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University of Wales Press

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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 English*, 5 (2018), 1, DOI: 10.16995/ijwwe.5.4

Published:
January 2018

Open Access:
International Journal of Welsh Writing in English is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:
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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

M. Wynn Thomas, *The Nations of Wales 1890–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016). Pp. 323. £24.99.

In the midst of his typically nuanced and revelatory reading of Arthur Machen's slippery, provocative horror novels, M. Wynn Thomas summarises the reasons for dedicating an entire book to a mere twenty-four years in Wales's history:

> The momentous social, economic and cultural developments of the later nineteenth century had left Wales riven by disturbing dualities, the site of bewildering juxtapositions, and the locus of unpredictably eruptive forces . . . the whole radically unsettled country had come to exhibit something of a marchland condition of fluid plurality and indeterminacy, a condition empowering at some times, but overpowering at others. (p. 258)

Wynn Thomas lists the multiple identities Machen tactically adopted: Welsh, English, Celtic Welsh, Celtic English, Western English and even 'Silurian', taken up sometimes to subvert dominant national narratives and sometimes unconsciously as he reproduced contemporary pseudo-scientific discourses of race (p. 260). Machen, his novels and his essays are therefore ideal material for *The Nations of Wales*, which responds to – and in many ways surpasses – previous attempts to move beyond essentialist definitions of this most multifaceted entity, such as Gwyn A. Williams's *When Was Wales?* (1979). Wynn Thomas draws on postmodern history and media/cultural theory to produce a cultural history of the late Victorian and early Edwardian period, drawing most obviously on the works of Benedict Anderson and to a lesser extent Judith Butler to move us away from understanding Wales as a coherent political, ethnic or – more problematically – linguistic entity, and encourage us to conceive of Wales as a set of diverse, often mutually contradictory, texts. Machen attacks the Nonconformists by drawing on Arnoldian representations of the Celt as heir to deep spirituality; the statues in Cardiff's City Hall evince pride while forming a chess-set of competing political and cultural visions: Boadicea (the only female statute, which was hastily added), Henry Tudor and Glyndŵr face off,

while the slippery Wallo-Celto-Norman Gerald stands near Williams Pantycelyn. Turning to the Golden Ages of Welsh scholarship and revival, Thomas details O. M. Edwards's promotion of bilingual scholarship, pride in the Nonconformist nation, but also his deep-rooted anti-Semitism; the astonishing chapter on evangelist Evan Roberts shakes the foundations of Edwardian last-gasp Evangelism by recasting it as a dark psychodrama of mental instability and power struggles. It is this chapter that most explicitly exposes the millennial undercurrent of *The Nations of Wales*. The fascination for me in regard to Thomas's approach to the period between both the death of Cymru Fydd and the general cataclysm of the First World War and the replacement of Liberal Wales with the Industrial Wales of the Labour Party and its rural rump, is that this heir to the democratic intellectual traditions of Edwards and John Morris Jones implies that late Victorian Wales's combination of visible progress and invisible rottenness is instructive for the inhabitants of late-capitalist Wales.

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) makes the case that the nation is a Victorian concept that can only exist once the conditions of modernity have been acquired: an educated middle-class discontented with the imperial hegemony and the technical and logistical infrastructure required to make vernacular texts available to a wide range of far-flung consumers. Once the national can be recovered or invented by intellectuals and easily disseminated through books, the arts and newspapers, a nation is born. For Wales, as Wynn Thomas demonstrates, this occurred in the 1880–1914 period as universities were founded, papers and periodicals circulated, and the lessons of Young Ireland, Young Italy and other Young nations were imbibed. The intellectual and political estates seem strong; Welsh-language literature and scholarship are experiencing a golden age. Lloyd George is on the rise and religious and land reform are on the agenda. Revivals sweep the nation and literary Welsh has adapted through the efforts of popular communicators such as Edwards and poets such as T. Gwynn Jones, whose 'Ymadawiad Arthur' (1910) reclaimed Arthur from the English. Wynn Thomas demonstrates that the substructure of Welsh Wales's cultural and political confidence is brittle. The Golden Age is a last hurrah for the visionaries: the populous south-east is becoming almost wholly Anglophone; the defeat of Cymru Fydd in 1894 initiates the decline of Liberalism; and Lloyd George's premiership in fact signals the end of his ambitions for Wales. Despite occasional revivals, the

chapels are emptying, unable to compete with trade unionism's critique of extractive capitalism's depredations. What comes across particularly clearly is that despite the idealism and the depth of these strands of Welsh life, almost nobody – bar the Welsh-language activists – saw the Fall coming.

Having reconstituted Wales as a collection of texts, *The Nations of Wales* exposes their often conflicted and conflicting constructions of Wales. In addition to the Cardiff Valhalla, Machen's novels, the range of beliefs collected under the banner of Nationalism, the career of O. M. Edwards and the gloriously campy 1909 National Pageant, a range of more-or-less obscure novels and poems are examined. In chapter two, 'Performing Political Identity', Beriah Gwynfe Evans's *Hunangofiant Dafydd Dafis* (1898) is dissected as a prime example of uneasy Welsh engagement with genre writing, while chapter four, 'Literature and the Political Nation', stresses the importance of creative work – paying proper attention to the relationship between genre and intended meaning – in the making of a nation denied political expression. Through the recovery of past literary cultures and texts – perhaps rather imaginatively and often on a deeply exclusionary basis – and the production of new work, a nation is made. Thus Tom Ellis becomes the centre of a personality cult through a revival of the Bardic tradition, instantiating a cultural and political continuity not borne out by cold analysis of political facts on the ground. In contrast to Machen's mysticism, Gwyneth Vaughan uses historical fiction to promote a 'pur[e]' Welsh-speaking and Nonconformist Wales at odds with her more progressive political activism (p. 123), while the contributionist reaction against Chapel Wales is represented by Daisy Pryce's *The Ethics of Evan Wynne* (1913). Wynn Thomas's sharp dissection of Celticism's origin in English notions of racial hierarchies is much needed, though I would have welcomed more discussion of relations between Wales and Ireland in particular because the Cymru Fydd movement seemed to walk a line between political envy towards and sectarian horror of their boisterous Catholic relations.

Although Wynn Thomas's introduction apologises for the relative absence of miners and women in *The Nations of Wales* (he directs us to other scholars), the marginalised contribution of women in this period is acknowledged: for example, his examination of Jessie Penn-Lewis's anglicised, middle-class Welsh evangelism and its influence on Evan Roberts should lead to a revival of interest in this fascinating figure. It is

certainly true, however, that the voices of working-class Welsh-language and English-language makers of Wales (Evan Roberts is both, and Wynn Thomas is interesting on the way Roberts's industrial background is overlooked) are relatively absent: this is a study of Wales's public intellectuals, movers and shakers, largely but not exclusively Welsh-speaking. Some subjects are more completely absent: having learned much about the New Welsh Woman in chapter three, I found myself wondering about how sex and sexuality – also being reinvented and reimagined in this period – might have intersected with the imagining of Wales. Similarly, the focus on texts and authors leaves the reader to look elsewhere for evidence of how these artefacts were consumed.

Like his previous book, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit* (2010), *The Nations of Wales* demonstrates the range, depth and subtlety of M. Wynn Thomas's thinking and should inspire a new range of thinkers. Like Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89), it should be read with one eye on the past and another on the present.

Aidan Byrne
University of Wolverhampton

Huw Osborne (ed.), *Queer Wales: The History, Culture and Politics of Queer Life in Wales*, Gender Studies in Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016). Pp. 272. £39.99.

As the latest instalment in the series Gender Studies in Wales, this collection of essays seeks to establish a broad overview of queer lives and cultures in Wales written by contributors from different academic disciplines. While the contributions cover a great variety of topics, the volume will be of greatest use to literary critics as the majority of the twelve chapters are devoted to Welsh writing in English, resulting in an imbalance in the volume's overall interdisciplinary aspect. That being said, Huw Osborne has done an admirable job as editor in bringing together astute critical readings. Drawing from a brief discussion of the recent film *Pride* (2014) in the introduction, Osborne suggests that Wales 'has a queer history and . . . is already queer; we simply have to choose to see it' (p. 1). He further addresses the stubbornly popular misconception of a largely rural (Welsh-speaking) Wales that remains at odds with queerness that is thought to be located beyond the national

border (p. 3). Utilising the accomplishments and shortcomings of *Pride* as a recent example of popular culture, Osborne lays out the general aims and objectives of the collected essays that endeavour to 'address the challenges to understanding and reimagining the nation' of Wales arising from queer identities and perspectives (p. 4).

Taking the early nineteenth century as a historical point of departure, the contributors take various approaches to their subjects and together attempt to present a rough sketch of Welsh queerness at different points across a broad chronology. In that respect, Osborne points out that the volume does not equate to a queer history of Wales (p. 7). Despite this caveat, the essays successfully contest the predominantly heteronormative, monocultural ideology underlying national historiographies that have persistently silenced queer and minoretised voices.

The first of the four parts of *Queer Wales* shines a light on 'The Queer Past before 1900' as the four contributions engage in an archaeology of queer voices in both public and private spheres and in literary and non-literary writing. In the first essay, Daniel Hannah asserts that Felicia Hemans's 'engagement with a Welsh bardic tradition in the early 1820s' and the recurring theme of loss in her poetry represent the strongest aspects of queerness in her writing (p. 15 and then p. 18). By adopting the voice of a pre-modern male Welsh bard in her *Selection of Welsh Melodies* (1822), Hannah claims that Hemans's poetic voice turns queer as she engages in an act of ventriloquistic bardism (p. 21). A more convincing recovery of a past queer voice is undertaken in Jane Aaron's compelling portrait of Sarah Jane Rees who published her writings under the bardic name Cranogwen. Tracing Cranogwen's roles as 'agony aunt' and editor of the Welsh-language magazine *Y Frythones* together with her poetry, Aaron presents a progressive Welsh writer ahead of her times. Aaron's nuanced reading teases out the subtleties and consistency of Cranogwen's writing. Not only did she challenge her magazine readers' conceptualisations of traditional gender roles, but she also refused to recognise gendered binaries at a time when there was no terminology available to differentiate between the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' (pp. 30–1). Examining private letters and a private art collection donated to what is now Aberystwyth University (p. 46), Harry Heuser next presents a biographical study of Ernest John Powell. While warning against ahistorical interpretations of source material, Heuser 'reads' Powell's donated art collection as a strategy of deliberate

personal myth-making by a Welsh eccentric who, throughout his life, found himself at odds with a heteronormative and paternalistic society. Connected to the question of historically available terminology, Mihangel Morgan shows that the Welsh-language lexicon has held readily available terms to express same-sex desire for much longer than is commonly perceived (p. 66). These terms have either fallen out of fashion for being heterosexist or, and more importantly, they are no longer common knowledge even among the Cymry Cymraeg owing to the minoretisation of the Welsh language in an Anglocentric British society (p. 67 and p. 69). In tracing examples from Welsh poetry from the Middle Ages onwards, Morgan undertakes a commendable excavation of twice marginalised Welsh-language queer history and suggests the adoption of the historically verified *cadi* for 'queer', arguing that one 'must turn to the Welsh past to shape a meaningful *cadi* Welsh present' (p. 69).

The second part of *Queer Wales* largely looks at Welsh writing inside and outside Wales after 1900. Kirsti Bohata brings forth the most comprehensive overview of female same-sex desire in Welsh writing, and, thanks to its accessible presentation of the chief literary themes and tropes, the essay will become the go-to text for many later studies on the subject. Bohata warns that the concept of sexuality is historical in itself, which makes it impossible to trace a 'transhistorical "lesbian" identity' (p. 92). However, her recovery of queer narratives in literary writing from before 1900 to the present highlights the still ongoing problematic interplay between notions of sexuality and the nation, in which 'the "otherness" of Wales . . . suggest[s] the "difference" of queer sexual identities' (p. 101). Similarly, Andrew Webb argues that there is a significant overlap between the experience of Welshness in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London and queer identities, particularly that of gay men. Examining the cultural Welshness in the letters and poems of Edward Thomas in the context of wider Anglocentric Britain, Webb discusses queerness in the critical understanding as an approach to non-mainstream positions (p. 115). Subsequently, Thomas's poem 'The Other' reflects 'parallels between a state-suppressed non-heteronormativity and an unrealised Welshness' (p. 118). This second part concludes with the editor Huw Osborne's own contribution in which he continues the theme of 'national and bodily delineation' (p. 130). Investigating writings by Rhys Davies, Erica Wooff and Jan Morris, Osborne contends that trans-bodies are

forced to readjust themselves to dominant binary cis-identities particularly during occasions of geographical border crossing. It is here that (nation) states reinforce the alignment of gender and birth sex.

In the third section, *Queer Wales* leaves the territory of the literary review with three case studies focusing on post-devolution Wales. The three chapters are the result of personal observations, work in the field and interviews, and they corroborate the themes and interpretations already touched upon in the preceding sections. In her interviews with lesbian mothers from the south Wales valleys, Alys Einion not only draws attention to a perpetuation of the 'split between female sexuality and the ideal of the perfect mother' (p. 151), but also how social constraints further prohibit or even forbid a mutual coexistence of 'mother' and 'lesbian' in the same social context. More often than not, these prohibitions force lesbian women to inhabit an either/or identity that deprives them either of their children or their sexuality, even now. Analysing the returns from the Crime Survey for England and Wales 2011–12, Matthew Williams and Jasmin Tregidga discuss the rising numbers of reported homophobic hate crimes in Wales and corroborate some of Einion's observations as they too find that '[f]or some gay women there is a clear relationship between gender presentation and hate crime experience' (p. 175). In the final essay of this section, John Sam Jones traces the impact of Section 28, particularly on the educational environment in Wales. This clause, introduced in 1987 and only repealed UK-wide in 2003, was notorious for banning schools from portraying gay and lesbian lives positively. He too observes that in the popular imagination, citizenship and sexuality represent two sides of the same coin insofar that national institutions project the heteronormative nation onto the body of the reproductive citizen, in this case, the pupil (p. 185).

The fourth and final part of the book concludes with a look at the representation of queer Wales in contemporary television and drama. Rebecca Williams and Ruth McElroy examine how the series *Torchwood* engages with non-heteronormative sexualities and how they relate to specifically Welsh settings. Quite surprisingly, they were able to recruit only a demographically narrow group of three white gay men for their survey. While the focus group generally agrees that *Torchwood* presents a more positive picture of Wales and gay people than other TV programmes, Williams and McElroy acknowledge that other studies reveal that bisexual and lesbian women would tend to

disagree and evaluate the programmes they consume less positively (p. 200 and p. 204). It is perhaps owing to this gendered imbalance of their focus group that in their investigation of the persistence of Ianto's Shrine as a marker of Welshness and queerness, Williams and McElroy sadly seem to have overlooked the fact that public commemoration in Wales generally favours the male image. As a result, even as a fictional male character, Ianto became enshrined while there are no memorials dedicated to real Welsh women in Cardiff Bay to date. *Queer Wales* concludes with Stephen Greer's investigation of the contemporary national theatre scene in Wales as he traces the central themes and characters portrayed in the recent dramas *The Village Social* and the bilingual *Llwyth*. In linking queerness with geography and social spaces, Greer centrally argues that any sense of belonging needs to be understood 'as a kind of methodology of place, a way of "doing the local" . . . which we take up, queerly, in the hope of rewriting its terms to better include us' (p. 211).

While focusing predominantly on the past 200 years in Welsh literary writing, *Queer Wales* succeeds overall in the recovery of historical and contemporary queer voices for and from Wales. Together, the twelve contributions succeed in mapping these voices onto the real and imagined geographies of Wales and thus providing a fitting point of departure for future discussions. For now, *Queer Wales* successfully investigates interesting examples of queer lives and their various representations in the two language traditions in Wales, thus illustrating not only the need for interdisciplinary but also intersectional approaches, as 'the idea of queering the nation is a fraught proposition that must be proposed despite the risks' (p. 3).

Rita Singer
Bangor University

John Pikoulis, *Alun, Gweno and Freda* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015). Pp. 397. £14.99.

Until now, John Pikoulis's authoritative *Alun Lewis, A Life* (1984) had remained the only book-length biography of one of the most significant writers of the Second World War. Pikoulis there wrote 'circumspectly out of consideration for the sensitivities of those involved' (p. 10). *Alun, Gweno and Freda*, the new biography published

a century after Lewis's birth, more explicitly focuses on the deeply personal and textual 'evidence' necessary to offer 'the first comprehensive account' of his exceptional, albeit short, life (p. 10).

In his first biography, Pikoulis had left two matters 'unresolved': whether Lewis's death in Burma, aged twenty-eight, was accidental or a suicide; and 'what happened to him in India, including a romantic involvement' (p. 9). In the new book, these issues are forensically interrogated using Lewis's poems, stories, letters and journals, contextualised primarily through correspondence with Gweno Lewis, his wife, and Freda Aykroyd, the married woman who influenced him so profoundly in India. Simultaneously, Pikoulis tells how he came to research Lewis, and the account of his negotiations with many interested parties provides another level of understanding of the writer and the man. Postmodern notions regarding simultaneity and the plurality of identity recur, and such complexities are underpinned by a narrative strategy that differs from Pikoulis's first biography in that it is non-linear. It artistically interweaves time periods, texts and personal perspectives that situate Lewis in Wales, the Army, India, in his family, his politics and, significantly, in the context of his own emotional responses.

Meticulous, comprehensive close readings provide the base for the book's methodology. A chapter devoted to the 'The Jungle' (1945), Lewis's last poem, but examined mid-way through the book, scrutinises its interlinking narratives, and the method is then developed into psychoanalytical interpretations that support Pikoulis's attempt to resolve the issues surrounding Lewis's death. 'The Jungle' shifts back and forth between the 'now' of soldiers asleep near a jungle pool and Wales during the Depression of the 1930s: 'We followed to this rendezvous today / Out of the mines and offices and dives, / The sidestreets of anxiety and want' (p. 206). Pikoulis comments that Lewis makes the social commentary in the poem 'from within', and the book emphasises that he rarely writes with emotional detachment (p. 206). This is the key to unlocking the 'evidence' surrounding the aforementioned 'unresolved' issues – the firm foundation on which Pikoulis constructs his hypothesis that Lewis's death was not accidental; it having been intimately bound up with his inner life and Freda Aykroyd.

The book's account of Lewis as a Welsh man holding his former life 'within' while simultaneously moving outwards and assuming another, perhaps exilic, self is a familiar notion, but is entirely credible as a

biographical motif. Men of Lewis's generation faced rigorous challenges to established ideals of masculinity, especially those related to responsibility and as protectors of hearth and home: miners or office workers one moment, enlisted or conscripted soldiers the next. In 'The Jungle', Pikoulis notes that 'Lewis stays in Cwmaman' (his birthplace), but at the same time, as the poem puts it, 'all fidelities and doubts dissolve . . . The warm pacts of the flesh [are] betrayed' (p. 207). Here is the heart of the matter at the centre of the book: '"The Jungle" tells how [Lewis] lived and died' (p. 208). The dissolving 'fidelities and doubts' refer to home and Gweno, whom he 'betray[s]' with Freda, whose 'pact' in turn is also betrayed, since the poem anticipates Lewis's imminent self-inflicted death.

Lewis's reputation following his death is foregrounded by the story of Pikoulis's research. Early in the book, he comments that he had found Lewis's two volumes of poems, *Raiders' Dawn* (1942) and *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (1945), 'interesting though not necessarily impressive' (p. 24). However, 'The Way Back' (1945) had astonished him: 'And in the hardness of this world . . . I exult with such a passion . . . To be joined to you again' (p. 25). As Pikoulis puts it, the poem belongs to Lewis's 'crisis' (p. 25) in India and the remainder of the book works to explain the identity of 'you'. He suggests that 'I pass beyond your golden gate' foretells the poet's 'march to the gallows', a 'cataclysm' after which 'lovers will meet again' (pp. 27–9). Freda herself provides details over and above those that are found within Pikoulis's first biography. Lewis had sent the first draft of the poem to her with a letter: 'I think perpetually of you, darling' (p. 34). Such interweaving narratives reveal in depth Lewis's coexisting emotionally complex selves. Pikoulis notes that 'Lewis's last Freda poem', 'A Fragment' (1945), implies sexual and existential fulfilment – 'I am, in Thee' – and that Lewis first sent it to Freda (p. 76). Less than two weeks later, Lewis sent the same poem to Gweno, leaving her to assume its sentiments were for her. Pikoulis is admonishing: '*[s]uggestio falsi, suppressio veri*' pointing sternly to fraudulent behaviour (p. 77).

Naturally, the detailing of Lewis's real intentions is potentially damaging and the book is fascinating in its exposition of the processes of writing an identity. In letters and interviews, Gweno and Freda put forward contrary representations of Lewis. For example, Freda agrees with Pikoulis's interpretation of Lewis's reference to a psychological episode, summarised in his 'Karachi journal', in which 'there was death

quite clear & familiar at last' (p. 145), as constituting a 'suicide note' (p. 155), and that his quest for selfhood was to be attained in simultaneous love for Freda and the realisation of a pre-existing longing for death. Gweno warns 'very earnestly against *over*-interpreting [Lewis's] consistent death-wish' (p. 156); such evidence, she claims, belonged only to his 'dark side – what he called his alter ego' (p. 159). Stronger warnings-off follow from Gweno regarding this issue and Lewis's involvement with 'Mrs Aykroyd' (p. 165), along with assertions of her family's right to speak and to feel, although Pikoulis's permission to publish is never withdrawn.

In the book's concluding chapter, 'Writing Alun', it is ultimately Freda's voice that is privileged and made public. Quotations from her lengthy and personal correspondence with Pikoulis suggest, to borrow Lewis's words, that there is a 'warm pact' between her and the biographer: Freda comments that Pikoulis expresses 'the truth about [Lewis] which only you have seen and which I have carried about in me' (p. 317). He responds by saying that 'the biography was written for her' (p. 318). Coupled with Freda's assertion that 'there was only one woman for Alun Lewis to love as he wanted and needed to love and that was me!' (p. 317), such strong feelings may make readers uneasy about objectivity: constructions of Lewis by these means are true labours of love. However, Pikoulis's merging of the critical emotional elements of published and unpublished texts with supporting evidence makes a compelling case for Lewis's life to be re-presented in this way. Pikoulis's right to speak is undeniable, although final closure may be elusive: as Lewis, in his last letter to Freda, says: 'I feel no distress at having to go unresolved as it were . . .' (p. 333).

Stephen Hendon
Cardiff University