took place in Britain for centuries after the initial Anglo-Saxon incursions, in the western peninsular now known as Wales, the majority of the people remained primarily Celtic...They soon began to think of themselves as a distinct nation in spite of the many different rival kingdoms that developed within their borders...It is also from this period that we can speak of the Welsh language, as distinct from the older Brythonic.

What change occurred to cause these Brythons, or Britons, to call themselves Cymry or Kymry? Davies suggests “The word Cymry evolved from the Brittonic word Combrogī (fellow-countryman) and its adoption suggests a deepening self-awareness among the Britons.” The word Cymry first appears in a poem praising Cadwallon written about 633 A.D. Davies continues that Cymry or Cymro “only gradually came to oust the word Brython...and it was not until the years 1100 that Cymry became as usual as Brythoniaid in the work of the poets” (pg. 71).

But where did the term Welsh or Wales come from then? Here there is a disagreement by the scholars. Williams claims, “[T]he word Welsh is a later word used by the Saxon invaders perhaps to denote people they considered ‘foreign’”. It would be easy to see how this could be. The Cymry were small, dark haired but fair skinned. The Romans were darker skinned, the Saxons lighter skinned and haired. However, Davies disagrees. He states, “‘Welsh’ meant not so much foreigners as people who had been Romanized” (pg 71).

And so, a division was marked out. Years of warfare began, the Cymry fighting both internally and externally. In 855, Rhodri Mawr emerges as a warrior king to unite most of Wales. His death 23 years later again stirred up internal strife and an alliance between his sons and Alfred, the English King. Rhodi’s grandson, Hywel Dda, kept peace with England during his reign from 904 – 950. He is the only Welsh king to earn the title “the Good”. The Chronicle of the Princes describes him as “the chief and most praiseworthy of all the Britons.” He is remembered foremost for the codification of Welsh law. Davies calls his set of laws among the most splendid creations of the culture of the Welsh.

For it contained proof not only of their identity, but also of their unity, and this is a point not to be overlooked by those who see the whole history of late medieval Wales as one of self-defeating internecine squabbles among minor princes and their offspring (pg 89).

It is important to note that Hywel did not write these laws; he simply systemized the legal customs which had been developing over the centuries. Davies continues,

The Law of Wales...was folk law rather than state law and its emphasis was upon ensuring reconciliation between kinship groups rather than upon keeping order through punishment. (pg. 88)

These laws included a women’s right to compensation should her husband beat her or be unfaithful, and she could receive up to half the land if they divorced. The law recognized nine forms of union, included a church marriage. This ensued that there were no illegitimate children, for each union of man and woman was a form of union. As long as the father acknowledged his son, the child could inherit. Nor did all of land go to the eldest son. All lands and properties were dispersed among all the children.

After Hywel’s death, King Athelstan of England again subdued the Welsh people. In 1039, Gruffudd ap Llywelyn took the throne of Gwynedd. The century between Hywel and Gruffudd was fraught with “lawlessness, intertribal warfare, petty princely squabbles and fratricide.” (Williams) Gruffudd, by the force of his determination, managed to bring all of the kingdoms of Wales under his reign. This lasted the seven years until his death, right before the invasion of the Normans. William of Normandy set up a strong, centralized kingdom. To control the Welsh, he established earldoms on the borders between the countries in areas referred to as the Marches. The Marcher Lords, as they were called, had control of most of southeast Wales by 1100. Their control of the area was to remain, on and off, until 1267. Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, “[t]hrough military conquest, after imprisoning his brothers and taking the kingdom of Gwynedd for himself...was able to re-unite much of his country in order to assert his claim Šand beĆ called ŠtheĆ Prince of Wales.” (Williams) It appeared that Wales was set to claim its own among the developing nations of Europe. This dream remained only for 5 years, however. The struggle began anew with the ascent of Edward I to the English throne in 1272.

Edward wanted the entire island under his control, and this included Scotland and Wales. Llywelyn’s brother Dafydd, in jealousy of Llywelyn’s accomplishments, defected to the English and assisted Edward in his conquests. After a defeat in 1277, Llywelyn gave up all but Gwynedd west of the Conwy River. Llywelyn was killed in battle in 1282 near the Irfon River, and with him died his dream of uniting his people.

One constant through all the battles and war, through the peace and prosperity, was the love born by the Welsh for the bards with their poetry and song. Their previous rulers, though dead and gone, lived through the epic tales spun and passed on year to year. Some of the poems took a prophetic air, comparing their slain leaders to the legendary Arthur. Williams states,

It was this popular prophetic tradition, uniting with the social unrest and racial tension that opened the door for Owain Glyndwr, Lord of Glyndyfrdwy (the Valley of the Dee). He seized his opportunity in 1400 after being crowned Prince of Wales by a small group of supporters and who subsequently felt confident enough to defy Henry IV's many attempts to dislodge him.

Owain came to power at just the right time; the penal legislation enacted in 1401 gave the English settlers more rights and curtailed those of the Welsh. Owain was also a descendant of the Princes of Powys, including many of the legends of the common people. Owain requested redress in the English court regarding a land dispute with Reginald de Grey, Lord of Ruthin. The English Parliament "treated Owain's attempt at redress with contempt, referring to the Welsh as nothing less than 'bare-footed rascals'" (Williams). The insult was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Owain and his small band of warriors attacked, captured Lord Grey, seized control of Conwy and brought a large amount of northern Wales under his control. His successes inspired the common man who had so long been trampled under the heels of English rule. They flocked to Owain from England and the Continent, ready to fight under a leader they believed had a chance to win. Even the heavens seemed to support him, for a comet flew by in 1402 and it was taken as a sign that deliverance was near. Owain rallied his people, inspired them and passed his confidence on to them. In June of 1402, Henry IV's army was completely destroyed in the battle near Pilleth. An entry in the Annales Henrici Quarit read as follows:

[Glyndwr] almost destroyed the King and his armies, by magic as it was thought, for from the time they entered Wales to the time they left, never did a gentle air breathe on them, but throughout whole days and nights, rain mixed with snow and hail afflicted them with cold beyond endurance. (Machynlleth)

Hope sprang up; here was the chance to be free, to be independent. Owain made treaties with France, with several Lords of the English court, had support from Scotland and Ireland and seemed invincible. Then it all fell apart. Henry IV's son, later Henry V, turned the tides in battle. Owain's French contact, Louis of Orleans, was killed and the French withdrew their support. The Scottish king was taken prisoner by the English. And finally, one of his own Welshmen betrayed him to the English. Owain's wife and daughters were taken to London as prisoners. He became an outlaw, went to the mountains and until 1413, continued to harass the English. Then, he simply vanished from sight. To this day, no one knows when or where he died. Ifan writes,

Nobody knows what became of Owain, he never submitted, was never captured, and was never conquered. Many say that for a number of years after the war diminished, he traveled Wales in disguise, resembling a poet or a seer, seeking his fellow country folk's opinion as to why the war failed. There is no official record of his death and no burial site has been found for him although, the favored theory at this present time is that he died at his daughter's home at Monnington Court in Herefordshire in 1416.

And Machynlleth, quoting the Annals of Owain Glyndwr, adds, "According to an anonymous writer in 1415, 'Very many say that he [Owain Glyndwr] died; the seers say that he did not.'"

England continued to impose stiffer and heavier taxes. Henry drained everything he could from Wales to build up England, not only financially but in men also. Wales was the only source he had for fighting men with previous experience. In 1431, 1433 and 1447, the English Parliament continued to reaffirm the Penal Code, which as biased with anti-Welsh sentiments. Davies believes "the literature written in the century after 1415 is more nationalistic than any other period" (pg. 204). Gwyn Williams agreed:

Since 1410 most Welsh people most of the time have abandoned any idea of independence as unthinkable. But since 1410 most Welsh people, at some time or another, if only in some secret corner

of the mind, have been "out with Owain and his barefoot scrubs." For the Welsh mind is still haunted by its lightning-flash vision of a people that was free."

Henry succeeded Henry, until Henry VIII ascended to the English throne in 1509. Henry obtained the throne from his father in "relative political peace and [with] a full treasury" (England). Henry's major problem involved who would inherit from him. His first marriage was to Catherine of Aragon, the aunt of the powerful Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was also Charles I of Spain. Catherine had given birth to a daughter, but no sons. Henry feared leaving England and its future to a woman and requested an annulment from the Bishop of Rome. The pope refused. The reasons for the refusal are diverse, but the root of problem was actually the marriage itself. Catherine had been married as an infant to Henry's older brother Arthur. Arthur died in his teens, without ever consummating the marriage. Both the ruling families of Aragon-Castille and England requested the Pope to grant a special dispensation so that Henry could "marry the widow of his brother, despite the injunction of Leviticus against this" (Quirk). Since England and Spain had a history of "rocky relations" (Quirk), the Pope granted the request out of concern for peace in Christendom. So, when Henry asked for an annulment on the grounds of incest (since he had technically married his brother's widow) a papal investigation was conducted. The Pope finally refused to grant an annulment, partially because of doing so would have reversed his original special dispensation, but also because Catherine's father Charles and Spain carried more influence internationally than Henry and England. To say the least, Henry was not pleased.

Anxious to wed the comely Anne Boleyn, Henry secured passage of the Act of Supremacy (1534) by Parliament. This measure ended papal authority in England and made the king head of the church in England. Most of the bishops supported the annulment and remarriage. Henry's power was further bolstered when he seized church property within his realm. The monks and nuns were turned out and the monasteries sold to wealthy nobles. In this way, Henry increased his treasury and formed a firm bond with grateful nobles (England).

Soon after he broke with Rome over the church and his requests for annulment, his focus turned to Wales. The first Acts of Union was passed in 1536. Wikipedia states:

The 1536 Act of Union divided Wales into thirteen counties: Anglesey, Brecon, Caernarfon, Cardigan, Carmarthen, Denbigh, Flint, Glamorgan, Merioneth, Monmouth, Montgomery, Pembroke and Radnor and imposed the Law of England on Wales as well as outlawing the Welsh language for official purposes, excluding most native Welsh from any formal office.

The actual Act reads:

Also be it enacted by the authority aforesaid that all justices, Commissioners, sheriffs, coroners, escheators, stewards and their Lieutenants, and all other officers and ministers of the law, shall proclaim and keep the sessions, courts ... in the English tongue, and all oaths of officers, juries and inquests and all other affidavits ... to be given and done in the English tongue; and also that from henceforth no person or persons that use the Welsh speech or language shall have or enjoy any manner office or fees within this realm of England, Wales or other the King's Dominion upon pain of forfeiting the same offices or fees, unless he or they use and exercise the English speech or language. (Hanes)

This act did not affect most of the common persons, and therefore, did not bring up any type of rebellion. Williams states two possibilities as to why. "Either the majority of the people of Wales realized the hopelessness of their position, or their leading citizens were too busy enjoying the fruits of cooperation with London." This did separate the ruling class from the commoners, however, for the commoner had no need to learn English while the gentry must to maintain their positions.

Williams sums up the people at the time, saying,

The social and cultural differences of the Welsh, especially in the matter of their language, kept them apart from their neighbors and made their society seem so strange and "closed" to the rest of Britain, and it is in the language of Wales where the differences are most experienced. To a large extent,

language (with its corollary literature), and to a lesser extent the Protestant religion, were the two pillars that kept the struggle for independence alive, as dismal and as hopeless as it seemed after 1536 and even more so after 1603. Both had been helped immeasurably by the fortuitous arrival of and widespread dissemination of the Welsh Bible.

The printing press reached Wales approximately 1546. Most of the books printed were religious texts. Sir John Price (John Prys of Brecon) published the first book, *Yn Llyvyr Hwnn* (In this Book). Tradition claims “the very first book actually printed in Wales itself was “Y Drych Gristianogawl” (The Christian Mirror), produced in a cave at Llandudno, North Wales as a surreptitious counter-reformation text in 1585.” (Williams) However, the driving force was truly William Salesbury, an ardent Protestant. In 1547, Salesbury wrote, “And take this advice from me; unless you save and correct and perfect the language before the extinction of the present generation, it will be too late afterwards” (Davies pg. 240). Salesbury’s true passion, however, was to proselyte not preserve the Welsh language. In his *Oll Synnwyr Pen Kembero Ygyd* in 1547, he stated,

If you do not wish to be worse than animals . . . obtain learning in your own language; if you do not wish to be more unnatural than any other nation under the sun, love your language and those who love it. If you do not wish utterly to depart from the faith of Christ...obtain the [H]oly [S]cripture in your own tongue as your happy ancestors, the ancient British, had it. (Davies pg 250)

In 1563, after many petitions to the Queen and Parliament, a law was passed requiring the Bible be translated into Welsh. This was done as part of the Protestant Reformation of Britain. Elizabeth was appalled by the slowness of the Welsh people to learn English and to convert from Catholicism. The suggestion made to the court was that the Welsh people, if able to compare the Bible side by side in English and Welsh, would learn English faster. This would also help with conversion to Protestantism, since the Catholic masses were said in Latin. Previous to this, there had been little of the Bible translated into Welsh. John Prys’s book contained “the Credo, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments.” (Davies pg. 239) Rome was not pleased with this work. Davies states,

Pope Gregory VII had argued, the ŹScriptures...if available to everyone...will be misinterpreted by those of little learning...who will then be led to perdition.’ (pg. 239)

Whatever the original intent, the Welsh language was given an unintended status and a place of honor by being used as a medium for the Holy Scriptures and became the only non-state language of that time to do so that century. Meanwhile, the common sense of the common Welshman was exhibited by their shared sentiment of “Why bother with English, when there was a perfectly acceptable Welsh in which to worship God?” (Williams) Davies brings up a very interesting point. Although it has been forbidden to use Welsh in matters of state, Elizabeth has just required its use in spiritual matters less than one generation later. “Yet in the Elizabethan age, the authorities consider religious uniformity to be more important than any linguistic uniformity.”

Salesbury was entrusted with the greater part of this mission of translation since he had an earlier translation already to his credit. He was assisted by Bishop Richard Davies of Abergwili. Since both men were scholars, the translation they created was written in the words and phrases they were used to using. This translation was commendable but virtually worthless for anyone who was not a scholar. William Morgan, who was a parish priest of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, stepped up to “save... the day and perhaps the language” (Williams). Morgan had studied Greek, Hebrew and Latin while attending Cambridge. This gave him the foundation he needed to create a translation that could be used by both the scholar and the common man. Morgan’s translation, completed with the help of fellow scholars, was completed in 1588. Richard Davies, one of these scholars, made use of a myth that Protestantism was actually the true religion of Wales, existing prior to the arrival of the Catholic Church. This myth assisted in making the transition from Catholicism easier for the Welsh people. Morgan was, by all accounts, a good man whose focus was on saving souls for God. He was merely focused on this and would probably been surprised to see the enormous effect his translation had upon the language and literature of the people of Wales. Williams states,

Many historians believe that it was this book alone that prevented Welsh from becoming nothing more than a bundle of provincial dialects or of even disappearing altogether. Perhaps it is mainly to this that much of the strength of present-day Welsh is owed, compared to Irish (which did not get its own Bible until 1690), and Scots Gaelic (which had to wait until 1801).

There were 1000 copies of Morgan's Bible, as it is called, printed and distributed. The crown was interested in having these books in people's homes for everyday use. Thus, children were taught to read using the Bible and were inspired to continue to write other literature in Welsh. This inspired Stephens to claim: "The Bible of 1588 was as influential in keeping alive the idea of an independent Wales as the defeat of the Amada [the same year] was in maintaining English independence."

Williams continues,

Since Morgan's language was that of the poets, "contemporary and classical, natural and dignified," it was also the Bible of Morgan "that ensured the purity, accuracy and strength of the poetic vocabulary should live on" at the time when the Bardic Order was facing extinction. It was the translation of the Bible that ensured the continuity of the literary language of Wales, linking the Medieval period to the modern.

Morgan's Bible was so popular that all of the copies either wore out or were stolen very quickly. Dr. John Davies performed some minor corrections and a few standardizations when he revised the book in 1620. Dr. Davies' translation is more similar to the King James Version in English. There was also a smaller, less expensive version printed in 1630 named "Y Beibl Bach" or The Little Bible. This was the only book most families could afford to purchase. It was made available to everyone in church and assisted in making Sunday schools a prominent part of both the social and religious lifestyles in Wales. Of his Bible, Dr. Davies wrote:

It is impossible to believe that God would have seen fit to keep this language alive until these days, after so many crises in the history of the nation...had He not intended His name to be called and His great works to be proclaimed in it. (Williams)

Most scholars agree that the influence of the Welsh Bible is incalculable: because of it, and strengthened by it, through their faith, their religious leaders, their language and their literature, the people of Wales were able to continue the struggle and become who they are today.

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