

**ADDRESS:
More Than a Footnote?
Wales in British History**

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Professor Keith Robbins is a distinguished scholar and the Senior Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales. As a historian, Professor Robbins has done much to focus attention on the role of Wales and the Welsh in British history. This address was part of the NAASWCH panel on "Wales and British History" at the 1999 meeting of the North American Conference on British Studies (NACBS).

On 26 May 1999 in Cardiff, its officially-designated capital for four decades, though a city which had itself voted against its establishment, Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Northern Ireland inaugurated the National Assembly for Wales/*Cynulliad Cenedlaethol*. It is a devolved government with an elected executive led by a First Secretary that has control over the allocation of the Welsh budget - a budget derived from a formula applied by the United Kingdom Treasury. The Assembly does not have the power to vary taxation and lacks the ability to enact what in British terminology is referred to as "primary legislation" - that legislation still emanates from the Westminster Parliament. Its powers, in this respect, and in practically every other, are inferior to those of the Scottish Parliament that has been set up contemporaneously. Nevertheless, in internal matters Wales may now be said to be in substantially "self-governing" within the continuing framework of the United Kingdom. It so happens that I was present myself in Cardiff in my official capacity at a number of these events on 26 May and lunched (amongst others) with a number of foreign ambassadors, including the Ambassador of the United States, who had come to witness the symbolic birth of this "new Wales."

It was not an event, however, which made the front page of the London-based Times or indeed other "British national" newspapers. It gave prominence rather, amongst other items, to the footballing triumph of Manchester United in winning the European Cup on that same night - an event that reputedly attracted an estimated global audience of 500 million people, including some 16 million in Britain. Wales could not compete with such a spectacle. News of its "great day" was relegated to page 15, although admittedly to a full-page spread. Reference was made to the parliaments, probably two, held by Owain Glyndwr at Machynlleth in mid-Wales during his revolt at the beginning of the fifteenth century, but the very fact that the writer had to go back so far to establish a kind of precedent is significant. It was as though, from the standpoint of a London-based "national" press, which circulates throughout the UK, though most densely in England, "Wales" had ceased to exist after the defeat of that rebellion and only now, some six centuries later, was something called "Wales" attaining again a limited recognition within the evolving contemporary political structure of the United Kingdom.

So, how and why is Wales ceasing to be little more than a perpetual footnote in accounts of the history of the English state and, later, of the British state, and later still (though only for a century and a quarter) of a United Kingdom which was held to consist of three kingdoms: England, Ireland and Scotland? And, in a sense, the proposal to establish a National Assembly had only been carried by the narrowest of margins in a referendum, and that only roughly half of the electorate in Wales had bothered to vote at all, seemed to lend support to the view that at the end of the twentieth century “Wales” was still a precarious concept. Only a quarter of the electorate in Wales, it could be said, positively wished to see “Welshness” epitomized in the limited degree of political autonomy that has now been achieved.

It is, of course, too early to assess what impact the operation of the National Assembly will have on the further consolidation of Wales and the extent to which devolution is “a process not an event,” to use the words of its (now politically damaged) architect, the former Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davies. Certainly, in the first elections to the Assembly, using a different voting system from that used in UK General Elections, *Plaid Cymru*/The Party of Wales gained a strong showing, capitalizing on the perhaps temporary little local difficulties inside the Welsh Labour Party. Even *Plaid Cymru*, however, during the course of the campaign, claimed that it was not advocating an “independent” Wales (though its opponents did not believe the claim). There was a good deal of debate about the meanings to be attached to words like “independence,” “self-government” or “autonomy” within the context of a debate, itself problematic, about levels of decision-making and jurisdiction in “Britain” as a member of the “European Union.” Whatever the future holds in these respects, however, a Wales of a kind has now re-emerged. Historians henceforth will have no option but to pay attention to its distinctive evolution in any assessment of British history (as indeed will also be true of Scotland). “Territoriality,” with its advantages and complications, is now becoming an awkward but fundamental aspect of UK life.

It is not perhaps surprising that contemporary developments have had a major impact on historiography (or perhaps it is the other way round?). That is to say, over the last quarter of a century, the writing of British history has been steadily emerging from the Anglocentric perspective on the history of these islands which has for so long been dominant (itself, of course, a reflection of political realities). In turn, at various levels, whatever their own personal political preferences, the work of historians has in turn fed into a fresh emphasis on the distinctiveness of the history of the peoples of Britain. This has been true of Wales. The body of serious history that is now available for the student is now much richer than was the case say thirty years ago. While in the past the paucity of publications might have explained the extent to which the development of Wales within England/Britain received scant attention in general histories of “Britain,” such an explanation or excuse no longer suffices. Produced largely by historians working within or connected with the various member institutions of the federal University of Wales, is not an exaggeration to speak of a “renaissance” in the historiography of Wales. In the decades since its foundation, the Welsh History Review has provided a central forum for scholarly publication in Welsh history on a scale never before achieved. *Llafur*, the journal of the society for the study of Welsh Labour History, and The Journal of Welsh Religious History have stimulated work in their particular areas. The University of Wales Press has played a

notable publishing role, something that continues in the successive volumes of its Studies in Welsh History series.

The pupils and colleagues of David Williams - Glanmor Williams, Gwyn Alfred Williams and Ieuan Gwynedd Jones among them - have in turn set the agenda and the pace for a successor generation, including such names as Kenneth O. Morgan, Rees Davies, Ralph Griffiths, Gwynfor Jones and Geraint Jenkins. The volumes in the History of Wales series, edited by Glanmor Williams, begun nearly twenty years ago, have become standard. We may also mention such names as Prys Morgan, David Jones, Dai Smith, John Davies, J. Gwynn Williams and Peter Roberts who have all made notable contributions to our understanding of the cultural, social, constitutional and institutional history of Wales. There are other writers, too, who have advanced knowledge in particular areas and the tradition continues in the work of Aled Jones, Merfyn Jones and Chris Williams. What is particularly notable is the extent to which a number of these historians have by no means confined themselves to particular chronological periods. Either in general histories of Wales that they have written or articles and monographs on topics in widely separated centuries, they have a view of the scope of historical study that contrasts with the generality of historians of England writing in England. There are several reasons for this difference. Wales is of course a small country and it may therefore be argued that it is more possible for historians to immerse themselves in the totality of its past than is the case with England. There is, however, a deeper reason, encapsulated in the title of Gwyn Williams' *When was Wales?*, itself echoed by the geographer Emrys Jones when he asked "Where was Wales?." And sociologists, anthropologists and ethnologists ask themselves, in their own way, who were/are "the Welsh." Literary scholars, like Wynn Thomas in his latest book *Corresponding Cultures: the two literatures of Wales grapple with cognate issues of identity and tradition*.

In short, the "matter of Wales" is complex and elusive. The entry in the early editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "For Wales - see England" is cited by Kenneth Morgan and others as an illustration of the humiliation of Wales and the patronizing indifference towards its past which helped to launch the national movement in Wales. Now, Wales certainly merits its own entry, rather than admitted as a variant of "England." Yet, identifying, patrolling and preserving boundaries between these two entities has been a fluctuating business for many centuries - whoever controlled and stamped their authority over "England." James Campbell has observed, in asking why the formidable late Anglo-Saxon state failed to absorb Wales, which the Welsh "look like a long-lasting frontier problem." He observes that quite close to each other in the south-eastern corner of Wales are to be found three of the most formidable fortifications of Western Europe: the Roman legionary fortified barracks at Caerleon, Offa's Dyke and Caerphilly castle. If the dice had fallen just a little differently, he suggests, the Vale of Glamorgan, for example, might actually have become part of "England" and to this day South Pembrokeshire exists as "Little England beyond Wales." Even after the major shifts in population that have taken place over the centuries, it is instructive to map the population/constitutional pattern of medieval Wales against the voting patterns in the referendum on the establishment of a National Assembly.

Partly perhaps as an aspect of contemporary politics, however, are we not witnessing, to some extent at least, a contrary phenomenon which may be no less misleading, namely that the history of Wales can be considered as a sealed compartment without, as it

were, “seeing England” at all? Yet it might be argued that “Wales and England” or “England and Wales” has existed as some kind of entity for longer than “Wales” ever succeeded in existing as self-contained and unified entity. In an article in 1963 Glyn Roberts wrote of “antipathy and sympathy in relations between England and Wales over the period from 1282 to 1485” but one might say that these two terms apply over a much longer time-span, even down to the present. Asser, chronicler of the Life of Alfred, most famous king of the house of Wessex, apparently spent half of his time in England and half in Wales. A certain clarity of concept and terminology in trying to discern, for different periods, what “England and Wales” share and what they do not, but it is difficult to attain. How is a “sense of nationality” to be determined and how do we measure language, culture, status and ethnicity in both individual and community self-perceptions at any given point? Whatever views may be held on these matters, “Wales” never achieved a centralized political and institutional coherence before its fluctuatingly collaborative and fluctuatingly conflicting princedoms were subjected to Anglo-Norman assault [how “Anglo” and how “Norman” being itself problematic]. The last independent princedoms were subjugated by Edward I. “English” boroughs (and castles) were scattered across the land and a complicated symbiosis ensued with the juxtaposition of legal customs, particularly regarding land tenure, particularly causing conflict in a society operating with several languages. Owain Glyndwr’s revolt, to which reference has earlier been made, is judged by Rees Davies to have been the first revolt which encompassed the whole of Wales with the objective of establishing an independent state, both politically and ecclesiastically. It drew upon historical mythologies which stretched back over centuries. It took place against the most favorable circumstances in England that the Welsh could ever hope for. Yet, although encompassing all Wales it did not encompass all Welshmen and, in the end, it proved a comprehensive failure. Davies notes that it would have been surprising if it had proved otherwise. Penal statutes followed against the Welsh and were in fact being reissued in the mid-fifteenth century, although not invariably enforced. Who was English and who was Welsh became a matter of importance in relation to marriage. Yet many of those Welshmen who had fought with Glyndwr subsequently fought with Henry V in France and in practice, in localities, Welshmen still often possessed the reality of power. Sooner or later, however, a new ordering of the realm would be necessary. Such a step was facilitated by the remarkable arrival on the English throne of Henry VII, a kind of Welshman, who had journeyed through Wales on his way to victory at Bosworth Field. He prudently named his eldest son Arthur. It was Henry VIII, however, his second son, who succeeded him. He inherited that network of followers and dependants which his father had established in Wales. When Henry VIII passed the key statutes of 1529-34 against the papacy and the Church, Glanmor Williams argues, he was able to apply them in Wales without meeting serious opposition. The Acts of Union between England and Wales followed between 1536 and 1543. It is reasonable to state that with only very small exceptions, “Wales was wholly assimilated into the English governmental system.” There was no place for the continuing recognition of institutional diversity within union such as occurred in the case of the subsequent Union of Scotland and England in 1707 - and there was in fact little institutional diversity to buttress. Wales now had a Prince, in the person of the heir to the English/British throne, but the Principality had little else, administratively, politically or ecclesiastically to preserve its separateness.

Yet, as the present somewhat confusedly demonstrates, that has not in fact been the end of “Wales.” No brief paper can give an adequate answer to why this should have been so. Rees Davies has persuasively argued that Owain Glyndwr was not merely a figure in the

history books: he had an established place in Welsh social memory. More generally, however, “Welshness” was sustained by the continued vitality, if subordinate status, of the Welsh language. Studies currently emanating from the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth, are giving us a more comprehensive social history of language than we have ever had before. Population growth, largely retained as a consequence of the dramatic industrialization which transformed the landscape of much of South and South-West Wales, created a Welsh-language constituency that was larger than ever before, even it was beginning to diminish quite rapidly into the twentieth century as a proportion of the overall population. A dense concentration of journals and periodicals emerged to meet this demand. The other characteristic of nineteenth-century Wales, as perceived from outside, was the remarkable growth of religious Nonconformity, in a variety of denominations. That pattern famously led Gladstone to remark in 1891 that the Nonconformists were “the people of Wales.” Much energy and emotion was directed against the established Church of England (as it then was) that came to a successful conclusion with its disestablishment in 1920. It was this Act, more than any other, which made Wales conspicuously “different,” though in fact around the turn of the century there was also separate legislative provision for Wales in various educational and other measures. Further badges of identity at this time manifested themselves in the creation of a national federal university, a National Library and a National Museum. Yet while Nonconformity/Liberalism did appear to have succeeded in establishing a notion (a somewhat exclusive one), of what “Welshness” was, no “Parnell of Wales” emerged. The paradox therefore emerged - if that is what it is - of an Ireland moving to independence (albeit partitioned in the process by a Welshman) but - as it now appears - unable to recreate a Gaelic society. A language of diminishing vitality and a Nonconformity (also as it turned out of diminishing vitality) still seemed sufficient distinctiveness as Wales participated fully in the emerging class-based politics of a universally enfranchised post-World War I electorate. It was only in the inter-war period, when the twin pillars appeared to be being undermined that *Plaid Cymru* emerged, though not very successfully, with a program largely concerned with cultural defense. It was only after World War II, slowly but surely, that further illustrations of Welsh distinctiveness appeared with a degree of administrative devolution through a new Welsh Office and the eventual establishment of a Secretaryship of State, a post that gave the holder a position in a British Cabinet. *Plaid Cymru* made progress, though not always steady progress, though its appeal remained substantially confined to areas where Welsh-speakers were in a majority. The foundation of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith* was a further expression of concern for the fate of the Welsh language. Successive British governments, of both party complexions, under some pressure, have given enhanced legal status for the Welsh language and ensured its place in the school curriculum.

In all of these respects, therefore, the period since 1945 has manifestly made it impossible to suppose that Wales and England are “the same.” A footnote to indicate the occasional small difference no longer suffices. Yet, to return to the beginning of this paper, it is still far from clear just how different Wales wishes to be. It may also be the case, the more that “Wales” is conceived as a “space” the more tensions between different geographical regions, between the different ways in which its socio-cultural communities perceive themselves, and between quite sharply contrasting levels of economic performance will come to the fore and again cast doubt on “the once and future nation” of Wales. It is not given to a historian, however, to know how things will go.