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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

Reviews

How to Cite:

[Name of reviewer], Reviews, *International Journal of Welsh Writing in Wales (Plural)*, 10.1 (2023), 1, DOI: 10.16995/wwe.10843.

Published:

December 2023

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The University of Wales Press wishes to acknowledge the funding received from the Open Library of Humanities towards the cost of producing this open access journal.

REVIEWS

**Darren Chetty, Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, Iestyn Tyne (eds).
Welsh (Plural): Essays on the Future of Wales (London:
Repeater Books, 2022). Pp 260. £12.99.**

There is a reason Günther Grass called his autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (*While Peeling the Onion*). The title suggests the exposing of multiple layers, but also the pain and tears which may accompany honest explorations of individual and collective identities. Such introspection invites pluralities, whether they be the chronologically subsequent or parallel identities of one person or, as in *Welsh (Plural)*, the approaches to Welshness, Wales and identities taken by twenty authors tasked with resisting ‘the idea that national identity can be based on a single story’. The four editors of this anthology, inspired by a workshop at the Hay Festival which left them feeling that Wales was lacking the visible and manifest ‘brand’ enjoyed by Scottish and Irish writers, asked contributors to ‘imagine Welshness as both distinct *and* inclusive’ in the second decade of a twenty-first-century Wales marked by legacies of Empire and migration movements and by twenty years of a devolved Welsh government that ‘gave everyone in Wales political citizenship’, but also by continued concerns about the survival of the Welsh language and a distinctive Welsh culture. Raymond Williams’s 1975 quest for the location of Wales’s ‘real identity, the real culture’ introduces their texts, which explore intersections of place, race, language and class predominantly (gender is less obvious here) and their role in the formation of identities. The concept of *cynefin* – mentioned or not – appears to be central to most texts. Personal and public histories intermingle in most essays as the private becomes political, the anthology a kaleidoscope moving on to different combinations of perspective, style, voice and location in every contribution: from Cardiff to Rhyl and London, from the rural to the urban and the metropolitan, Muslim voices to those of agnostics and cultural Nonconformists, from Welsh speakers to Welsh learners and those pondering the meaning of accent, at times all rolled into one.

The editors rightly insist that by pulling back from the ‘immediacy of politics’ cultural entrepreneurs are well placed to contribute to the

‘collective imagination’, and the contributors all attempt to do so – the more obviously literary authors differently to the academics. Yet, musician Cerys Hafana summarises what emerges in a number of essays when she concludes that it is ‘the infrastructure – education, media, housing, jobs – that does the most in protecting the future of marginalised and minoritised groups’. The authors cannot escape referencing the *Realpolitik* that may make or break imagined identities and nations. Their focus on Welshness and Wales necessarily throws light on England, Britain and the UK. England and the UK are always present, as the context of Welsh identities and as part of migratory movements. As Joe Dunthorne puts it, ‘full of shit, it was also full of job prospects in the creative arts, members of our extended families and good universities’. The essays are not all an easy read for those who love this country. Uncomfortable passages, like Mike Parker’s extended rejection of the ‘replica, flatpack nation’ Wales too often attempts to be and the multiple references to racism, or to having to negotiate ‘racialised identity in white spaces’ as in Shaheen Sutton’s chapter, force an honest look at ourselves, no airbrushing, just *Wales (Plural)*. While the more academic writers set the scene and analyse histories and data as expected, it is the more literary and autobiographical essays, often by the (younger) cultural entrepreneurs – novelists, poets, musicians – which truly excited me, made me laugh, annoyed me a little, angered me on their behalf, or made me want to give them a good Welsh cwtch to let them know that we are here for them.

To look forward, we need to establish how we arrived at a Welsh national identity which, though not problem-free as many reflections show, is no longer that of the ‘naked people under an acid rain’ imagined by Gwyn Alf Williams in 1984. Martin Johnes’s opening chapter explores our emotional relationship with a past that non-historians prefer to be simple. Welsh history for many still means focusing on perceived mistreatments by England rather than exploring a complex story of complicity and the advantages of union with England, mention of which may elicit ‘angry letters, tweets and emails’. His timely reminder of the darker legacies of Empire is combined with a plea for writing the histories of a diverse Wales. Mike Parker also takes stock, mainly of the work of Leopold Kohr and Jan Morris, focusing on the former’s remarks on Wales’s abundance of resources and the latter’s imagining of a Wales where ‘multiple identities are allowed to exist even within the one person’

and Machynlleth is a capital city. Topical and political, some passages are deeply uncomfortable, but therefore thought-provoking. Kohr's 'power theory of aggression' is as applicable today as it was in 1971, and so is Morris's turn from political nationalism following the 1990s atrocities in Yugoslavia. Charlotte Williams's comprehensive thoughts on 'Cynefin, the Curriculum and Me' should be read with those two. Williams's article combines reflections on her childhood as a lone black child in the middle of an all-white school photograph in north Wales with exploring definitions, challenges and the potential of *cynefin* – 'the place where we feel we belong, where the people and landscape around us are familiar, and the sounds and sights are reassuringly recognisable' (Welsh Curriculum Framework) – and a review of research on race, ethnicity, equality and history teaching that reaches from the present back to Bernstein's 1970s views on the role of education and society to explain persisting inequalities in the Wales of today. Dan Evans completes the more academic historical stocktaking. Merfyn Jones's 1992 essay 'Reconstructing Wales' informs his discussion of Welsh histories produced in the second half of the twentieth century, which often divided identities into 'nationalist' and 'Labourist', and the effects of devolution on Welshnesses that, perhaps, are no longer as binary as that. Most interesting is his application of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to the exploration of Welsh identities.

The majority of the contributors focus more closely on how their individual histories – childhoods, migrations and encounters with racism, accents and languages, rurality and urbanity – reflect changing historical realities of Welshness as much as they have shaped the authors of the essays. Place is a starting point for many. 'Welsh Indian South African Londoner' Darren Chetty chooses the changing appearance of the 'Black Boy' pub sign to explore his Swansea childhood and attitudes to race there. We meet a Sikh Elvis impersonator and learn about everyday casual racism, Charles II and the Georgian fashion for black 'exotic' servants as markers of status. Chetty's love for Swansea City and the Vetch highlights the way team loyalties shape local and national identities and attitudes to race. Joe Dunthorne's 'We Bleed Red' adds another perspective on place, sport and belonging, charting the attempts of a half-English boy to sound as Welsh as possible at the Vetch and as posh English at university, until his Welshness vanished 'for months,/ only to reappear come Regional Awards season.'¹ He feels fraudulent until the conflict is resolved by a community of 'wish-we-were-Welsher' rugby fans in London, the digital

age having helped him learn all three verses of *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*. Accent and language are as important as place.

Kandace Siobhan Walker's reflections begin with Welsh rurality, the Brecon Beacons to which she is transplanted as a child and where the history of her composite family reflects complex migration movements that unite Hong Kong, Jamaica and London. Her insightful comments that nature 'belongs to whiteness' are backed up with sociological studies, and with hauntingly beautiful descriptions of rural and urban environments:

At dusk, I am a teenage girl standing in a field, in the shadow of surrogate mountains, bare feet in the earth, the knee-high cornsilk grass brushing my skirt, submerged in the clear plasticity of a world almost without time [...] I feel small but right [...]

When I hear the engine I turn, knowing that I will see, through the hedge, a white man in a black Range Rover, sleeker than a big cat in a zoo. His white family staring from the passenger seats. Each watching the other, questioning which is the intruder, whose presence is authentic, whose is artificial. To me, the clean tyres give them away. To the tourists, my skin is its own betrayal. Suddenly I am nowhere.

Her adult return to the metropole means a liberating familiarity but also delivers racism, 'the slaver' still on its pedestal. The 'Welsh rural' may provide a 'generative space for the articulation of Blackness' after all. For Durre Shahwar too, as someone born outside the UK but 'having lived, been educated and worked in Wales for the greater part' of her life, Welsh identity is constructed through nature and place. As in the case of other people of colour in this anthology, she is forced to question her Welshness, not least by the UK Border Agency (the 'nation state' intruding into private Welsh lives again) attempting to deport her family. Benedict Anderson and Charlotte Williams are cited to explain ways of 'belonging to something bigger than yourself'. The difficulties of filling in equality and diversity forms are partly overcome by venturing out into the countryside, a process by which Wales becomes the home of a Welshness which is not a 'performance for others'. In the application of 'place identity' *cynefin* springs to mind again. Shaheen Sutton movingly describes the multi-ethnic community of 'Pill' in Newport and becoming Welsh outside Wales, called a 'Taffy' in Birmingham for

her Welsh accent as a child and accepted as Welsh in Glasgow as an adult, perhaps on the basis of a 'shared aversion to English nationalism'. Back home, the 1970s' 'unrelenting barrage of racist abuse' which had forced her best friend's family to leave, slowly changes to less obvious forms of racism, and a female role model, a white woman 'in her mid-forties', introduces her to a complex imperial history which includes the drowning of Tryweryn, the Aberfan disaster, 'good immigrant' Paul Robeson, Chartism and the 1919 race riots: 'A forgotten Wales beneath a forgotten Wales'. Just when it seems that things have turned out well for her, we are shocked back into reality with descriptions of brutal racist attacks in her home community. This, too, is our country, where 'Black and brown people, im/migrants and nonmigrants' are forced to prove and validate their Welshness, now often by learning Welsh and sporting Welsh rugby shirts.

Our national poet Hanan Issa has placed her essay 'Have you heard the one about the Niqabi on a Bus?' almost at the end of the anthology she co-edited. I had heard this urban myth and – like her and many others – revelled in the public scolding of an English racist in a Welsh bus. Her unpicking of the story reveals a 'double whammy' of otherness Welsh Muslims endure that had escaped my attention: marked as other by ethnicity and by religion. She uncovers fascinating historical Muslim presences and legacies in Britain and Wales and uses her nan's changing attitudes and her mother's journey to Islam to chart the meaning of clothing perceived to be 'unWelsh'. The final passage in her essay describes a practice through which Welshness may be defined by care for your *cynefin*:

Muslims believe that every person has an obligation to be a caretaker of the Earth. I prefer the word caretaker as it emphasises responsibility over ownership. When my son was born we had a tree planted in a patch of forest near Bridgend. It felt just as important to his legitimization as getting his birth registered at City Hall or hosting an aqiqah. In measuring a person's Welshness, could a respect for the landscape and its people take precedence over aesthetics?

For those contributors born to white, Welsh or Welsh-speaking parents, Welshness may appear less fraught, but their search for communities, their questioning of accents, language and class, and

attempts to maintain integrity in the wider culture of the UK, are not unproblematic either. Though the majority of essays are written from the perspective of north Wales, they present very different accounts of Welshness. Cerys Hafana allows fresh insights into the life of a queer folk musician, and the tensions between the ‘woolly’ concepts of tradition and change – folk being traditional music ‘that can, and will, be changed’. Moving tributes to her teacher Nansi Richards and references to the Welsh Romani who contributed to the Welsh cultural renaissance after 1815,² alternate with exploring tensions between tradition and innovation. The Celtic folk music scene is revealed to be home to shockingly homophobic and misogynist behaviour, and the continuing heteronormativity of dance at the ‘spine tingling’ new Dinas Mawddwy Mari Lwyd is questioned. But, as a white Welsh speaker with a Welsh first name, Hafana also interrogates her own privilege. Interestingly, this is the only essay which pulls back the veil on the continuing issue of Welsh identities being defined by outdated nineteenth-century muscular masculinities. Iestyn Tyne explodes any notion of a common British farming community in his beautiful and poignant essay on upland marginal farming communities, often perceived as areas ‘where long lost ways of life’, including the Welsh language, survive, yet which hide a dark truth of a rural poverty deepened by their roles as tourist attraction and provider of second homes. Tyne’s explorations are supported by an account of work experience he undertook aged seventeen on a wealthy Worcestershire farm, staffed mainly by relentlessly exploited and denigrated Eastern European migrant workers. His Welshness, rooted in ancient landscapes and community spirit, does not stem from this experience, but his conviction that Welsh independence is the only solution certainly does: ‘Because how does one defend the oppressed from under the roof of the oppressor?’ Grug Muse focuses on internal Welsh divisions, using ‘Datganoli/Devolution’ and 1997 as the temporal span of her memory and the changes in her native village Penygroes as markers – of decline but also of the hope embodied by the community café in which she sits. Responses to the devolution referenda are measured in music, places, and the routes which connect them – between A470 and M4 – before she pays homage to a day in the life of a high street in north Wales, its fate threatened by out-of-town shopping centres and e-commerce, and apparently by the ‘strangers’ moving in, who surprise locals by forming community cooperatives and Caffi’r Orsaf, a new civic space:

The new cafés are surprising not simply because they are new uses for old buildings, but because they are a new type of public space in this post-industrial valley. Civic space has traditionally been dominated by the chapel and pub. Traditionally, these were masculine spaces, in a valley of masculine industries. ... Y Banc has its own softplay area for children. Yr Orsaf is filled regularly with tables of young mothers, parents with children, grandparents and grandchildren.

The wider political meaning of changing place and spaces is demonstrated by the migration of Welsh speakers to Cardiff, the gentrification of Grangetown and the destruction of Butetown. Should evolution not mean decentralisation? Niall Griffiths, hailing from Liverpool, is made Welsh on an outward bound experience in Snowdonia, which sets him on a path to a political Celtic Welshness reflected in his topical essay that interprets the pandemic border monitoring as a 'foretaste of the fracturing of the UK'. Griffiths asserts that the UK parliament is facing a growing Celtic challenge in the Senedd, the Scottish parliament and at Stormont. Having chosen to live in north Wales, his is a nationalism rooted in Ned Thomas's writings, one that seeks to include, from Catalunya to the expatriate Welsh communities of Ohio.

Andy Welch and Morgan Owen explore their Welsh identity by connecting place, language and accent. Welch's Rhyl accent – perceived by outsiders as a 'generic north-western twang' and by his peers as 'uniquely not-Scouse, not-Chester definitely northeast Walian' – leads to explorations of his family history and that of neighbours who built the Rhyl that attracted the Victorian tourists who in turn made the local Welsh change their accent to accommodate the paying guests. Welch's quest for a Welsh identity returns him to political realities and infrastructures, as in the other essays. How can a man develop a national identity if a '180-mile journey from Rhyl to [the capital] Cardiff takes more than four hours on two trains, and even longer by car', but a trip to Anfield just over an hour? How can a feeling of being Welsh be achieved if your home town is never on the Welsh news? Is there a 'sliding scale' to Welshness which proceeds to 'very, very Welsh' for eisteddfodic Welsh speakers? Welch does not offer answers but his questions are poignant and worth considering. Merthyr Tydfil is the centre of Morgan Owen's essay, which almost angrily rejects perceptions

of his home as the death bed of nature and the Welsh language, as he sits ‘in a grove of oak with bluebells and wood sorrel at my feet, watching my town and thinking to myself in Welsh.’ Like the Merthyr he defends passionately, Owen faces multiple challenges, as he explores divisions within the Welsh-language community that outsiders may well miss: the assumption that native Welsh speakers do not hail from working-class Merthyr, the cultural dominance of middle-class children from *Y Fro Gymraeg* described as having ‘direct access to, and participation in, the institutional Welsh-language culture, and more importantly, with ample encouragement and opportunities.’ However, somebody my age recalls that the parents of those children fought as much for that access – by founding their own schools and organisations and going to prison for refusing to comply with a monolingual English state apparatus – as did his working-class parents. We return to explorations of *cynefin*.

The three most consciously literary pieces touched me in very different ways. Gary Raymond’s ‘How to be a Welsh novelist: A Choose your Destiny Adventure Game’, structured around computer game logarithms, injected humour with its treatment of the serious matter of trying to write a novel with ‘characters that are true, plotlines gleaned from your own life growing up in Wales’, while making a living, staying in Wales and contributing meaningfully to our culture. Twenty-one choices send you back and forth, between writing in Welsh or English, selling your integrity to an agent who wants you to make the novel ‘less Welsh’ and more Scottish noir (or not in which case your book launch takes place upstairs in a Cardiff pub), and realising that if you are not a white middle-class man ‘getting your novel published is going to be harder’. I am not divulging the end scenarios but one is not sure which is sadder. Marvin Thompson, a ‘Welsh citizen brought up in England by parents who were born in Jamaica’, explores form very differently and in the minor key in ‘On Writing a Modern Welsh Horror’. Investigating his own creative process in composing a twelfth-century ‘sestina’ on Brecon and the slave trade as part of the ‘Outposted’ project of 2020, his text is a deeply impressive bitter ‘Triptych’ on the pain of ‘living in a nation that celebrates slave traders’, where blue plaques to men who ‘grew rich from selling slaves’ are still unveiled; on the imagined journey of enslaved brothers, the shame of being a slave and not persisting with an alien university degree, the forgotten contributions of black soldiers in Empire wars and the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on people of colour (a fact many of us have probably forgotten by now). There is also past and current resistance as a portable jackhammer or a

woman's hand remove the blue plaque to the slaver. The horror genre itself comes under the microscope, when Thompson conveys his reading of African-American Goth Leyla Taylor, and is related to identity and the whiteness of public spaces with which other contributors, too, have had to contend all their lives:

To be black is to be the fear, to be the thing that goes bump in the night, hiding under the bed.

It is one thing to use literature or film to process social anxieties but what do you do when you are the social anxiety? What do you do when the villagers with torches and pitchforks are coming after you?

There is hope of teaching future generations. His 'Mixed Race children' are capitalised, as well as 'Welsh' and 'Black' to indicate respect for their dual heritage and indicate the beginning of new Welsh identities. The Anti-racist Wales Action plan envisaged when he wrote his contribution offers similar hope.³ If Raymond's piece made me chuckle, Thompson's filled me with shame about whitewashing and a stasis that took the deaths of too many people to be broken. The volume closes with a series of literary letters to the editors by artist and curator Rabab Ghazoul, moving in their honest admission of the lack of mental wellbeing which has led to this form, the slowly healing fractures of all our multiple identities. His four letters may have given up on 'trying to catch one clear thought', but they give us the most succinct and down-to-earth portrayal of Wales's role in Empire, and his dreams for our future, a perfect coda to the volume:

When I think of Wales, I think of its injuries and hurts and wounds, and also its complicities, its willingness to go along with the looting and depravity, not perhaps as principal actor, not the leader of the pack, not the bully at the front always making a show of himself in the playground taking everybody's sweets and homework, but the keen pupil sitting at the back of class, not so prominent – the one that tags along.

Towards the end of the Radio 4 piece where they invited me to talk about Wales, I made a kind of plea, I think I was dreaming a little. I said that when the Welsh independence movement struggled alongside other anti-colonial and anti-racist movements,

when the yearning in Wales to dismantle white supremacy was as strong as the yearning to free ourselves from English supremacy, when we championed multiple liberation struggles as our own and drove all emancipatory aspirations into one – when we did this, we'd be moving in the direction of something, we might be getting somewhere. We'd still be small, yes, but formed perfectly as some kind of force to be reckoned with.

Some of the more overtly political essays in this volume – referencing raw pandemic experiences and Brexit – whilst losing topicality, may gain importance as demarcations of change, reminders of forgotten EU policies and of the campaign slogans of the 'age of the political liar utterly unburdened by shame' (Griffiths), which the early 2020s appear to be. I hope all of the texts will move the reader as they have moved me, often to feel uneasy, but rightly so. We need to read and react to all stories and voices if we want our future Wales to be plural. Representing a complete set of voices is impossible, but the volume should have included Welsh people of (Eastern) European origin – beyond the Polish migrant workers mentioned by Tyne – members of post-World War Two migration movements, who have contributed to our culture, and who may reveal to us different sets of complex Welsh European identities. I am also missing more conscious intersections with gender and, strangely for me, mention of or the voices of the mothers who surely influence identities – faced with decisions on which language to speak with their children, which schools to choose, which food traditions to maintain or merge. As Johnes and Sutton remind us, family and community shape identities perhaps more than formal education. It also grates a little that the ingrained reverence for the (older) male still appears to unduly influence the choices of those who are shaping the future of Welsh culture. One would have expected Charlotte Williams's essay to open the collection and establish direction. Then again, the lacunae perhaps leave room for a further volume with a slightly different focus. *Welsh (Plural)* will be on the reading list of our Year One History module *Inventing a Nation*, which begins with a seminar asking the students to reflect on 'identity'. I look forward to discussing the volume with them.

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Notes

- ¹ This was a poem written for him by his friend Tim Clare.
- ² It is interesting to note that the fullest description of their contribution was published in Welsh first and in English twelve years later. A. O. H. Jarman and Eldra Jarman, *Y Sipsiwn Cymreig: teulu Abram Wood* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1979); Eldra Jarman and A. O. H. Jarman, *The Welsh Gipsies: Children of Abraham Wood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991).
- ³ Anti-racist Wales Action plan | GOV.WALES / Cynllun Gweithredu Cymru Wrth-hiliol | LLYW.CYMRU.

