NARRATING THE NATION: TELLING STORIES OF WALES

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‘We were a people bred on legends
Warming our hands at the red past.’¹
‘Welsh History’, R. S. Thomas

‘What history we were taught in the elementary school was a poisonous brand of romantic and medieval Welsh chauvinism [...] The reading was dreadful - nothing but how such and such medieval Welsh prince defeated the Saxons [...] It was absolutely contradicted by how we now were.’² Raymond Williams

R. S. Thomas’s well-known poem, ‘Welsh History’ (1952) offers us a delineation of Welsh history which appears to be drawn from the works of the popular, nationalist historians of the early twentieth century. Raymond Williams also responds to that outpouring of populist history but in a gesture of fastidious rejection of what he sees as its mendacious myth-making. R. S. was born in 1913, Williams eight years later; both would have attended schools in Wales in the period between the wars when text books such as O. M. Edwards’ Ystraeon o hanes Cymru [Stories from Welsh History, 1894] and Owen Rhoscomyl’s rousing Flame-bearers of Welsh History (1905) would have been among the set books. Such popular and didactic constructions of Welsh history have been pervasively influential, and not just on Welsh poets and novelists. This essay sets out to analyse the ways in which the history of Wales was made into a national narrative by popular historians of the twentieth century. It is written from the perspective not of a professional historian, for my research interests are literary and cultural, and I am therefore not competent to offer any kind of academic historiography of Wales. Rather, I am interested in the stories writers tell about Welsh history, writers who are frequently not professional historians themselves but who attempt to offer a coherent and persuasive national narrative. I believe that such popular stories of Wales can speak volumes about changing conceptualizations of Welsh history, culture and identity over the decades.

It has become a truism to assert that histories are always histories of the present. Nevertheless, it is certainly instructive to note how the popular histories of Wales produced during the twentieth century unerringly reflect the dominant ideologies of the time of

composition. It is also noteworthy that male and female authors frequently conceive of and project different constructs of Wales and Welshness, indicative of contemporary gender ideologies, which are also inflected by ideologies of class and ethnicity. We find that texts composed at different times in the twentieth century emphasize different periods of the Welsh past; some histories construct a medieval Golden Age, others focus on the Tudor reinvention of Welshness in the early modern period, while others see the Industrial Revolution as the key factor in the shaping of a modern Welsh nation. This essay will attempt to give a flavour of those differing emphases by focusing on a range of popular histories spanning the first half of the twentieth century, in Welsh and English, by male and female authors, comparing their construction of Wales and Welshness and seeing how their ‘imagined nations’ measure up to the contemporary reality of a devolved and increasingly diverse country.

Homi K. Bhabha asserts that ‘nationalist discourses’ try ‘persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress’ but at first sight it seems that popular narratives of Welsh history tend to do the opposite. As R. S. Thomas puts it, ‘We fought, and were always in retreat/Like snow thawing upon the slopes/ Of Mynydd Mawr.’ And here again R. S. shows how his imagination has been formed by the popular histories of Wales initiated by O. M. Edwards at the end of the nineteenth century. For Edwards’s narrative was one which linked Wales not with progress but with resistance to modernity, and the key concept underpinning that narrative was that ‘Wales is a land of mountains’. This is the opening sentence in his influential 1901 text, Wales, in the Story of the Nations series published in 1901 and reprinted many times. Edwards, who himself came from Llanuwchlyn in the heartlands of Snowdonia, offers us a geographically determinist narrative of the Welsh as a people formed by their mountains, which account for their distinctiveness from Others, their preservation of an old tongue and culture, and an admirable resistance to the homogenizing forces of modernity. In Edwards’ construction of Wales, the mountains are turned into emblems of Welsh resilience, a stronghold, a terrain within which Arthur and his sleeping knights are ensconsed, suggesting the eternal resting place of the Welsh spirit. Of course, as the eminent geographer Estyn Evans has pointed out, Edwards does not really argue this geographical analysis of history in any sustained way; rather, it remains as a rhetorical gesture, a narrative device, used emotively and in a literary manner to move the reader and to engage one’s emotions. Nevertheless, as Neil Evans reminds us, although ‘[Edwards] was not at the cutting edge of scholarship, not a researcher in the modern sense, but a popularizer and educator [...] the place he gives to geography in Welsh history is ... the declaration of independence of Welsh history.”

O. M. Edwards was a driven man, passionately committed to reminding the Welsh of who they were or at least of convincing them that they were the idealized, noble mountain people conjured up in his own historical narratives. At the turn of the century, he

was indefatigable in his mission to ‘raise up the old country’ and he published many accounts of Welsh history in both Welsh and English. The book in the Story of the Nations series, which also had an American publisher and was widely read in the U.S., was unusual in its ambitious coverage; as Geraint H. Jenkins points out, it was ‘the first history book to devote more space to post-Conquest than to pre-Conquest Wales’. Nevertheless, this conscientious attempt to narrate modernity is not characteristic of most of Edwards’ accounts of Wales. The heart of his construction of Wales is rural, Welsh-speaking, and Protestant; its emotional centre can be situated in a certain poor thatched cottage at the foot of Aran Fawddwy where O. M. Edwards, the illustrious Fellow of Lincoln College Oxford, was born.

Edwards’ approach to the writing of Welsh history is a hybrid one. In the volume Wales he is at one and the same time the Oxford don, the Edwardian man of letters, the Welsh son of the soil made good, and the Romantic idealist whose first love is poetry. These different and potentially conflicting authorial personae manifest themselves in the hybrid genres of his texts. While Wales tells a linear narrative history of the country, in other books he subscribes to Carlyle’s dictum that ‘History is the essence of innumerable biographies’ while in others he adopts the role of traveller in order to guide the reader on an educational pilgrimage around the historical ‘lieux de memoire’ of Wales. As Anthony D. Smith has observed, regarding the forging of nationalist ideologies by an educated elite: ‘There were two ways in which […] maps and moralities could be constructed out of a living ethnic past. The educator-intellectuals found both in the life and symbolism of the people and their popular historical traditions. The first way was through a return to nature’ and its ‘poetic spaces’. This nature and these spaces are quite specific; they constitute the historic home of the people, the sacred repository of their memories.

In Cartrefi Cymru (The Homes of Wales, 1896) Edwards the educator-intellectual quite literally explores the ‘historic home[s] of the people’; this text is in many senses a more characteristic production of Edwards’ pen than the Series of the Nations volume. Its tone is much more intimate and its style belle-lettrist; he adopts a first-person narrative voice and in tones of disarming enthusiasm and with outbreaks of purple prose worthy of the copious heather which decorates the cover of the book, he leads us to the homes of a dozen notable figures from Welsh history: Dolwar Fach, Tŷ Coch, Gerddi Bluog, Pant y Celyn, Bryn Tynoriad, Trefeca, and so on. He takes us to the literal hearthstones of the nation, firmly placing the resilient Welsh character in a domestic setting. This is an interesting and, I suggest, innovative approach to the writing of Welsh history, anticipating

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7 Thomas Carlyle, ‘On History’, 1830.

both Estyn Evans’s notion of the ‘personality of Wales’\(^9\) and some of the advances made by feminist historians in recent years; as Paul O’Leary has suggested, ‘collapsing the public-private divide is one of the most important contributions of gender history.’\(^{10}\) Arguably, O. M. Edwards was beginning to do just that in these strangely hybrid texts, part popular history, part travel narrative.

In Cartrefi Cymru Edwards visits the homes of two hymn-writers, two preachers, three poets, two prose writers, a religious martyr, a composer, and a saint. In so doing, he constructs a composite portrait of Welshness as a national identity characterized by literature, religion, and music. At the beginning of his pilgrimage to ‘Dolwar Fechan’, the former home of the hymn-writer, Ann Griffiths, we meet the narrator at the local inn, an interior location which itself has a history:

I am sitting in a long, narrow, low-ceilinged room with windows looking out in three directions, at the only inn in Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa. This is the most important room in the village - here every rural committee meets, here Sir Watkin’s annual rent feast takes place, here meets every club, here the wisdom of generations of farmers at weddings and funerals is expressed. But today it is quite empty, just the two long rows of chairs, the two old oak tables, and myself the weary traveller seeking solace and restoration through drinking the wholesome steepings of the leaves of India. Through the open door I can see the thin legs of the old bell-ringer who is dozing by the hearth in the kitchen, and through the three windows I can see the rain pouring down through the leafy thick branches of trees, through the ash and the sycamore, and along the golden chains of the laburnum.\(^{11}\)

This opening shows clearly that he is using literary and rhetorical devices such as repetition and periphrasis to create a sense of intimacy, a palpable atmosphere, as well as a sense of the past: this place, here, has its own history, repeated through the generations - it is almost

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as if the sounds of the voices heard here echo through the narrator’s own. The strategic position of the old bell-ringer suggests the established ceremony of village life, its dignified marking of religious rite, and its intimate relation to the cozy domestic hearth. Outside, Nature just is, in all its fertile glory; the narrator is alert to all the resonances and beauty of this place, and transmits them to his reader, illustrating the process described by Anthony D. Smith as ‘constructing maps and moralities […] out of a living ethnic past [by] a return to ‘nature’ and its ‘poetic spaces’ [which are] the sacred repository of [the people’s] memories.’

Edwards’ narrator then goes on to recount his visit to Ann Griffiths’ grave and house. The journey itself appears to be as important as arrival at his destination, for he walks through a haunted and historicised landscape; it is as if the narrator becomes Ann Griffiths, walking the same paths she walked, noticing the same things, such as the sound of the stream which might have inspired the rushing waters and fountains in the imagery of her hymns. The house, when he arrives, is disappointingly new but he is welcomed by an old woman who wants to feed him. Since he has walked eight miles from Llanfyllin, he asks for a glass of water but is given an ambrosia-like milk: ‘Daeth a gwydriad o lefrith i mi, a’r hufen melyn yn felus arno. Lawer gwaith wedyn, pan yn yfed llefrith a’i hanner yn ddwfr a’i hufen wedi ei hel yn ofalus oddiarno, bum yn hiraethu am y glasiad llefrith a gefais yn Dolwar Fechan’. [She brought me a glass of milk, with the yellow cream lying sweetly on top. Many times since, drinking milk which is half water with its cream having been carefully skimmed off, I have longed for that glass of milk I had in Dolwar Fechan]. He is also given milk and hospitality in Pant y Celyn, the home of another prominent hymn-writer, William Williams. The repeated gesture of Welsh hospitality at these hymn-writers’ homes suggests subtly the way in which Protestant religion has fed and nurtured the Welsh, forming and sustaining them in the same way that milk nourishes the infant.

In most of the houses he visits, he notices and describes old clocks, and notes the dates carved on walls or furniture - here, history is literally written on he material objects of the home. At the end of the text he expresses the hope that he has inspired some readers to take the same pilgrimages throughout Wales, for: ‘Ein gwlad ni ydyw. Y mae wedi ei chysegru â hanes ein cenedl. Ynddi hi y gorwedd our fathers; her graves sanctify the earth […] There are homes scattered here and there all across her territory, and there are children inside them, full of life and hope, like the great men who lived in them in days gone by; is it not a good thing to show these children the steps of those who set forth from these homes before?] As Robin Chapman has argued, ‘by adopting the persona of traveller and visitor, Edwards relocates himself. Or, rather, bilocates himself. He is at once […] visitor and native, the

12 Smith, ibid.
13 O. M. Edwards, Cartrefi Cymru, op. cit., p. 17.
14 Ibid., p. 139.
pilgrim whose journey confers significance on the ordinary’.¹⁵ Moreover, in a move characteristic of nationalist rhetoric, Edwards turns from the past to the future in the final pages of the text, calling explicitly for a National Museum, so that ‘the homes of Wales’ should not continue to be ‘the only monuments to the heroes of Welsh history’.¹⁶ Edwards soon got his wish: within little more than a decade, the National Museum of Wales was founded in Cardiff.

While Edwards referred explicitly to the children of Wales at the end of Cartrefi Cymru, he also set himself to address those children directly in a series of textbooks on Welsh history for schools. Contemporaneous with Cartrefi Cymru, Ystraeon o hanes Cymru (Stories from Welsh History) went through many editions in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Its striking red cover is adorned with images of medieval warriors complete with swords and shields, one pierced by an arrow; it also displays a castle, flags and, of course, the inevitable mountain in the background. The 80-page book includes 32 stories, beginning with ‘How Arthur left this world’ and ending with ‘Arthur’s sleep’. As that Arthurian framing indicates, the stories of Wales told here are significantly more legendary and mythological than the narrative history of the book Wales in the Story of the Nations series. The child reader is informed, authoritatively, that ‘For many hundreds of years the Welsh have been awaiting Arthur’s return, to free his people. But Arthur never did return.’¹⁷ The second story focuses upon the heroic figure of Caradog, accompanied by a coloured illustration of ‘Caradog yn Rhufain’ [Caradog in Rome]. This same picture, depicting Britons in chains before the Roman emperor, is actually reproduced in a number of school texts in both Welsh and English from this period (it appears, for example, in works by Moelona, Ernest Rhys, and Owen Rhoscomyl, discussed below). The tenor of this story is distinctly anti-imperialist; the greedy and arrogant Romans are figured as admiring, despite themselves, the bravery and defiance of the indigenous Britons. In a later story, the role of predatory villain is taken by the Normans, who are described as ‘hunting down and slaying the Welsh in forests and fields. Their land, their goods, their freedom - all was lost’.¹⁸ Interestingly, though, despite this emphasis on martial heroes and battles, Edwards does not entirely lose the emphasis on the domestic that he had employed in Cartrefi Cymru; at one point the narrator addresses the child-reader directly, inviting him

¹⁶ ‘Cartrefi gwledig Cymru yw yr unig gofgolofnau i arwyr ein hanes ni’, Cartrefi Cymru, op. cit., p. 140.
¹⁸ ‘yr oedd y Normaniaid yn eu hela [y Cymry] i farwolaeth mewn coed a maes. Eu tir, eu da, eu rhyddid, - yr oedd y cwbl wedi ei golli.’ ibid., p. 17. Compare again the lines from R. S. Thomas’s poem, ‘Welsh History’: ‘We fought, and were always in retreat/Like snow thawing upon the slopes/ Of Mynydd Mawr.’
to imagine visiting a house in the old days and leading him around the domestic interior, pointing out its features, like a tourist guide to the past.

The stories are a roll call of Welsh medieval heroes: Dewi Sant, Hywel Dda, Gruffydd ab Cynan, Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf and of course Owen Glyndŵr, with a few heroines scattered here and there, such as Mary Jones and her Bible. But the text is not reducible to a Carlylean biography of great individuals - it retains its generic hybridity which, in fact, increases as the text proceeds to become a kind of miscellany of poetry, proverbs, biography, adventure story, and travel guide. Oddly, the narrator becomes particularly animated by livestock; he diligently gives the numbers of sheep and cows for every county in Wales, suggesting the richness of the land. He also draws attention to Wales’s mineral wealth and the skills of those who exploit it, but this is as close as he comes to addressing the industrial experience of the people of Wales. Despite this striking lacuna, in ‘Pobl Cymru’ [The People of Wales] he suggests that although people in different areas of Wales speak different languages, there is still a unified national identity. Similarly, there is a strongly expressed belief in progress: the child reader is informed that ‘Your country is improving all the time’, a sentiment which appears to uphold after all Homi Bhabha’s assertion that ‘nationalist discourses’ attempt ‘persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress’. Yet the apotheosis of the nation is always in the future; in the final vignette we see Arthur telling his warriors to go back to sleep because the day has not yet come, but the impression given is that ‘gwawr Cymru’ [the dawn of Wales] is not far off. This is clearly not history in any factual sense but history as story, a history of the imagination and desire, with a tinge of allegory.

Owen Rhoscomyl’s Flame bearers of Welsh History (1905) bears many similarities in its nationalist construction of Wales to O. M. Edwards’ Ystraeon o hanes Cymru, indicating that a difference in language at this point is not really an indication of internal ideological difference. Rhoscomyl was, of course, a fascinating and colourful figure in his own right, as John Ellis and Hywel Teifi Edwards have shown, but, for the purposes of this essay we can view him as a ‘flame bearer’ of Welsh history in his own right. As Geraint H. Jenkins suggests, after a period of historical amnesia, ‘thanks to Flame-Bearers of Welsh History [...] schoolchildren were now [by the early twentieth century] reading stirring tales of Welsh gallantry.’ Like Edwards, Rhoscomyl focuses on presenting a gallery of Welsh ‘heroes’ such as Caradoc, Arthur, Brychan Brycheiniog, Dewi Sant, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, Gwenllian, the Lord Rhys, Llywelyn the Last, and Owain Glyndŵr. This parade of derring-do was performed in the National Pageant of 1909 in Cardiff Castle, orchestrated and scripted by Rhoscomyl himself. The Pageant was, in effect, a physical embodiment of the narrative he told in Flame Bearers of Welsh History and, at the same time, an act of communal remembering and celebration involving some 5,000 performers and 25,000 spectators. Hostile critics like Raymond Williams (who depicts his childhood alter ego,
Will, in his 1960 novel Border Country sitting through a history lesson where the set text is clearly Flame Bearers of Welsh History) would no doubt appreciate the irony of the role of Owain Glyndŵr being performed by the former Tory MP, Lord Tredegar, and that of Dame Wales by the English-born, Irish-bred Marchioness of Bute.

But to return to the text of Flame Bearers of Welsh History: the prose reads much more like a boys’ own adventure story than the sober tones of scholarly history. It also revels in orotund declarations, such as ‘Cloudily dawned the morning of that Monday, August 22, 1485, when Henry Tudor drew out the host of his gallant countrymen for the battle that was to close a thousand years of struggle. It was to close more; it was to close the medieval period of British history, and to open the modern day, the day of our own Empire.’ Rhoscomyl and O. M. Edwards are typical of their time in the way in which they apparently see no contradiction between Welsh nationalism and British imperialism; similarly, both subscribe to the potent myth of the Tudors bringing a Welsh identity and character to the English throne. Rhoscomyl’s narrator ends by exhorting present-day readers to emulate the heroes of the Welsh past: ‘Well, and those old times are gone, the souls of those old heroes are with God; their dust and the memory of their deeds alone remain with us. Yet, if we are as true to follow the right, and to struggle for it, whenever we see it, as stubbornly as they did, then, when our own time comes to lay down this life and pass beyond the veil, we shall find the old leaders ready to acknowledge us as being of the old blood and the old name.’

Such direct appeals to the contemporary schoolchild clearly align the didactic practices of Rhoscomyl and O. M. Edwards, but the former is more interested in genealogy and continuity of race than the latter. In fact, Edwards, true to the characteristic hybridity of his writing, also espouses what we tend to regard as a ‘modern’ notion of Wales as having a mixed racial and linguistic heritage. In Wales, Edwards asserts unequivocally that the country is ‘not the home of one ancient race, it is not the home of one ancient language. Many races have reached its glens and hills [...] Many languages have died on its mountains’, concluding, typically, ‘But, while races and language go, the mountains remain.’ Like Edwards, though, Rhoscomyl deploys all his literary skills in fashioning the stories of his popular history. His description of the site of Owain Glyndŵr’s grave may serve as an example:

His grave is known - well known. It is beside no church, neither under the shadow of any ancient yew. It is in a spot safer and more sacred still. Rain does not fall on it, hail nor sleet chill no sere sod above it. It is forever green with the green of eternal spring. Sunny the light on it: close and warm and dear it lies, sheltered from all storm, from all cold or grey oblivion. Time shall not touch it;

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23 Ibid., pp. 253-4.
decay shall not dishonour it; for that grave is in the heart of every true Cymro. There, for ever, from generation unto generation, grey Owen’s heart lies dreaming on, dreaming on, safe for ever and for ever.25

To a cynical contemporary reader, this might be seen as nationalist kitsch, but it has an undeniable rhetorical power, with its repetitions and elegiac cadences, appealing still to an author such as Dafydd Guto, who writes in Y Casglwr (The Collector) as late as 2002 that Rhoscomyl makes history come alive, offering the reader hope in the future.

Rhoscomyl was a novelist as well as a writer of popular history; similarly, his contemporary, Ernest Rhys, was a poet, editor, and man of letters in the late nineteenth century mould and he, too, took to providing popular histories of Wales for an increasingly eager audience. His Readings in Welsh History was published by Longman Green and Co in London in 1901. Its 36 chapters begin with ‘The Early Forefathers of the Welsh’ and end with ‘The University of Wales’. It includes chapters on the druids, Boadicea, The Celt and the Saxon, The legends of Arthur and Merlin, St David, Gerald of Wales, The Mabinogion, The death of Llywelyn the Last, The struggle for the Welsh Tongue, two chapters on Owain Glyndŵr, and The Welsh Bible. Surprisingly for a man who trained and worked as a mining engineer before he took to the pursuit of letters, there is nothing on modern history or industrialization. Appropriately for a man who would be the editor and driving force behind the distinguished Everyman library, Rhys’s text is relatively erudite; he draws on and quotes from original sources, such as Gildas, the Triads, early Welsh poems, Roman historians, Kilhwch and Olwen, Brut y Brenhinoedd, and Hollinshead. Yet the narrative is very readable and often astute; his account of Gerald of Wales, for instance, is perceptive: ‘Gerald [...] was not the fairest of observers, and he was full of Norman conceit, and all his pages must not be taken as matter-of-fact. But he had wit and an eager mind and a passion for making things and men better than he found them. No one has given us more of the spirit of that age of Norman and Celt than he who had the blood of both mingled in his veins.’26 Like O. M. Edwards, he draws especially on Welsh literature to formulate an argument about the nature of the Welsh past and he also includes the private sphere in his evocation of that past. In the chapter on ‘The Mabinogion’, for instance, he writes:

In the Chronicle of the Welsh Princes we read of so many wars, invasions, feuds and castle-takings, that little time seems left for other things. But these events only filled a small part of the years which they mark. There were long winter nights and days, when the mountain rains fell, that needed beguiling. A Welsh prince, or any head of a house, would not have thought his household complete without the minstrels and tale-tellers, who could speed the long hours round the hearth with their harps, and with the feats of warriors and tales of adventure [...] The Welsh Hearth [...] as we know, counted for much more in a Welsh house in the Middle Ages than it does now. Around it the house folk sat and plied the domestic crafts, while songs were sung and stories like the “Mabinogion” told.27

25 Flame Bearers, op. cit., p. 228.
27 Ibid., p. 107.
His own story-telling is, like Rhoscomyl’s, often vivid, as in his rendering of Llywelyn the last’s death: ‘His poor remains were cruelly treated. Where the body lies, none quite know. The head was cut off, and by Edward’s orders crowned with ivy leaves and a silver crown, in mockery of the Welsh prophecy that this Prince of Wales should be crowned in London. So adorned, and carried in triumph through the streets on a spear, the head of the Last Prince was placed on the same Tower walls which had been the death of his father.’

He is particularly eloquent on the history of the Welsh language, which he himself spoke:

The people of Wales have had to wage an endless struggle for their Welsh tongue [...] If we count over some of the words in a Welsh book, we find many words that come from the Latin. Such are ffenestr, a window, which in Latin is fenestra; tyrfa, a crowd, Latin, turba; trist, sad, Latin, tristis; and sanct, holy, Latin, sanctus. Every word of the kind is like the name of a battle-field on a map. It shows where the two tongues fought, and some words took the place of others. The strength of the old tongue, as in Welsh today, was in its words of the home and the hearth, and in its sounding names of air and water, and of the green places, rocks, mountains and rivers of the land. Think of the Welsh name for thunder, Taran, how fine it is; think of names of mountains like Eryri, for Snowdon, or Moelwyn in the same region; or farther south Cader Idris ...

Like Edwards and Rhoscomyl, Rhys emphasizes survival and continuity; he praises the ancientness of Welsh poetry which has through the ages, been ‘the faithful servant of our history’ and ends by asserting that ‘the ancient fire of Welsh song is not dead.’

Despite some differences in emphases, then, O. M. Edwards, Owen Rhoscomyl, and Ernest Rhys, notwithstanding the disparity of their own backgrounds, construct a remarkably similar story of the nation, a story in which Wales itself is a ‘poetic space’ and the ‘sacred repository of […] memories’.

Geraint Jenkins has pointed out, in outlining Welsh historiography, that Welsh History before the twentieth century was ‘a history written by men and, for the most part, about great men’. He notes, however, that one of the few reputable works of history written before the publication of J. E. Lloyd’s magisterial, two-volume A History of Wales: from the earliest times to the Edwardian Conquest in 1911 was written by a woman, namely Jane Williams, known as ‘Ysgafell’ whose A History of Wales derived from Authentic Sources was published in 1869. However, Ysgafell’s text certainly does not belong in my account of popular stories of Wales since it is almost ostentatiously erudite. In mentioning Jane Williams here, what I wish to indicate is what happened to a woman historian of the period who did not wish to turn ‘history’ into ‘story’. Quite simply, she had no readers. As the rather poignant hand-written note in the opening pages of the National...
Library of Wales copy of the text indicates, even her publisher was rather sorry that such an obvious labour of love and scholarship should have gained such little acclaim.

No, if women historians wanted to be heard at all, they were more or less forced to take the popular route. My next example is of a work by the novelist Eiluned Lewis whose The Land of Wales was co-written with her brother, Peter Lewis, and published in 1937. The Lewises give ample attention in their text both to the modern industrial experience and to domestic work, as evidenced by some of the illustrations in the book. But generically their story of Wales bears a strong resemblance to O. M. Edwards’s Cartrefi Cymru. The opening is almost certainly written by Eiluned Lewis, for it is highly reminiscent of the topographical beginning of her 1934 bestselling novel, Dew on the Grass. We are confronted with the figure of the solitary traveller in a Welsh landscape:

On a day of clear weather, a man standing on one of the whale-backs of Plinlimon can see with his naked eyes the whole width of Wales. To the west lies the unfrequented sea - once the highway of the Western World - clipped between the horns of Lleyn and Dyfed [...] To the east the hills fall away to the English plain and the traveller on Plinlimon, in that region of bog and springy turf, watching above him the spiral sweeps of a buzzard’s flight, his ears filled, if it is spring, with the bubbling notes of the curlews, may be likened to a man on a tower who watches both gates to his property. The position of Wales as a mountain fortress ... is immediately apparent. Invaders of endless variety ... have visited her through the centuries, while she looked out through her two windows, suffering much, receiving much, and always remembering.33

This is a striking opening. And one might be tempted to categorize the text as a work of geography or topographical description or even a travel guide, were it not for the fact that even this initial paragraph makes it clear that a story of Wales is about to be told, rather than simply a picture sketched. Fascinating also is the way in which Wales is figured as a suffering female figure, an icon of the enduring nation rather like Ireland’s Cathleen ni Houlihan, while the intrepid traveller is, of course, male. The Lewises’ book shows how all these popular texts draw on each other, forming a palimpsest of narrative intertextuality - here, O. M. Edwards’s geographical determinism - ‘Wales is a land of mountains’ – is borrowed and turned to different purposes. This is a highly literary story of Wales; like Ernest Rhys, Lewis draws heavily on sources like the Mabinogion, fairy tales, Shakespeare, George Meredith, Drayton and Borrow to tell her story (and I think these literary aspects are attributable to Eiluned rather than to her brother, who was not a creative writer). She tends to sideline the martial heroes, such as Llywelyn and Glyndŵr; indeed, in contrast with other popular texts, she gives short shrift to the ‘biographies of great men’ school of narrative. Instead, she and her brother adopt a more democratic approach, emphasizing common experiences, and placing their own love of Wales at the centre of the text. In common with all the other stories, though, The Land of Wales emphasizes continuity and survival, emphasizing the notion of an imperishable ‘essence’ of Wales, which it is still possible for the determined traveller to find.

Eiluned Lewis, The Land of Wales...
Such an essentialist assumption is likewise found in contemporary Welsh-language popular histories by women, such as those by ‘Moelona’, which was the pen-name of the novelist, teacher, and children’s author Elizabeth Mary Jones, originally from rural Ceredigion. She was, of course, writing at a time in the early twentieth century when the whole enterprise of women’s and gender history had yet to be undertaken. Yet she herself was a committed feminist, whose fiction is full of propaganda in favour of female suffrage and higher education for women.\textsuperscript{34} Paul O’Leary has noted how, unfortunately, in comparison with recent labour history, ‘women’s history to date has made much less of an impact on the way in which the general narratives of Welsh history are constructed.’\textsuperscript{35} And of course the neglect of Jane Williams, ‘Ysgafell’, would appear to set a precedent for such a state of affairs. Yet, ‘Moelona’s voice was heard, largely because she was herself an influential schoolteacher and wrote a number of school text books. Her narrative of Welsh history in her 1930 text for schools, Storïau o hanes Cymru [Stories from Welsh history] bears many similarities to the school texts by the triumvirate of Edwards, Rhoscomyl, and Rhys already examined. This is a book aimed at younger children than any of the books analysed so far, though; its twenty-six chapters each focuses on a figure from the past, predominantly men, but including more women than we have seen hitherto. Nevertheless, Moelona subscribes wholeheartedly to the nationalist narrative of her male peers, beginning with Caradog and the Romans, and embracing Dewi Sant, Arthur, Hywel Dda, Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf, and Owain Glyndŵr. Interestingly, though, she brings the narrative more up to date and gives more emphasis to literary and philanthropic, rather than military figures. Thus, Robert Owen, O. M. Edwards himself, and the novelist Daniel Owen figure in her composite biography of the nation, along with the feminist and writer, Cranogwen. Like her male peers, she underlines the notion of continuity: ‘Er plygu i frenin Lloegr, a derbyn ei deddfau, Cymry yw'r Cymry o hyd. Nid anghofiant ogoniant eu gorffennol. Carant eu gwlad a chadwant eu hiaith.’\textsuperscript{36} [Although they bowed to the English King and accepted his laws, the Welsh are still the Welsh. They do not forget the glory of their past. They love their country and they keep their language]. She includes Ieuan Gwynedd as one of her tableau of heroes because of his work in supporting education for women and founding the magazine Y Gymraes (The Welshwoman), concluding ‘Caiff merched heddiw gystal addysg a bechgyn. Ieuan Gwynedd oedd y cyntaf yng Nghymru i ddangos mai felly y dylai fod’.\textsuperscript{37} [Girls today receive just as good an education as boys. Ieuan Gwynedd was the first in Wales to show that that’s the way it should be]. In the mode of popular nationalist history, she paints a rather too rosy picture of a ‘now’ when everyone has equal opportunities. Nevertheless, it is clear that Moelona’s story is significantly different from those of her male contemporaries and forerunners: she inserts women more firmly into the national narrative and asserts their right to be there.

\textsuperscript{34} See my \textit{Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging} (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007) pp. 47-53.
\textsuperscript{36} Moelona, \textit{Storïau o hanes Cymru} (Wrexham: Educational Publishing Company, 1930) p. 51.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. p. 106.
I turn now from popular stories of Wales aimed at a juvenile audience to ones which are firmly addressed to an adult, and primarily English, audience. These are books by Welsh men of letters who take on the role of interpreter of the Otherness of Wales to an urbane English audience. Edward Thomas’s Beautiful Wales, first published in 1905, and republished under the title Wales in 1924, appears at first sight to be this kind of coffee-table book, especially since the rather chocolate-box illustrations actually seem to take precedence over the writing. Yet this is the poet Edward Thomas, who died at the Somme in 1917 and, as soon as one opens the book, one realizes that this is something much more valuable and interesting from a literary point of view than anything examined hitherto. Like O. M. Edwards’s Cartrefi Cymru, it is a generic hybrid, part history, part autobiography, part travel guide, and its eccentric structure does not even pretend to offer a coherent grand narrative of the Welsh past. In fact, Thomas begins by mocking the contemporary cult of the Celt and the blinkered view of English tourists. Foreshadowing the much more recent mistrust of totalizing narratives which elide difference, Thomas proposes the notion that there are many different Waleses, which explains why he hardly recognizes the country in the descriptions of it given in the work of English travellers. What he offers here is an impressionistic account of his Wales, again presaging the emphasis on difference and subjectivity in a work like My Wales by Rhys Davies, discussed below. In the second chapter Thomas becomes more explicitly autobiographical, recalling his London childhood and his longing for Wales, which was focused on a picture of ‘Sir Lancelot at the Chapel Perilous’ which hung in his parents’ home. Thomas is well aware - in 1905 - that Wales is for him an ‘imagined nation’ whose topography is a strange, dreamy mixture of the actual and the literary. He expresses a sense of loss, of possessing only a trace of a great heritage, as a result of what he elsewhere called his ‘accidental Cockney’ identity. ‘These little things’ he says ‘are the opening cadences of a great music which I have heard, and which is Wales. But I have forgotten the whole, and have echoes of it only, when I hear an old Welsh song [...] I have had a vision of a rose. But my memory possesses only the doubtful and withered dustiness of a petal or two.’

‘A Farmhouse under a mountain’ recounts an actual memory of staying in a Welsh farmhouse, beginning with a long description of the domestic interior, which is reminiscent of O. M. Edwards’ prose in Cartrefi Cymru, especially in the way in which past and present are artfully melded together:

Having passed the ruined abbey and the orchard, I came to a long, low farmhouse kitchen, smelling of bacon and herbs and burning sycamore and ash...[There was] an open fireplace and a perpetual red fire, and two teapots warming, for they had tea for breakfast, tea for dinner, tea for tea, tea for supper, and tea between....There were two tall clocks; and they were the most human clocks I ever met, for they ticked with effort and uneasiness: they seemed to think and sorrow over time, as if they caused it, and did not go on thoughtlessly and impudently like most clocks, which are insufferable; they found the hours

troublesome and did not twitter mechanically over them...And outside...always silent, but never forgotten, the restless, towering outline of a mountain.\textsuperscript{39}

Again echoing O. M. Edwards, Thomas brings history directly to this hearth later in the narrative: ‘When we are by this fire, we can do what we like with Time, making a strange solitude within these four walls, as if they were cut off in time as in space from the great world by something more powerful than the night; so that, whether Llewelyn the Great, or Llewelyn the Last, or Arthur, or Kilwch, or Owen Glyndwr, or the most recent prophet be the subject of our talk, nothing intrudes that can prevent us for the time from being utterly at one with them [...]In such a room are legends made...’\textsuperscript{40} Thomas’s story of Wales is thus discontinuous and self-conscious, a knowing construction of the Welsh past with all the requisite heroes thrown in but without the usual teleological narrative linking them. The connecting thread in this story of Wales is the poetic subjectivity of the narrator, so that it is fitting that in the latter third of the book the narrative should also turn into a month by month journal of Wales. Thomas is bewitched by ‘all those phantoms following phantoms in a phantom land, - a gleam of spears, a murmur of arrows, a shout of victory, a fair face, a scream of torture, a song, the form of some conqueror and pursuer of English kings, - which make Welsh history.’\textsuperscript{41}

Despite the literary quality and the appealing idiosyncrasy of Edward Thomas’s narrative, it is undeniable that his Wales is an exclusively rural place - there is in it no representation of the urban or the industrial, or indeed of modernity, unless one counts the reference to the impudent twittering of modern clocks. As Paul O’Leary has observed, this period of Welsh history takes ‘rural society’ as the encapsulation of the ‘essence of Welshness’, just as, conversely, the new histories of Wales from the 1980s onwards took ‘the working-class culture of urban and industrial society’ as their ‘trope of authenticity’.\textsuperscript{42}

But some literary figures in the mid-twentieth century did begin this shift towards the recognition that the story of Wales included more than the rural and a roll-call of medieval heroes. The Rhondda-born novelist and short-story writer Rhys Davies is a case in point. As Huw Osborne has recently pointed out in his monograph on Davies, in the late 1930s and 40s Davies seemed happy enough to play the role of the professional Welshman, though he was a cosmopolitan gay man who had long been living in London. In this guise he published both My Wales in 1937 and The Story of Wales in 1943. One of the most immediately striking differences in Rhys Davies’s My Wales is his choice of ‘heroes’: rather than Caradog, Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf, and Owain Glyndŵr, Davies dwells upon Dr William Price, The Maid of Cefn Ydfa, and Twm Shon Catti. Characteristically, Rhys Davies is attracted to eccentrics, dissidents, and misfits; he celebrates not sameness but difference. Nevertheless, Davies does not shy away from making sweeping generalizations about the essence of Welsh identity, probably because he was, as Osborne suggests, pandering to his

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., pp. 41-2.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 199.
\textsuperscript{42} O’Leary ‘Masculine histories: Gender and the Social History of Modern Wales’, p. 255.
largely English audience and acting as a kind of ‘native informant’. But Davies’s text gives ample attention to the industrial experience and modernity, unlike his more romantic predecessors; the longest chapter in My Wales, for instance, is about ‘The South Wales Workers’, and there are no fewer than five photographs of coal miners in the text. He also engages with the present - in referring, inevitably, to Owain Glyndŵr, he links him with the recent arsonists of Penyberth: Saunders Lewis, D. J. Williams, and Lewis Valentine:

Owen’s effort to give Wales political freedom found a definite echo in 1937 when three Welsh Nationalist leaders were sent to gaol for a criminal attempt to repudiate an English ruling. The revolt begun in the early fifteenth century - the first cohesive Welsh revolt - is not over yet, according to these new leaders who, by means of arson, so suddenly surprised English people into knowledge of their existence. Whether Owen has left descendants as great as himself remains to be seen.

But one can tell that Davies is not particularly enthusiastic about either Welsh Nationalism or indeed Owain Glyndŵr; instead, his prose becomes animated when he narrates the tragic love story of Anne Maddocks, the ‘Maid of Cefn Ydfa’ or the criminal exploits of Twm Shon Catti, who is introduced, mischievously, like this:

In remote pre-Nonconformist days, when hilarity was more naturally abundant in Wales than it was later - that is, before the Great Blight - there lived a Tregaron man by the name of Twm Shon Catti. He is a relief from the long procession of romantic heroes, grim warriors, serious bucolic bards, preachers, revivalists, mournful singers, hymn-composers, industrial magnates, colliers, strikers, and eisteddfod personalities who pass across the long history of Wales. Twm Shon Catti was a rascal.

Rhys Davies’s voice as a queer artist telling his story of Wales comes as a welcome change from the often stereotypical and muscular masculinity of popular history in the hands of writers like Owen Rhoscomyl. Like Edward Thomas, Davies is acutely aware of the imaginative construction of an idiosyncratic version of Welsh history aimed at a particular audience here. He is conscious of manufacturing a Story of Wales but, as Geraint H. Jenkins has remarked, ‘a manufactured past is better than no past at all’.

There are, of course, many stories of Wales and more recent popular histories continue the imagining of the nation already seen in these earlier examples. Texts such as, for instance, Elisabeth Inglis-Jones’s Story of Wales (1955), Jan Morris’s The Matter of Wales (1984), and Charlotte Williams’s Sugar and Slate (2002), are all popular histories of Wales seen from a distinctively female point of view. But what these more recent texts show is the way in which the totalizing grand narrative of popular history has increasingly fractured and admitted into itself both internal difference and increased generic hybridity. In his

45 Ibid., 188.
46 Geraint H. Jenkins, op. cit., p. 120.
analysis of popular accounts of Irish history The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland (2001) Roy Foster draws attention to the way in which ‘narrative itself has come to be seen as an agent of making history.’ The Welsh authors considered above can certainly be regarded as active makers of history, as well as, arguably, makers up of history. Making it up is what literature is all about, of course, and it has been particularly interesting to note the way in which literary figures - novelists, poets, and travel writers - have participated in this process of Welsh history-making. They have brought their imaginations and their rhetorical and technical skills to bear on what Hannah Arendt has called ‘mastering the past’, which, she says, ‘take[s] the form of ever-recurrent narration’, concluding that ‘the poet in a very general sense and the historian in a very special sense have the task of setting this process of narration in motion and of involving us in it.’ While the Welsh Assembly Government in present-day Cardiff may not have been envisaged by those early twentieth-century story-tellers, it is as well to remember that the Senedd in Cardiff Bay is only a short bus ride away from Cardiff City Hall, which still contains a gallery of statues of Welsh ‘heroes’ from Llywellyn to Owain Glyndŵr, as if bodying forth in marble the narratives of those early popular historians of the nation. However much we might today call into question the grandness of their narratives, those Welsh story-tellers made their readers feel like participants in a history which they felt was in danger of being forgotten.

(8080 words)

I would like to thank Neil Evans and Paul O’Leary, ‘proper historians’, for their invaluable comments on this essay.

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