

CULTURAL FACTORS IN REGIONAL REVITALIZATION IN WALES

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*Mae hen wlad fy nhadau yn annwyl i mi,
Gwlad beirdd a chantorion, enwogion o fri;*

Translated to:

*The old land of my fathers is dear to me,
Land of poets and singers, famous men of renown;*

Here's a translation of the opening lines of the Welsh national anthem. Culture goes to the very core of what makes Wales unique. It is what expresses our sense of ourselves, our values and our aspirations. It is not an optional extra, not a cherry on the cake, but it is integral to everything we want to achieve as a nation. It is a natural part of our daily lives – our language, our talk, our reading, our games and pastimes, our beliefs, our gathering together. It is what elevates our lives – our literature, our music, our songs, our art, theatre and architecture. It is all around us, the texture of our living, the place where past and future meet.

In Wales, our culture, the very essence of who we are, is expressed through the Welsh language.

Welsh is a Celtic language, and has in the past had well over a million speakers. Today there are around 600,000 people who note that they speak Welsh. Of the people who claim that they are totally fluent, 82% speak Welsh every day. There is therefore a good and healthy relationship between the language and its speakers. This cannot be said of all minority languages.

Welsh speaking people in general have a very positive attitude towards

culture and education. These are strong strands through the history of the language. Levels of literacy have been high amongst the speakers of Welsh for a long time, and indeed within the structure of Welsh society during the past few centuries, it was not money that distinguished between different social groupings, but culture and learning.

The Welsh language would probably not be alive today were it not for the *litterati* of past centuries.

The first Welsh poetry we know about was composed some 1400 years ago. It narrates the history of a battle which took place in Scotland, as the Welsh lost footland in the South of England and the North of England.

The oral tradition of creating poetry and telling stories in Welsh was a feature of Welsh society for about 600 years following the first poem. It then developed as an oral and written tradition and has been a vibrant part of Welsh culture since then.

By providing reading material in Welsh - the most significant of all being the translation of the Bible into Welsh in 1588 - the language would have long died out, and there would be very little evidence of it ever existing. The translation of the Bible into Welsh was a great boost to the language because it ensured that Welsh was the language of religion and worship, and kept the language alive within communities.

Even though religion did play an important part in saving the language from extinction by boosting literacy levels in Welsh, it also led to losing many of the Welsh traditions. Wales has kept its upper class traditions, the praise poems and elegies paid to the Welsh aristocrats, but we have lost the other layer of our cultural heritage, the poetry and songs of the common people. Christianity, and the Methodism movement in our religion in particular, led to the banning of dances, dramas and acts of rather obscene nature; it also led to the changing of place names in Wales. Traditional Welsh names on villages and towns were changed to Hebrew names, as if the inhabitants of a village named Nazareth were somehow better Christians than their neighbour is the nearby Welsh name Talysarn.

But, going back to talk about literature. Our National Library is stacked with miles upon miles of literature, and every year students from all corners of Wales and beyond are enrolling on to university courses to study Welsh literature.

However, the written word tradition is not something which belongs to the past.

The Welsh Books Council, a national body, funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, which provides a focus for the publishing industry in Wales, oversees the publication of around 600 new books written in Welsh every year.

The Welsh Books Council sets out to stimulate interest in Welsh books, to promote the publishing industry in Wales and to coordinate the interests of authors, publishers, booksellers and libraries. It also provide practical and financial support to authors by providing services and by awarding grants/commissions which are channelled through publishers, and distribute grants to help publish quality material in and to ensure that the output is widely available.

When questioned by non-Welsh speaking journalists, Welsh poets and authors are often asked why they choose to write and publish in Welsh. After all there's no denying that there's more money to be made in the English publishing world, and anyone would be hard-pressed to make a livelihood out of writing in Welsh (although some do manage it).

Why, they ask? Well, arts mean more than money. Some choose to write in Welsh because it is their mother tongue, and although they are fully bilingual, Welsh may be the only language in which they can express themselves fully. What goes in first goes in the deepest. Therefore, writing in Welsh is often not an act of political stance; it is something which comes naturally.

The same can be said about Welsh language music. Wales is known as the land of song; and whilst I assure you that this is a myth, and that some of us can't sing a single note in tune; Wales is indeed a country proud of its musical heritage, and Wales is notable for its harpists, male choirs, and solo artists.

Cerdd Dant (string music) has a very long history in the Welsh tradition, and is a unique technique of singing lyrics over a harp accompaniment. Singing to harp accompaniment goes back a very long time, perhaps as far as the time of the Celtic Druids, more than a thousand years ago. Other people apart from the Celts had harps, of course, but over the centuries one essential element became important in Wales which would make the art of singing with the harp different: the special relationship between poetry and music. Cerdd Dant is essentially a means of performing poetry, and the words are always given the greatest priority.

During the twentieth century cerdd dant changed quite substantially. At the beginning of the century, it was confined to individual singers only. Then duets and small parties began to appear. Later on trios and quartets were formed, and then, from the 1970s onwards, cerdd dant choirs began to appear for the first time. The Cerdd Dant Festival is an annual event, which grows in its size every year. Some fifty years ago it would be possible to hold the Cerdd Dant Festival in a small village social centre, but now they are held in the county's largest theatres and conference venues. Much of this growth is down to the fact that the festival began to appeal to the television and radio media, and over the past twenty years or so the festival has been broadcast live on television, attracting high number of viewers. Wales had long been admired for its natural beauty, its green mountains, hills and valleys, but the industrial revolution (traditionally dated 1730 – 1850) was to change all this forever. Underneath the picturesque settings, in the most tranquil of places, coal, slate and iron – the lifeblood of the world's modernisation was found.

Welsh iron was used to build great iron ships and railways around the world. Welsh steam coal became the fuel of choice for boilers everywhere. In 1870 coal production exceeded thirteen million tons and about half of this, now carried by the railway system, was destined for the export trade from the large docks of our cities Cardiff, Swansea and Newport to the rest of the world.

The miners and their families faced a grim existence. Thousands of miners died as a result of roof falls and underground explosions. Fathers often perished alongside their sons. Government commissioners had found that children as young as six years of age could be found working twelve hour shifts underground. And, above ground, overcrowding and insanitary conditions led to outbreaks of cholera.

However, from the dark pits of the mines and the cold face of the quarries emerged friendship, pride and a strong sense of community. Thousands of social forums, clubs and institutes were formed in the newly industrialized areas. Most commonly associated with the industrial Wales, perhaps, are the male voice choirs. Working men, emerging from underground, belting out hymns and anthems in the most entrancing of tunes.

Industry has now left Wales. And even though trees and grass have made our valleys green once again, the inheritance of our industrialized past remain strong, in music as well as in our psyche.

I must say a word about two modern choirs. Only Men Aloud! from South Wales and Ysgol Glanaethwy from North Wales are the two choirs who topped the televised UK-wide choral competition; singing Welsh language songs. With a repertoire ranging from five hundred years ago to current day, these choirs show that there are no barriers placed on choral singing and are proof that choirs can be fresh and funky.

But it's not all folk stanzas and hymns. In the 1960s a contemporary Welsh music scene was created. The scene has developed and evolved over the past decades to mirror the zeitgeist. It is impossible for me to hazard a guess at how many bands have performed and recorded in Welsh over the years, or even how many bands are doing so today. I would imagine that they're out there in their many thousands.

Going abroad, people often ask me to describe what Welsh language pop music sounds like. I have found it an impossible task to give them an answer, just as someone from England, the States or Japan would find it impossible to put the contemporary music of their languages and countries in an egg-shell.

The lyrics are written in Welsh, but the similarity often ends there. Everything else is extremely varied - all genres of music are covered, as well as songs you'd be hard pressed to fit into any category.

Does the fact that the songs are written in Welsh limit their appeal? Not necessarily. People on the whole, especially those into their music, will listen to the song regardless of its language. Go to a bar in Europe and you will know the difference between terrible euro-pop and a song with substance and thought behind it, even if you don't understand the words. There is more work to be done to market and promote Welsh language music, so it can be heard more outside the usual venues, festivals and Welsh language programmes.

A recognised Welsh tradition of theatre emerged on the 18th century, in the form of an interlude, a metrical play performed at fairs and markets. The larger Welsh towns began building theatres during the 19th century. Along with the playhouses, there existed mobile companies at visiting theatres and fairs.

The Welsh language National Theatre was formed in 2003. The company stages touring productions, performed at the main theatre venues in Wales, and sometimes over the border in London. They also stage a programme of events at

each National Eisteddfod and endeavour to have close relationships with schools and the communities which they serve. As well as the National Theatre, there are many other independent companies throughout Wales staging dramas, comedy acts and all kinds of performing arts through the medium of Welsh, at the very roots of our communities.

You heard me referring to an unfamiliar word just now. The Eisteddfod. Let me expatiate.

The first Eisteddfod can be traced back to 1176. It was a grand gathering of poets and musicians from all over the country. A chair at the Lord's table was awarded to the best poet and musician, a tradition that prevails in the modern day National Eisteddfod.

Today the National Eisteddfod of Wales is one of the great festivals of the world, attracting over 160,000 visitors every year. An eclectic mixture of culture, music, visual arts and all kinds of activities for people of all ages. The Eisteddfod is a travelling festival which belongs to the people of Wales – wherever they live, and this is an integral part of its appeal. The festival visits areas in north and south Wales alternately, and hosting the National Eisteddfod is a great boost for any area.

The Eisteddfod provides an ideal opportunity to promote and encourage people to use and learn Welsh locally, to take part in cultural activities in their area, and it's also a great opportunity to promote the region as a tourist destination. The economic effect on the area is huge, with the Eisteddfod contributing between £6-8 million to the local economy during the week.

The Eisteddfod is the home of literature, music, dance, recitation, theatre, visual arts, science and technology, and all types of culture in Wales, and although the festival only lasts for a week, the preparatory work and the buzz surrounding the event and all its activities lasts for more than two years before the Eisteddfod. Many areas choose to continue organising events promoting the Welsh language and culture once the festival is over.

Another important eisteddfod in the calendar is 'Eisteddfod yr Urdd', or the Youth Eisteddfod. Organised by a Welsh-medium youth movement, yr Urdd, it involves Welsh youth aged 7 to 24 in a week of competition in singing, recitation, dancing, acting and musicianship. The event is Europe's premier youth arts festival.

An International Eisteddfod is held annually in Llangollen, Denbighshire,

each year in July. Choirs, singing groups, folk dancers and other groups attend from all over the world, sharing their national folk traditions in one of the world's great festivals of the arts. It was set up in 1947 and begins with a message of peace. In 2004, it was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Doing some research before coming here, I found that there are strong links between Japan and the International Eisteddfod. The Konan Women's College Choir took home the main prize for choral singing in 1985; and Japan topped again in 1992 when the Yuh choir from Nishinomiya beat other countries to the first prize.

I have so far talked about the historical context of the Welsh language culture, and how the ancient culture is seen today in modern day Wales on a national level. But for a culture and language to survive as living and breathing things, they must be deeply rooted on a community level, so that they are things which come naturally to people.

I have talked about the industrialized Wales of the past. I should also mention that Wales, especially the mid and West of the country, is very dependent upon agriculture and farming. Rural Wales is where the language is most widely spoken. In North West Wales for example there are areas where Welsh is spoken by more than 80% of the population, making it the day to day language of socialising and business alike.

The Young Farmers Clubs is the largest organisation for the young people of rural Wales. It is a voluntary youth organisation that represents 6,000 young people in rural Wales. Although the name of the organisation refers to 'Young Farmers', the members represent young people from all walks of life. Members get the opportunity to take part in all sorts of different activities throughout the year, from trips to competitions galore. There are also opportunities to travel abroad, to attend social events, meet new people and make friends from all over Wales.

Having social clubs such as the Young Farmers in rural areas is a great boost for the Welsh language and culture. By providing fun and socialising opportunities for young people, the Young Farmers Clubs go a long way in ensuring that young people are keen to stay in their communities, and to contribute to the local economy and social events.

Rural Wales may be traditionally linked as the Welsh-speaking heartlands. But, the rise of Welsh-medium education over the past thirty years has seen the

language gaining ground in the post-industrialized valleys of South East Wales, and in our cities.

Miniscule compared to the cities here in Japan, Cardiff is the capital, largest city and most populous county of Wales. The city is Wales' chief commercial centre, the base for most national cultural and sporting institutions, the Welsh national media, and the seat of the National Assembly for Wales (a devolved assembly with its own government legislation making powers). According to recent estimates, the wider metropolitan area of Cardiff has a population of nearly 1.1 million, more than a third of the total Welsh population. Cardiff is a significant tourism centre and the most popular visitor destination in Wales with 14.6 million visitors in 2009.

As was the case in many parts of Wales during the industrial revolution, the massive influx of people from all over the UK, Ireland and parts of Europe, swamped the native Welsh-speaking population in Cardiff. However, following the establishment of the city's first Welsh-medium School in the 1950s, Welsh has slowly regained some ground. Aided by Welsh-medium education and migration from other parts of Wales, the number of Welsh speakers in Cardiff rose by 14,451 between 1991 and 2001; and Welsh is now spoken by 11% of Cardiffians.

In order to support the Welsh language and culture on a community level in Wales, be that in rural or in urban areas, we have what we call *Mentrau Iaith*. These are Welsh Language Initiative Programmes, and there are 22 of them all over Wales. A *Menter Iaith* is a local organisation which offers support to communities to increase and develop their use of the Welsh language. A *Menter Iaith* usually services a whole county, and it reflects the wish of local people to make more use of the language. A *Menter* will offer advice and assistance to individuals, organisations and businesses, and will organise activities to raise the profile of the Welsh language.

A *Menter Iaith* will offer practical advice and help which is often free of charge. Each *Menter* offers a variety of services, depending on local requirements, such as –

Advice

- to new parents on raising their children bilingually
- to public and voluntary organisations on how to increase their

use of Welsh

- to businesses eager to begin to offer a bilingual service to their customers
- On Welsh medium education

Activities

- social and leisure opportunities for children and young people to use their Welsh
- opportunities for Welsh learners to use their Welsh outside the classroom
- undertaking short translation work or putting you in touch with a translator
- working in partnership with local organisations to offer social activities

In any country and in any language, the media has a strong social and cultural impact upon society. This is predicated upon their ability to reach a wide audience with a strong and influential message.

A survey of the uptake of successive media technologies by the Welsh-language community shows that the Welsh have proved eager to take advantage of new media as a means of saving their language from the confines of folk culture and consequent marginalisation.

This can be illustrated by looking at the chronology of new media adoption in Welsh. Firstly, the printing press: a hundred years after its invention, Sir John Price claimed this technology for Welsh in 1546 with the first-ever Welsh book, *Yny lhyvyr hwnn* ('*In this book*'). Secondly, the journal: in 1735, some 80 years after the publication of the first English journal, the Oxford Gazette, came the first attempt to create a Welsh periodical, *Tlysau yr Hen Oesoedd* ('*Treasures of the old ages*'). The first true Welsh weekly, *Seren Gomer*, appeared in 1814, four years after Wales's first English weekly newspaper.

Welsh-speaking society quickly adopted the new technology of newspapers. Records at the Welsh National Library show that by the late 1880s, there were 25 Welsh-language weekly newspapers.

After the transmission of electronic messages over wires, the next major development was wireless technology, towards the end of the 1800s. The BBC was established in Britain in 1922, and the first broadcast from Wales – which included a song in Welsh - was on 13 February 1923, some 30 years after the invention of the technology of radio itself. Over the years, Welsh-language programming gradually increased, with the establishment of Radio Cymru about 35 years ago, and the expansion of its airtime to the current 20 hours per day.

A separate Welsh TV channel, S4C, began broadcasting in 1982. Before the launch of S4C, Welsh speakers had been served by occasional programmes in Welsh broadcast as regional opt-outs on BBC Wales and ITV Wales, usually at off-peak or inconvenient times. This was unsatisfactory for Welsh speakers, who saw the arrangement as a sop, and also an annoyance for non-Welsh speakers, who found the English programmes seen in the rest of the UK often rescheduled or not transmitted at all.

During the 1970s, Welsh language campaigners and activists campaigned for a TV service in the language, which already had its own radio station, BBC Radio Cymru. After much protesting and acts of peaceful civil disobedience, the UK Government created an independent Welsh language television channel.

S4C's remit is to provide a service which features a wide range of programmes in the Welsh language. Like Channel 4, S4C does not produce programmes of its own; instead, it commissions programmes from BBC Cymru and independent producers. S4C has been particularly successful in commissioning children's programmes and cartoons. Broadcasting rights for cartoons created originally for S4C, such as *Super Ted*, *Fireman Sam* and *Sali Mali* have been brought by television channels the world over. TV movies produced for S4C have received some good foreign reviews; *Hedd Wyn* (an anti-war film based on the life of Welsh poet Ellis Humphrey Evans, who was killed in the First World War) was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Oscar in 1993 and *Solomon & Gaenor* (a romantic tale about an Orthodox Jew falling in love with a Welsh woman in the South Wales Valleys) was nominated for Oscar in 1999.

Over the past three decades, S4C has developed with the latest developments in broadcasting; turning to a complete digital channel last year, and they plan to produce all programmes in High Definition by the end of 2012.

'New media' in Welsh includes a range of services across various platforms, such as the Digital S4C television channel; the digital text service offered by BBC Wales on cable television for ntl and Telewest customers, which provides news, weather and sports; the WAP mobile phone news service carrying the latest Welsh stories; the live Radio Cymru service available throughout Britain and Europe on digital cable TV, and the RSS feeds of Welsh-language news headlines to external websites. There is also the emerging field of blogs, or weblogs, of which there are an increasing number in Welsh. It is also encouraging that a group of volunteers came together to translate facebook into Welsh some two years ago.

So, as you see, the Welsh language and culture is entwined, and is a very ancient culture which has, despite all the odds, survived and developed into the modern age. Perhaps I should mention one man who, to me, is an embodiment of the Welsh way of life which I have described.

It's this man. Ceri Wyn Jones. A Welsh language poet who has won a Chair at the National Eisteddfod with a poem dedicated to the struggles of farmers making a livelihood out of agriculture. Following a career as a teacher, he works as an editor with a Welsh publishing company in West Wales. He is a member of a choir, appears regularly on Welsh language television and radio programmes. I don't know if he has a facebook profile. But if he does – it would probably be in Welsh!

This century we are set to face the biggest challenge yet. In an age of globalisation, it is a common struggle for all of us to safeguard the future of our unique languages and cultures.

The global economic recession has hit Wales hard. Dramatic cuts are planned to public spending. This year, the Welsh Assembly Government has ring fenced spending on the promotion of the Welsh language, which is very positive. However the money spent on running S4C, the Welsh language television channel, is not so safe, and the independence of the channel is under question, as the UK Government talk of plans of merging the channel with the BBC. There is currently an active campaign underway to try to safeguard the existence of Welsh language broadcasting, a campaign in which the Welsh Language Board is very prominent.

The arts and culture are not only for the good times. They are a crucial ingredient in our well-being, especially at difficult times. They contribute to our

economic well-being, but also work on the human spirit: they provide jobs, they drive our creativity, and inspire, comfort and challenge individuals.

Culture should be a driving force for progress, the root source of a confident, diverse and forward-looking nation. We should embrace it, nurture it and celebrate it.

I opened my address to you today with the first two lines of the Welsh National Anthem. I leave you with the last two lines of that Anthem:

*Tra môr yn fur i'r bur hoff bau,
O bydded i'r hen iaith barhau.*

Translated to:

*While seas secure,
this land so pure,
o may our old language endure.*