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REVIEWS

M. Wynn Thomas, *Eutopia: Studies in Cultural Euro-Welshness, 1850–1980* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021). Pp. 416. £24.99.

Writing about Welsh culture appears to be going through a ‘European’ phase at the moment, at precisely the point when many direct ties with the continent are being attenuated or severed because of Brexit. Studies that compare Wales with parts of the continent (and Ireland, which is sometimes forgotten in discussions about Europe) have proliferated in recent years, as well as those that chart how European visitors of different kinds have interpreted Wales.¹ To assert the connections between Wales and the continent under these circumstances is a radical move, and one that confronts at almost every turn the dominant ways of thinking about Wales, Britain and its neighbours. What does it mean to think about the modern history and culture of Wales side-by-side with a country like Slovenia, as Robin Okey has done, and how does it challenge our customary cultural optics?² The question is posed even more acutely when seeking to uncover a long and varied tradition of viewing Europe in largely utopian terms – the ‘Eutopia’ and Euro-Welshness of the title of Wynn Thomas’s immensely stimulating new book. He has already written extensively and authoritatively on American influences on Welsh writing and the tensions between European and American cultural worlds, and he pays some attention to that division here. Consequently, he brings to this book a profound understanding of different contexts for transnational engagements among writers from different literary and linguistic traditions in Wales. The result is a rich, textured and deeply thought-provoking study of a seam that runs through modern Welsh culture but which has not been brought together in this way before now.

The book is made up of three key elements. The first is a ‘rough’ taxonomy of Welsh encounters with, and understandings of, Europe and its cultures that includes: a Home Rule model, the Postcolonial model, the Nonconformist model, the Small Nation model, Peace Movement Welsh Europeanism, the Cultural Renaissance model, a Radical Conservative model, a Radical Left model, and a ‘Multicultural

model'. These provide a clear and useful framework for understanding the variety of attempts to understand Euro-Welshness, its ideological underpinning and modes of articulation. This brief summation of types might suggest a somewhat mechanical approach to the topic but the analysis of individual writers, texts and periodicals that follows is anything but formulaic or mechanistic.

The second element of the book takes us to the heart of the study, where Thomas brings his formidable skills as a literary critic and cultural analyst to bear on the works of individual writers and the contexts in which they operated. These varied considerably in terms of their literary contribution, their underlying ideological approach and the view of 'Europe' they imagined to exist – or which they hoped might exist. The number and variety of writers included means that only general themes and some individuals can be mentioned in a short review. One theme to emerge is the variety of genres of writing, whether in the form of journalism (ranging from Gwilym Hiraethog in the mid-nineteenth century to Gareth Jones in the mid-twentieth), articles in periodicals, travelogues, novels, drama or poetry. Ideas of Europe have been interwoven in each of these modes of expression. Furthermore, some literary texts have been reimagined for the mass media, as in the case of some dramas (Emyr Humphreys was a particularly important figure in this respect). Another theme is how many writers were influenced by a single country or language group and consequently saw Europe refracted through it. A familiarity with France, Germany, Spain, Italy and their languages, for example, inflected the particular view of Europe cultivated by different writers; if Welshness has been a diverse experience, then Europeanness is that much more so.

Another important aspect of the book relates to how individual authors engaged with literary movements on the continent. Two parts of the book I found particularly stimulating in this regard are two chapters. The first is that on the Female Europa and Welsh Symbolism, where the contrasting literary contributions of writers such as Kate Bosse-Griffiths, Dorothy Thomas, Eluned Phillips and Brenda Chamberlain reveal Europe as 'the continent of female experience in all its bliss and bale' (251) and the influence of Symbolism on Euros Bowen and Vernon Watkins, who (like Yeats) both deployed the visionary image of the swan. The second chapter is that on Surrealism and the post-1945 years, where the complex relationship of writers like Glyn Jones and Dylan Thomas to Surrealism is explored. These chapters

interweave a trenchant analysis of the works of individuals with a sharp appreciation of broader cultural trends to demonstrate how writers were inspired by and contributed to these movements. It struck me that in discussing these movements, there is also the potential to explore the influence of European movements on Welsh artists, like Ceri Richards and Surrealism in 1936.

The third element of the book is a close reading of the content of specific journals, some of which is largely descriptive of individual articles and their coverage. This element of the book provides a useful insight into the role of periodicals in shaping the discourse about Europe – as a small nation, a linguistic minority, and so on. The sometimes similar, yet ultimately very different ideas of Europe that emerge from the *Welsh Outlook* around the time of the First World War and *Planet: the Welsh Internationalist* (the brainchild of that quintessential Welsh European, Ned Thomas) from the 1970s is instructive in this regard, illuminating shifts in cultural politics and *mentalités* in different periods. As these publications demonstrate clearly, visions of Europe have sometimes interlocked with ideas of Britain and its empire, or with the post-imperial condition, at key points in the past. Some Eutopias were fundamentally British in nature, while others rejected that framework in part or in whole.

The book also reveals underlying tensions in Welsh visions of the continent, fissures that historically have frequently opened up around religious identities. One theme that emerges strongly from the first half of the book is that of anti-Catholicism, an antagonism rooted in theological disputes, but which manifested as a structure of feeling suffusing a wider print culture before 1914 and which continued in various forms for much longer into the twentieth century. It raises questions about the way many Welsh Protestants, such as O. M. Edwards and Gareth Alban Davies, saw parts of Europe as an inspiration (German theology, Geneva), while viewing Catholic Europe as an ‘Other’ against which they could define themselves as a godly, progressive and freedom-loving people. This cultural formation went beyond the writings of the authors discussed here, and it raises the perhaps uncomfortable question of whether some engagements with Europe entailed rejecting some of the continent’s important traditions. This fissure explains in large part why Saunders Lewis’s essentially Catholic Europe was vehemently attacked.

This is a reminder that Euro-Welshness has had to face the reality of cultural and political divisions. In the so-called ‘short’ twentieth

century (1914–89), Europe has been overwhelmingly about war and division, whether of the hot or cold varieties, and it is tempting to interpret at least some of the Eutopias delineated here as attempts to heal those psychological and physical wounds. While Saunders Lewis imagined a re-united European medieval Catholic ‘civilisation’, the continent for many has been ineluctably sundered by cultural and political differences and so they have chosen which Europe should be their ally. This is brought out clearly in the analysis of O. M. Edward’s travelogues, a genre of writing that conveys much more than simple descriptions of unfamiliar places.

It seems to me that there is a tension between how most of the writers discussed in this fascinating book have envisaged a Welsh European future and their concern to justify it with an appeal to particular interpretations of the past. To some extent or other, the visions of Europe discussed here have depended on a belief in what each writer thought was the direction of historical development. The problem with this is that each Eutopia outlined here now appears to be not only delimited by, and embedded in, a particular period and set of assumptions, but also seems relativistic and contingent. Progress based on Protestantism, a future paradoxically rooted in Catholic medievalism, a Marxist analysis surrounded by the debris of ‘Actually Existing Socialism’ in central Europe and the east, all seem like impossible dreams in the present. Perhaps this is true of all utopias, but especially those with an explicit toehold in what appears to be contemporary reality.

A word can be said about periodisation. The date 1850 has been adopted as the beginning of a period of Euro-Welshness. This is not the same as Welsh engagements with Europe in the round. The inspiration of Welsh radicals from the French Revolution of 1789 was expressed in terms of universal rights, rather than anything specifically Welsh and so that grouping falls outside the terms of this book, but I did wonder about Welsh views of the Bretons in the 1830s and 1840s as ‘Cymry Ffrainc’ (the Welsh in France) as an instance of Welsh Europeanism; but perhaps this was, in reality, a way of denying the Europeanness of the Bretons and incorporating them in a domestic category. Uncertainty about this example reinforces a view that the mid-nineteenth century is an appropriate starting point.

What, then, of the end point? It might be said that this is a book with a destination (the year 1979) but no definitive conclusion. In the wake of the Brexit vote, the final chapter, ‘Onwards towards Union’, in spite of its

sense of dynamic forward movement, now has something of a mournful feel about it. And yet the 1970s was a decade when Wales became enmeshed in a series of formal and informal European structures on a wide basis for the first time following British membership of what was then the EEC. The fact that the Welsh people were asked in 1975 to consent to membership of the EEC in a referendum was in itself a landmark moment in political culture. This takes us into a territory where 'Europe', then still divided between Cold War East and West, became a more structured political and economic reality.

In spite of the taxonomy supplied at the outset, perhaps such a wide-ranging study cannot provide a neat resolution, or even a succinct distillation, of the diverse discussions it charts so expertly and revealingly. The fact that the taxonomy has not strait-jacketed the treatment of individual authors is one of its strengths, suggesting ways of bringing different writers together in the context of particular visions of Europe without limiting an understanding of their work. In one sense, the book provides a launch pad for other studies of the period covered here; Thomas disarmingly says that the book is not comprehensive, but it is difficult to think of many significant omissions, apart from the case of the chemist-scholar Thomas Stephens who is identified here anyway as a figure for further study. More importantly, the book provides the essential context for understanding Welsh engagements with Europe during the forty years that followed its chosen end point. As the author points out, the complexity of the landscape following 1979 would need another book. It is to be hoped that someone takes up that challenge, and if they do so they will be greatly indebted to M. Wynn Thomas for establishing the parameters of such a study.

In the meantime, and using this book as an inspiration, it is possible to point in other directions for considering how European interactions during the period under consideration affected engagements with culture that go beyond the literary – whether those of geographers such as E. G. Bowen, who adapted Paul Vidal de la Blache's concept of geographical personality to understand Wales as a culture region, or historians such as David Williams and R. R. Davies who were inspired by the writings of the French *Annales* school to think of Wales in not dissimilar terms. Gwyn A. Williams, who wrote trenchantly on the French revolution of 1789 and Goya, brought key concepts of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci into cultural debate (particularly that of hegemony). Some of these might not fit the category of 'Eutopia'

– although Gwyn A. Williams came close to it when he rejected the Europe of Saunders Lewis in favour of that of Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci – but they suggest other possibilities for pursuing the kind of analysis that Wynn Thomas has outlined here.

In sum, this original, impressive and important book illuminates the work of a host of key writers and analyses their views of Europe to uncover a crucial tradition in Welsh cultural life in the modern period. It is a sympathetic treatment of writers for whom Europe in its varied forms was a lodestar for their imaginations, and the timing of its publication makes it a necessary book that will stimulate debate and further enquiry.

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Notes

- ¹ E.g. R. J. W. Evans, *Wales in European Context: Some Historical Reflections* (Aberystwyth: Prifysgol Cymru, 2001); Simon Brooks, *Why Wales Never Was: The Failure of Welsh Nationalism* (Aberystwyth: Prifysgol Cymru, 2001); Kathryn N. Jones, Carol Tully and Heather Williams, *Hidden Texts, Hidden Nation: (Re)Discoveries of Wales in Travel Writing in French and German, 1780–2018* (Aberystwyth: Prifysgol Cymru, 2001); Mary-Ann Constantine, “‘Impertinent structures’: A Breton’s adventures in neo-Gothic Wales”, *Studies in Travel Writing*, 18/2 (2014), 134–47; Daryl Leeworthy, ‘The world cannot hear you: Gwyn Thomas, Communism, and the Cold War’, *Welsh History Review*, 28/2 (2016), 335–62; and Paul O’Leary, *Ffrainc a Chymru, 1830–1880: Dehongliadau Ffrengig o Genedl Ddi-wladwriaeth* (Ebook: Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2015).
- ² Robin Okey, ‘Wales and eastern Europe: small nations in comparison’, in T. M. Charles-Edwards and R. J. W. Evans (eds), *Wales and the Wider World: Welsh History in an International Context* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2010), pp. 184–217; Robin Okey, ‘Iaith, crefydd a chenedligrwydd yng Nghymru a Slofenia, c.1750–1918: rhai syniadau’, *Y Traethodydd*, 170/ 715 (2015), 205–20.