

# Some thoughts on the cultural differences between England and Wales.

*(Ry'n ni yma o hyd)*

## BACKGROUND

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is now being developed between Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) and Meeting of Friends in Wales (MFW). The responsibilities of MFW are described in *Quaker faith and practice* paragraphs 5.04/5.05. This makes it clear that MFW has national responsibilities on behalf of BYM to represent and advance the life and witness of Quakers within Wales, as well as informing BYM about Quakers in Wales.

These responsibilities include:

- 5.4 (d) “responding to issues which relate to living in a bilingual society, including outreach in Wales and commissioning, translating and publishing Quaker material in the Welsh language.”

and:

- 5.04 (e) “representing Wales to BYM, liaising with yearly meeting committees and departments where appropriate.”

A Language Policy will form part of the MOU to clarify the ways in which these responsibilities will be fulfilled by both BYM and MFW. Clarity is also needed on the differing requirements of Quakers living in a society which is both bilingual and bicultural. This paper seeks to explore cultural differences other than language, in particular those which impact on Friends’ understanding of a culture which for some is very different from the one they have come from, and seeks to assist Friends House when its work impacts on the life of Friends in Wales. Simple translation is never enough.

The paper is based on the responses of MFW Focus group, Trustees and other Friends to an initial paper produced for discussion by the Clerk of Focus Group. It is not exhaustive, but we hope it will be helpful to all who read it.

## SUMMARY

The culture of Wales is heavily dependent upon its mythology and history, a mythology which still lives in the background of Welsh thinking with the tendrils of care for environment, people and justice running through to current thinking. Historically Wales became a second class partner in a supposedly united kingdom, a country of resource that could be exploited with little regard for its inhabitants.

As a community made up of small farms and workers’ towns, the Welsh have retained a strong sense of belonging to place, and of justice and equality. Although land and mine owners were only interested in a quick return on their investments, their workers retained a wish to invest in the future, a wish which could only show itself as valuing the importance of education, poetry, song and performance.

Once devolution began and gathered pace the history and culture of Wales has shown itself in more progressive policies with a longer horizon than those imposed by the UK Government.

## DETAIL

Although Welsh is spoken by 19% of the population (2011 census), surveys show that its existence is valued by a clear majority of those who don't speak it. In a number of areas, between 60% and 70% speak Welsh.

The modern Welsh name for themselves is *Cymry*, and *Cymru* is the Welsh name for Wales. These words are descended from the [Brythonic](#) word *combrogî*, meaning "fellow-countrymen" (John Davies, *History of Wales*). The word "Wales" and associated words come from the Germanic "whal" meaning other. So these two names are quite opposite in their derivation, broadly speaking "us" and "them". Modern Welsh people still see themselves as part of a community which is not always appreciated by people attracted by low house prices in beautiful situations, and who may not recognise any role for themselves in their new locality's culture and society. In genetic terms there is no difference, both nations showing exactly the same diverse origins. It is in the history and community make-up that the differences appear. Newcomers do not always recognise the investment that residents are called on to make in welcoming them, sometimes for them to have a limited stay or response. This is particularly true in those areas where a majority of local people speak Welsh.

Wales has its own mythology – the Mabinogion, the Triads, the Book of Taliesin and other tales. This mythology is referred to much more frequently in modern writing than its equivalent in the rest of the UK. This illustrates another cultural difference, that history, both mythological and more recent, is closer in Wales than in England.

There appear to be strong differences in the political culture of the two nations, but, to some extent this could be the fact that the majority party in the United Kingdom Government has been the Conservative Party for two Parliaments, whereas the dominant party in the devolved Welsh Government has been Labour with Plaid Cymru as one of the major opposition voices. Wales has never returned a majority of Conservative MP's, or even come close, ever since universal suffrage began.

The devolved administrations in the home nations of the UK are elected by proportional representation, which means that everyone can feel they have a voice, unlike in UK general elections, which are by simple majority vote so in practice are never won by a party having an actual majority of the votes.

While the UK government has governed for the benefit of a small section of the public at the cost of the majority, Welsh politics have concentrated on the future generations. This difference in outlook is quite obvious in the way that decisions are made in the two administrations. For example, in the consultation about environmental policy following Brexit, the White paper asks where the environmental principles should be set out. Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) have responded and their response provides a quite different viewpoint to that of the paper:

“It is our view that ‘principles’ which can be modified by Ministers through Statutory Instruments are hardly principles at all. It is essential that a statement of principles be encoded in primary legislation and be amendable only by Parliament (or by the devolved assemblies in devolved areas).

We note with concern the exclusion of national security and Finance Acts from the ambit of these principles. This means that any Government policy badged in these ways can be put through in contravention of environmental principles agreed by Parliament, and we strongly oppose these conclusions.

Para 40 raises the issue of balancing the environmental principles against other principles, such as prosperity. We would commend the approach of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which outlines well-being goals (in effect, principles) covering the whole of Welsh Government activity (including Finance Acts) and requires Government and statutory agencies to show how their policies contribute to achieving all the well-being goals. It also outlines ‘ways of working’ to ensure that this happens and that the public can be fully engaged in considering the impact of policies not only now, but also on future generations. We believe that the England and UK reserved matters would benefit from a similar approach and would commend this to DEFRA. We would hope that the Inter-Governmental Agreement which has been made between the UK and Welsh Governments will allow Welsh policies on occasion to be adopted across the UK rather than a mechanism for imposing English solutions in the devolved nations.”

Although Devolution has been limited to certain areas of control, the Welsh Government has introduced many pieces of progressive legislation, for example:

Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013

Human Transplantation (Wales) Act 2013

Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014

Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015

Environment (Wales) Act 2016

Public Health (Wales) Act 2017

Public Health (Minimum Price for Alcohol) (Wales) Act 2018

In these cases, for example in charging for plastic bags, in organ donation, in free prescriptions, in a smoking ban, and a ban on fracking, the Welsh government has taken positive action well in advance of the UK government and has been quite clear in their decision making, while the UK government has hedged about with options, and taken much longer over reaching a decision. There have been many cases where the UK Government has preferred to attempt to achieve their aspirations with voluntary industry- led programmes rather than directives. Generally speaking the health and well-being of Welsh people have been primary for the Welsh government, while in England targets and finance have been more important.

Although devolution has been part of UK Government policy there has been a tendency for the UK Government to create uncertainty about the decisions already taken, with a real danger of back-sliding. This tendency has become linked, particularly since the Brexit vote, to the UK Government taking on the European Union role of coordination as we move away from Europe. The UK Government is both the “national government” for the UK, and the “national government” for England. That dual role is not always clearly understood, either by the UK Government or by the media when reporting such matters. In a recent post from QPSW there is an item with the heading, “Should fracking permission be given by the government?” Neither the brief introduction nor the detailed brief mention that this policy is specific to England. Both the Welsh and Scottish governments have said that they will not sanction any applications to frack.

The history of Christianity in Wales influences our present politics. The New Testament was translated into Welsh by 1567, and the whole Bible was translated into Welsh by 1588 (i.e. before the King James’ Authorised version.) Translation of the Bible, with the arrival of the printing press using moveable type, facilitated others than the priesthood to explore religious concepts. Although church and chapel attendance is mainly in decline in Wales as elsewhere in the UK, Wales retains an underlying respect for religion; the chapels and local churches retain an essential role in communities that contain a high proportion of working farms, where even though the weekly congregation may be in single figures the death of a popular local farmer can still attract a thousand mourners. Non-conformist churches have a much greater cultural influence in Wales than the Anglican church.

The administration of the Church in Wales is top down while the chapels are self-governing, with any priests being the employees of the congregation, keeping them strongly linked to the community. The one form of Christian practice showing growth is in the Evangelical churches which are also very community based. The Evangelical Alliance is not a member of Cytûn, but the two bodies work together in some matters.

When the National Assembly was established, a role for Cytûn was included, recognising the limited time span of politicians (5 years maximum between elections), which helps to provide a longer vision. Because there is no established church in Wales public events/services tend to be organised by Cytûn rather than one of the member churches. A meeting between the First Minister of the Government and church leaders was established very quickly; this has now been extended to include other faiths.

Although rural depopulation is a factor in Wales as in the rest of the UK, the topography of Wales has caused the retention of a greater number of small farms, which in turn retains a stronger farming community. Possibly because of this tradition of small farms a sense of place is an essential part of the Welsh person's nature. "Where are you from?" is a far more likely opening question than "What do you do?" Welsh people like to "place" others in the landscape.

Papur bro (*local paper*) is a Welsh language local community newsletter, produced by volunteers and generally published monthly. There are currently 58 *papurau bro*, produced throughout Wales. With changing times and appetites, more modern, online versions of *papurau bro* have started to appear. During 2015-2016, *papurau bro* had a combined distribution of 66,808 copies each month, an example of the importance of local communities in Welsh life.

Young Farmers Clubs (YFC) are a vital and stable part of rural Welsh community and culture. YFC is a remarkable organisation promoting social, cultural and political awareness and involvement. Young people involved in YFC develop confidence, knowledge, stage presence, debating ability and an awareness of national and local matters.

Traditionally there were very limited opportunities for young people in Wales following the Industrial Revolution. The economy of Wales was closely tied to mining, heavy industry and farming. Many youngsters left Wales for careers in drapery, teaching and the churches. Those who stayed found opportunities for personal development in organisations such as Young Farmers Clubs and the Miners Institutes and social clubs that were an essential feature of the towns. Although for many these establishments provided social opportunities, they were also essential in educating many of the working class in cultural and political skills that resulted in a vibrant political, poetic, musical society which includes both solo and group performance.

Eisteddfodau and agricultural shows at all levels of Welsh community interaction from village to nation are still vibrant. The Royal Welsh Show is described as the pinnacle agricultural show in Britain. The National Eisteddfod is one of the largest cultural festivals in Europe, while the Urdd (youth) Eisteddfod and the Llangollen International Eisteddfod continue to grow in popularity.

One of the most popular songs in Wales since it was written in 1981 is Dafydd Iwan's "Yma o hyd" (English: *Still Here*) a patriotic song that tells of the survival of the Welsh nation over the centuries since Maccus led a Romano-British army in 383 AD during the final years of the Roman Empire, right through to "Maggie (Thatcher) and her crew". The chorus proudly proclaims *Ry'n ni yma o hyd, er gwaetha pawb a phopeth* which translates as "We're still here, in spite of everyone and everything."

It has been argued that the song played a significant role in raising the morale of Welsh nationalists during the 1980s, thereby inspiring a resurgence in support for the Welsh language and culminating in three key Acts of Parliament: the Education Reform Act of 1988, the Welsh Language Act of 1993

and the Government of Wales Act of 1998 (the last of which authorized the establishment of a National Assembly for Wales in 1999). Today, Yma o Hyd is very popular with Welsh folk music fans and widely considered second only to *Hen Wlad fy Nhadau* (the official national anthem of Wales). It has also become a popular song sung by the fans of the Scarlets and Wrexham FC fans.

(Wikipedia)

It is interesting to wonder why one of the nations of the United Kingdom needed to have its morale raised, before it could begin to establish its own personality, but, of course Macsen Wledig and his army could not prevent the pushing of the British peoples to the western edges of what is now England, and, while the later Norman invaders used intermarriage as their main tool for subduing those they lorded over, eventually it was their force and their castles that had the greatest effect until money and the ownership of land completely subdued the Welsh to become what Paul Robeson recognised as a people in a similar state to the American Negroes of his time. Aberfan was a reminder of the oppression of industrialisation, and yet also of the strength of community.

Many parts of England suffered Norman invasion, land expropriation, enclosure, industrialisation, collapse or closure of industries and were significantly non-conformist in their religious practice, and would recognise most of these feelings. However the Welsh were explicitly discriminated against for extensive periods. After Edward I's conquest, for about 150 years, there was systematic colonisation, with the setting up of English walled towns in which the Welsh could not spend the night, and in rural north Wales, thousands of acres of Welsh Princes' lands with bond tenancies were expropriated and leased to English settlers. Free lands without heirs fell to the Crown. After the Glyndwr uprising, the Penal Laws of 1402, restricted education in Wales: the Welsh were not allowed to attend universities, hold court office, or own property in England. These laws were not repealed until 1624, seventeen years after the English laws against the Scots had been repealed, despite Henry VIII's two Laws in Wales Acts of 1536 and 1543 legally unifying the law in England and Wales. It may seem strange to talk of the Normans, Glyndwr and Henry VIII in a paper reflecting on cultural differences today, but it was clear that the votes for and against devolution in 1997 followed a geographical distribution that mirrored the pattern of Norman influence.

A second phase of enclosures followed the beginnings of industrialisation as the *nouveau riche* created estates out of land that had been used by farmers and peasants. The Rebecca Riots grew from a community based vigilante process to fight against the fences and toll gates that suddenly blocked their access. The Government, frightened of the French Revolution spreading to Britain, gave way to some of their demands and legislated to ensure that the newly taxed roads were improved to reflect the taxation.

The notorious Blue Books of 1846, written by monoglot English school inspectors, taking much of their evidence from Anglican clergymen, disparaged the Welsh as immoral, (i.e. non-conformist,) and ignorant, (i.e. failing to learn much from their English-speaking teachers,) and so recommending that the use of Welsh be stamped out. There were remnants of that approach in Welsh schools as recently as the 1950s. In spite of that, learning, certainly in the post war years, seemed more important than status and not only as the vehicle to escape the oppression of industrialisation; thus the transition via education to professions has been more available.

The drowning of Capel Celyn still resounds in Welsh culture and politics. The Act of Parliament in 1957 to create the Llyn Celyn reservoir and drown the village was opposed by 35 of the 36 Welsh MPs of the day, but was still pushed through. Prior to that the village of Llanddwyn was drowned in the process of building Lake Vyrwy to supply water to Liverpool. The creation of the Elan and Claerwen Valley reservoirs for Birmingham (begun in 1890) was forced on the local farm tenants with two weeks' notice to vacate. The post World War II clearance of the Epynt for live ammunition exercises allowed the tenants six months' notice, but the promised return of the land is still awaited. In 1958, without even a vote in Parliament, Trawsfynydd Nuclear power station was imposed within a

National Park that had been set up as recently as 1951.

The inference of these events is that Wales is still considered exploitable. As recently as the mid 1990 John Redwood, then Secretary of State for Wales was proud of sending £3,000,000 back to the UK Treasury when Wales was recognised as one of the most disadvantaged regions of Europe (GDP per capita was below 75% of the EU average; it is still the poorest of the UK nations). That same politician refused to answer any correspondence in the Welsh language, returning it with “I don't speak this language” scrawled across it. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation the proportion of households living in income poverty remains higher than in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and poverty among couples with children has been rising since 2003/06 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-wales-2018>.

North-South transport links in Wales are poor, a consequence of the topography and the economy over centuries being part of England's with routes tending to lead to and from England. The A470 Cardiff-Llandudno is the only North-South trunk road except for the A487 Bangor to Haverfordwest west coast road. There have been no North-South rail routes within Wales since the Beeching closures in the 1960s, so today's North-South route runs through England from Chirk to Abergavenny. Wrexham and the North Wales north coast are further by rail from Cardiff (4+ hours from Bangor) than London (3 1/4 hours) by the fastest train. Reputedly Pwllheli at the end of the Cambrian Coast line is the furthest point by time from London at about 6½ hours (and probably within Wales from Cardiff at about 6 hours) via Shrewsbury.

Sport has become the opportunity for the occasional triumph which usually brings the whole nation together in celebration, and makes up for the far more usual succession of our footballers losing to some even smaller nation, our rugby players not quite getting to where we hoped they would, or our athletes simply disappearing amongst the numbers of others. So when Geraint Thomas wins the Tour de France thousands of us travel to wave our dragon flags and cheer.

The status of Wales as a small nation tends to lead its people to a greater awareness of other small nations and minorities (e.g. Bretons, Catalans, Croatians, Native Americans). This, with the concepts of community and of the well-being of future generations leads to empathy with other peoples. The Gorsedd of Bards may well be historically poppycock, but its creation had pacific foundations that are embedded in the call “A oes heddwch? (Is there peace?)” during the bardic ceremonies. That has implanted itself in the psyche of many Welsh people and Jane Harries' lecture at the Eisteddfod this year was a reminder that there is a strong peace message driving some aspects of Welsh consciousness. There seems to be a great sense of the importance of equality and lack of class in Wales, as there is in other parts of the UK away from the main areas of population.

## CONCLUSION

There is still indignation among Welsh people related not just to history but also to an ongoing injustice in the way this part of the UK is financed. There is a recognition too that in some matters Wales is approaching the problems of today in a more progressive way than the UK Government is. Devolution is allowing Wales to develop a different character to other parts of the UK, and that character is increasingly attractive, and anyway *ry'n ni yma o hyd, er gwaetha pawb a phopeth!*

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