NEW WALES? NEW CULTURE?
Ned Thomas

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Starting with an interpretation of the 1997 Welsh referendum result in terms of identity, the paper broadens the discussion of political culture to include changes in the Welsh economy, the influence of the European Union, the status of the Welsh language following devolution, and concludes with some perceptions of a more subjective kind from within recent Welsh literature. The new weak constitutional arrangements consolidate some gains made in an earlier period and set a different and problematic context for future development.

Acknowledgements

Map 1 is reproduced from Jones and Balsom (2000).

Map 2 is reproduced from a map prepared by the Institute of Welsh Politics, University of Wales Aberystwyth.

Maps 3 and 4 are reproduced from Aitchison and Carter (1994).

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ned Thomas is Academic Director of the Mercator Centre at University of Wales Aberystwyth, author of *The Welsh extremist: modern Welsh politics, literature and society* (new ed., Y Lofa, 1991; first ed. Gollancz, 1971) and founder-editor of the magazine *Planet: the Welsh internationalist*. He has taught at the universities of Salamanca and Moscow, worked as a journalist for Times Newspapers and been director of University of Wales Press.
Elsewhere one worries that a foreign audience may not sufficiently understand our Welsh context; in an Irish publication my fear is that, although we are divided by a very different history and religious tradition, the readers will understand it only too well, through closeness, through partly shared experience of the British state, by analogy and by contrast, and because we are united by a common imposed language. I cannot now remember which Irishman referred to Wales as “England’s little butty” but I do know that it was Seosamh Mac Grianna who wrote in 1937 (I quote perforce in translation): “I cannot imagine a Welshman dying for his country. There is a kind of understanding that they are the residue of England; and they are afraid they are not strong enough to fight.” Of course we think it is more complicated than that, though we feel the force of what is being said; some Welsh people would echo the words of the writer Saunders Lewis, the founding father of the Welsh Nationalist Party, to the effect that “the language is more important than self-government” and claim a greater success for Wales in preserving linguistic if not cultural particularity. Others would make a virtue of our tradition of non-violent protest—what the poet T Gwynn Jones called being a “pacifist with the emphasis on the fist”, a tradition not always easily distinguishable from taking things lying down. I am not brave enough nor knowledgeable enough in the matter of Ireland to make cross references as I go along, but I am aware of the resonances that may hang in the air.

This paper deals with the cultural changes (in the broadest sense) that were reflected in and produced by the devolution referendum of September 1997 and the first Assembly elections of March 1999. By academic training and natural bent I am not a political scientist nor a historian, but come from a background of comparative literature with an interest in political ideas and cultural patterns—and in languages. In the last 10 years I have spent a great deal of time working with other linguistic minorities within the European Union. All this influences my perspective. This paper will move from the more objective to the more subjective, from those areas where I am most dependent on the work of others to those which are less susceptible of measurement and reflect more closely my own judgements. I shall start with the political culture of Wales since the referendum, then look briefly at some economic questions within a European context, turn to language questions and conclude with some soundings within literature where consciousness is formed and transformed.

POLITICAL CULTURE

When the 1997 referendum was won by the “yes” campaign there was some euphoria and triumphalism and a lot of talk of a new inclusive politics and of a new style. It is true that members of the Assembly address each other informally without the flummery of the London House of Commons and that the minority government
which was the outcome of the first Assembly election in 1999 enforced a degree of cooperation hitherto unknown in British politics outside times of national crisis. It is rather early to judge the work of the Assembly, but the referendum, regarded with a cold eye, was a very doubtful victory. The turnout was lamentable considering the nature of the decision to be taken. At 51.3% it was considerably lower than the 58.8% who voted in the 1979 referendum which overwhelmingly rejected devolution. In an essay in the volume *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again*? David Butler and Iain Maclean have combed the world’s referendum results for comparisons, and very few anywhere show less enthusiasm for what is proposed unless it be Chile’s referendum on extending Pinochet’s presidency in 1988. They conclude that “this was the closest—and perhaps the most unsatisfactory—of UK referendums” and draw attention to the view of the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life that “a fairer campaign might have resulted in a different outcome” (Butler and McLean, 1999: 11). While people claiming a Welsh national identity became more pro-devolution between the referendums of 1979 and 1997 (which is usually ascribed to a drawing together of different strands of Welsh opinion in the face of Thatcherism) there was only a very slight increase in the numbers affirming such an identity. It is hard to escape the conclusion that an even slightly greater participation rate would have resulted in a “no” victory. A referendum in which all but half of the electorate stayed away, and in which those who did vote voted “yes” by a wafer-thin margin of 6,721 votes, does not seem a very solid basis on which to build a new Welsh democracy, at least seen within the conventional paradigm of western democracy.

There is no good evidence to explain non-participation beyond speculation about the general disillusion with politics, which in the UK reached even greater depths in the last European election, but the pattern of those who did vote lends itself to interesting analysis. First: did people vote as their party allegiance dictated? I am indebted here to the work published by Richard Wyn Jones and others in the volume already referred to (Taylor and Thomson, 1999). Attitudinal surveys carried out before the referendum established that:

(a) Plaid Cymru identifiers—despite qualms about the weak powers of the Assembly in the model offered for approval—took their party’s cue and intended to vote “yes”

(b) Liberal Democrat identifiers were two to one against despite the party’s long-standing pro-devolution policy

(c) Conservative identifiers intended to vote “no”, by nine to one. This was wholly consistent with their party’s policy at the time, though it makes difficulties for the party now the Assembly exists.

(d) Labour identifiers—the most interesting group; despite party policy in favour, and despite Tony Blair’s popularity and his visits to Wales during the campaign, this group were in favour by a margin of only three to two. Moreover, this group was the least likely to vote.
Map 1: Referendum result, 1997
Map 2: Election result, 1999
Map 3: Welsh speakers, 1991
Map 4: Welsh-born, 1991
It is instructive to compare the map showing the “yes” and “no” majority areas in the 1997 referendum vote (Map 1) with the map showing the constituencies won by each party in the first Assembly elections in 1999 (Map 2). But first one must enter several caveats: we are not comparing identical constituencies, though roughly similar patterns stand out. Secondly, the division between “yes” and “no” voting areas in the referendum was not as stark as the map suggests. Anglesey in the far north voted “yes” by a wafer-thin majority, and even in the strongest “no” voting areas of the South East the proportion of “yes” voters was not negligible.

North-east Wales, which has a strong Conservative vote though it was won by Labour, voted “no”, which can be explained by the Conservative vote and the split Labour vote. Eastern mid-Wales voted Liberal Democrat and “no”, reflecting the majority attitude among its members rather than party policy.

Welsh-speaking west Wales (see Map 3) where most seats are held by Plaid Cymru not surprisingly voted “yes” (it is reasonable to suppose that Labour voters too felt closer to the devolution agenda in these areas on identity grounds.)

The traditional Labour heartlands of the south Wales valleys mostly voted “yes” and the Assembly elections showed a much increased Plaid Cymru vote in these same areas, with two constituencies remarkably falling to the nationalist party, one of them Neil Kinnock’s former constituency. Cardiff and the coastal belt and border areas of the south-east, though voting Labour in the Assembly elections, are not so solidly Labour as the valleys, and voted “no”. So ironically, Cardiff, the capital, which has gained most by the result, voted against.

A fourth map (Map 4) shows the proportion born in Wales. The highest proportion coincides with the valleys area of south Wales. This is precisely the area of mainly English-speaking Wales without which the “yes” victory would not have been possible. It is also, as we have seen, the area where Plaid Cymru was able to make inroads on the Labour vote in the Assembly elections—though on a low turnout of 48%. Putting the maps together, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the results reflect the politics of identity, which does not of course mean that these results will be reproduced in the next general election for the London parliament where other issues may dominate. The evidence of the autonomous regions in the Spanish state shows that people are quite sophisticated enough to see certain parties as better for them at one level of government, but not necessarily at the other level.

Is Welsh identity, then, either linguistic and ethnic (and strongest in the Welsh-speaking areas of the western half of the country), or simply ethnic, by which I mean that the identity is transmitted through family and community with continuity on a particular patch of territory (and strongest where the overwhelming majority of the population has been born and brought up in Wales)? Even though the ancestors of much of the valleys population moved into Wales in the mid and late nineteenth century, it seems likely that an identity was forged which can be seen as ethnic. This is not a popular thing to say in Wales, and no politician can say it, since over a quarter of the total population today was born outside Wales and no-one wants to superimpose on a division between Welsh-speakers and non-Welsh-
speakers a further distinction between a Welsh ethnic group and recent settlers. But the analysis seems to show that such a distinction exists.

There is a further complicating factor that certainly reinforces the division of the "yes" and "no" areas. Unlike Scotland, Wales has only one morning daily newspaper that claims national status—the Western Mail published in Cardiff. It sells fewer than 65,000 copies, mainly in the southern half of Wales, a very small number indeed compared to the sales in Wales of the London morning papers. TV therefore has a special salience when it comes to Welsh political discussion. The "no" areas have a high correlation with what in terms of TV viewing are "cross-over areas"—where people are able to choose to get their programmes from English rather than Welsh transmitters. Thirty-five per cent of the Welsh population live in such areas, as compared with 2.5% in Scotland. They are thus able to avoid programmes about Welsh politics whether in Welsh or English, and the evidence is that quite a lot of them do so. In an article on "Television and the referendum" (Jones and Balsom 2000: 123ff), Ioan Bellin concludes that between the low coverage of the Welsh referendum on British network TV and the possibility of watching regional TV providers outside Wales, there were people who could quite easily have forgotten that there was a referendum campaign going on. This is a very unsatisfactory situation for Welsh democracy. But do people not watch Welsh programming because they do not feel Welsh or do they become less Welsh in identification because they do not watch Welsh programming? And will they watch more because of the Assembly?

Within the "yes"-voting or Welsh-identifying majority areas, two rather different political cultures have grown up. Although Plaid Cymru holds most of West Wales in terms both of London and Cardiff representation, its victories have been in four-party contests where other parties can still pose a substantial threat. Nevertheless, in these areas Plaid Cymru to a considerable extent, because of its strength, sets the political agenda. Where independence is not beyond the bounds of reasoned discussion, devolution may seem, to people with different party allegiances, a moderate middle way.

By contrast the political culture of the south Wales valleys area has been monolithically Labour for decades, with an earlier more heroic substratum of Communist and trade union activism and miners’ strikes, a rhetoric of internationalism, hostility to nationalism (and often to the Welsh language) and suspicion of devolution as a sop to nationalism. This culture identified itself as Welsh, or perhaps south-Walian, within a British working-class and a British political order. Very few of the area’s elected representatives actually believed in devolution, but with one or two exceptions they lay low during the referendum campaign, whether out of genuine loyalty to the Labour Party’s central policy or fear of the Blair machine’s proven capacity to deal with dissidents. As a result the “no” campaign among people to the left of centre was left floundering and leaderless. Those elements of its grass-roots membership who joined the “no” campaign were only reacting as they had been told to react by their own party’s traditional rhetoric in south Wales, but now found themselves rejected by New Labour which was urging a “yes” vote. No wonder the Labour Party vote split, with many voters staying away entirely. But one must also
note a gradual cultural change spreading through the valleys area over the last quarter-century with the phenomenal growth of Welsh-medium schools. At least at the cultural level a rapprochement was taking place between Welsh-language culture and the valleys culture. It is now more difficult to set them against each other. Ron Davies, the former Labour Secretary of State for Wales, often seen as the architect of devolution, is an interesting representative figure in this context. An opponent of devolution in 1979, he was converted to being its champion in 1997. In the interim he learnt Welsh, and is sometimes accused in Labour circles of being too close to the nationalists, but also became disillusioned with the Westminster system as a means of advancing Welsh interests. And he, famously, is responsible for the dictum that devolution is a process not an event.

I shall conclude this section by advancing the hypothesis that the referendum result is best interpreted as the residual Welsh nation, after centuries of linguistic and ethnic assimilation, affirming itself at the last possible minute, and by a favourable conjunction of circumstances (including the lack of interest of the non-Welsh identifying section of the population), succeeding in acquiring a new national democratic institution with weak powers which it now has to share with representatives of a population in great measure sceptical, indifferent or sometimes hostile to the notion of devolution.

THE ECONOMY AND EUROPE

Interestingly, the boundary between the majority “yes”-voting and majority “no”-voting areas very roughly coincides with the line between those areas in the west and the valleys which have subsequently obtained Objective One status from Brussels—a measure of relative low income and deprivation—and those which have not. It is the south-east—outside the valleys—that has been most successful in attracting inward investment along the M4 corridor. In the manufacturing sector, Ford, Sony, Panasonic and Lucky Goldstar from Korea, all have a large presence, while Cardiff has developed service industries, attracting companies in the financial sector and in media (following an initial boost from the establishment of the Welsh-language TV channel). The public sector, already strong because of the presence of the Welsh Office, has been boosted by the establishment of the Assembly. The attraction of inward investment has been very largely the achievement of the Welsh Development Agency (WDA), a technocratic operation previously answerable through the Welsh Office to the Westminster Parliament, which now comes under the direct democratic control of the Assembly. Will it do better in the future when it is answerable to politicians in Wales and facing competition from the newly-established English economic regions? One result of the transfer of responsibility that can already be seen is a greater emphasis on growing Welsh companies and a greater awareness of the gross regional inequalities within Wales not only in terms of the WDA’s results but also of its efforts.

The valleys area, following a long period of decline in its mining industry, saw that industry’s virtual disappearance in traumatic circumstances in the 1980s, with re-
sulting high levels of unemployment and dereliction, and resulting social problems. These conditions persist.

Throughout Wales, as in the rest of the UK, agriculture is in crisis, but the crisis is more acute than in many parts of England because farms in Wales are smaller measured in terms of turnover and income (not necessarily in terms of acreage because in poor hill-farming country a large acreage may still scarcely provide a living). Bankruptcies and suicides have become common in the countryside, and the pressure on politicians to do something is considerable. Agriculture is still more important to the overall economy in Wales than it is in the UK as a whole. Moreover, there is a cultural dimension to the crisis. It is estimated that 49% of Wales by area belongs to Welsh-speakers. This is not a measure of wealth but a measure of how much the Welsh language in rural Wales depends on marginal farming.

Regeneration of the valleys and the rescue of the agricultural sector are two priorities few people in any party would disagree with. Their hopes are pinned on the Assembly whose effectiveness is being put to the test. But how far does the Assembly have powers of redistribution? Redistributing income in accordance with the egalitarian myths of Welsh society is not an option when there are no powers of taxation. Everything therefore hangs on European money for Objective One and on influencing European agricultural policy. These are the two policy areas that have dominated the Welsh Assembly in its first year. Although other factors also influenced the fall of Alun Michael as the Assembly’s First Secretary, the vote of no confidence was in fact triggered by the Objective One question.

Objective One provides up to 75% of the cost of projects, but how is the other 25% to be found? In the absence of taxation powers the Welsh Assembly can only transfer expenditure between the various areas of its budget. From where then will the matching funding be found? From education? Health? Transport in Wales? Or will it come from outside the Welsh budget, from London? Agriculture creates the same three-cornered tension—London, Cardiff, Brussels—and both subjects raise the same questions of Welsh representation in the European Union. Compared with the Republic of Ireland, Wales is demographically under-represented in the European Parliament, and we have no representation as observers in the Council of Ministers of the kind that the German Länder have. It is unlikely that UK representation will always be able to deliver what Wales wants from Brussels, which can only strengthen the demand over time for more direct representation of Wales in the European institutions.

**LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY**

The European context also gives me a transition into language. While Welsh-speaking farmers are not very well disposed to the EU, Welsh cultural movements, through the Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages, have become more aware of the other cultural and linguistic regions of the EU than has the rest of the population, particularly the English-speaking population of Wales. Let me give one example. During the discussion of the linguistic arrangements appropriate for the new Assembly, the Welsh Language Society produced a very thorough pamphlet on the
subject. It took a very strong line and was immediately condemned by the Government-appointed Welsh Language Board which feared that such strong claims would alienate moderately favourable English-speakers. It was, said the Board, a document which could only have been written by people who had never been outside the Welsh-speaking heartland of Gwynedd. In fact it was very closely modelled on Catalan linguistic laws and used terms taken from there such as “the language proper to Wales”, terms which were outside the Language Board’s discourse. The pamphlet probably influenced the discussion and the arrangements for the two languages within the Assembly come very close to giving complete parity to the two languages. An army of some 50 interpreters and translators has been recruited, and all papers are produced in both languages. The use of Welsh in the Assembly is not so encouraging, but it is still a great deal more than ceremonial. Some 30% of Assembly members have a knowledge of Welsh, though the degree of their knowledge varies considerably. A survey of the first few months, however, shows that Welsh is being spoken in the chamber and committees for no more than 9% of the time. The very few members who use only Welsh claim that they are never under a disadvantage. But it is still early days and things may improve or indeed deteriorate.

I would say that the status of Welsh in the Assembly merely puts the seal on gains in status and use already achieved in the last twenty years. Saunders Lewis in his famous radio lecture of 1962, Tynged yr Iaith (The fate of the language) made the following prophecy:

in my opinion, if any kind of self government is achieved in Wales before the Welsh language is established and used as an official language in all the local and state administration of the Welsh-speaking areas of Wales, it will never become an official language at all, and its death will come sooner than it will under English Government (Lewis, 1962).

As with all good prophecies we are left wondering whether and which bits of it have come true. Welsh has become the language of local government administration, strongly in one or two areas, more weakly elsewhere and to some small degree everywhere, even outside the Welsh-speaking areas. Indeed the Assembly arrangements drew heavily on the experience of Gwynedd in the North so far as its language arrangements go.

The establishment of the Welsh TV channel, the making of Welsh a compulsory subject in all schools (though without adequate teacher-training arrangements), and the establishment of a Language Board which can require all public bodies to produce a bilingual policy and invite other bodies to do so—all these things happened under the Thatcher and Major governments as concessions to Welsh pressure groups. I think it will be more difficult to make further gains now that language has to be argued against other priorities within the Welsh budget. But equally I think it will be difficult for things to move back. There are now very considerable vested interests in the Welsh language within all kinds of institutions. In the Assembly itself there is a kind of unspoken agreement among the Labour, Liberal Democrat and nationalist parties not to play the language card but to support at least the present level of bilingualism. Only the Conservative Party in Wales, angling for the immi-
grant vote, calls for Welsh to be made optional from a certain age in schools and for expenditure on Welsh in the Assembly to be reduced.

We now have a situation where Welsh is usable and used in very many more domains than was the case until quite recently. British Telecom has a Welsh helpline, as do some banks, which also have bilingual “hole-in-the-wall” machines. Most public and semi-public bodies produce their printed material in both languages, though rarely is it originated in Welsh—and that shows. A translation industry has been created. But there is still a slow decline in the number of communities where Welsh is the dominant everyday language. This is essentially because of immigration into the more strongly Welsh-speaking areas. No one immigrates into the South Wales valleys and a lot turns on what happens there linguistically as well as politically. They are the area of phenomenal growth in Welsh-medium schooling, where grandchildren can talk to their grandparents in Welsh but to their parents only in English. In the referendum campaign, the “no” camp was a strange alliance of Conservatives with some leaderless grass-roots figures from the South Wales valleys socialist tradition. At a human level I could feel considerable sympathy for this last group. Brought up on the simple opposition of “nationalism bad, internationalism good”, their conceptual world was turned upside down by the devolution proposals of New Labour and they felt abandoned. As in so many other places there is now an ideas vacuum on the left in Wales, but equally Plaid Cymru is in need of a broader philosophy than the one that developed over decades in rural Wales. I don’t think, as some people in the party do, that it is a matter of dropping the image of a language party—the valleys after all are increasingly sending their children to Welsh schools—it is more a cultural leap than a linguistic one that has to be made. Will the people of this area see the future of their children in terms of reintegration into the Welsh-speaking community or in a new English-speaking Wales? One way or another, my second conclusion is that the valleys area of South Wales will be the battleground not only of future Welsh party politics but of linguistic and cultural politics.

LITERATURE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Let me now turn to that inner space within language where the consciousness of groups and individuals is formed, to literature. The leading figures of Anglo-Welsh literature in the decades after Dylan Thomas were people who acquired the Welsh language and have been its passionate defenders—sometimes more passionate than Welsh-speakers themselves, as is the pattern in many colonised countries when the déracinés strike back. I am thinking of RS Thomas, the poet, and Emyr Humphreys, the novelist. These were the product of a generation when the Welsh language was lost in many families and their reacquisition and reintegration into the language community helped to turn the tide. This is not the case in the new Anglo-Welsh generation of writers. They are almost without exception favourable to devolution, but do not see the need to write English out of the angst of not being able to write Welsh. They reject the label Anglo-Welsh in favour of the clumsy “Welsh writing in English” They are not marked by Nonconformity or the coal industry which often gave a particularity to writers in English from the 1930s and 1940s. They want
to be themselves and to write out of the reality of the suburbs which they know and which may not be so different from that of parts of England. Some are extremely talented, some very true to their immediate environment, but none except perhaps Chris Meredith take the nation and its contemporary history for their subject, as Emyr Humphreys has done in a long series of novels, nor can their work easily be analysed in relation to the political events of the times. There is of course no reason why it should be, and perhaps it is only a matter of time before it does. Meanwhile younger writers in Welsh, though they too have expanded beyond political and realist writing into magical realism and fantasy, still find it very difficult to escape the burden of nationhood, because their very medium feels the pressures on that identity. I want to conclude with a quick look at two novels by middle generation Welsh-language novelists, and one recent novel by Emyr Humphreys.

Raymond Williams, writing about the Welsh industrial novel of the 1930s, noted a limitation alongside very real strengths. Because they were the product of societies where virtually everyone was the object of decisions taken elsewhere, these novels, he argued, could not fully show the levels at which those decisions were taken, or the interaction between that world and the world under the hatches which the authors knew. It seems to me that this analysis can be applied to much of twentieth century prose literature in Welsh too. It is not too much of a limitation in the short story, and it allows poetry to flourish; it is in the novel that it is felt as a constraint and it perhaps explains in part the late development of the novel in Welsh.

In his own novel the *Fight for Manod*, Raymond Williams attempted to move beyond the powerlessness of that pattern. A character not unlike himself, moving from grammar school boy in Wales to university professor in England, finds himself advising “them” in London on a new town that is to be developed in the rural area which he knows from within, and decides to put his knowledge of what goes on “up there” at the service of his original known community down here. It is interesting to see the topic of the large development which swamps the local Welsh-speaking community now appearing more than once in the Welsh language novel, not in imitation of Raymond Williams but because the real thing has become a staple of Welsh life. The investigation of the sources of power can now take place within the Welsh language and within Wales, since English capital or indeed international capital now has to deal with the local community through Cardiff-based Welsh and sometimes Welsh-speaking intermediaries. This is credible where previously it was not, because the class parameters of Welsh have been extended and because the domains in which Welsh is used now include lobbying, PR and advertising. Robat Gruffudd’s novel *Crac Cymraeg* (1996) is one novel whose plot turns on this theme. It comes and goes between a mid-Wales village, threatened by developers, and the lights and delights of Cardiff Bay where the Welsh-speaking middle class, still dependent on London, nevertheless has enough space to create its own urban culture—rather glitzy and not in very good taste. What I find interesting about this uneven novel is that it not only describes a new tension within Welsh-speaking society but enacts it—it is itself drawn in both directions. The dilemma of the chief characters is more than a personal dilemma: it reflects the choice that exists increasingly for those brought up in the traditional Welsh-speaking culture between loyalty to the old life under the hatches (with its claustrophobia and solidarity) and life with a
modicum of power, including economic power for women, the mobility and spaciousness and the greater scope for corruption which that power brings. Whereas in previous generations those who left the life under hatches left it for life in English, the tension can now perhaps be a tension within Welsh. At least that is what one novel in Welsh seems to be saying.

Angharad Tomos is a novelist whose sharp inwardness immediately marks her as belonging to a quite different literary category from Robat Gruffudd. From her student days she has been a language protester, imprisoned on several occasions; wherever life takes her she carries an ultra-sensitiveness to suffering and injustice, so that her imprisonments opened her sympathies to the other less privileged women with whom she shared her cell. In her novel *Wele’n Gwawrio* (1997) an assorted company of friends living outside the bonds and bounds of conventional steady jobs and family structures, some on drugs, some still turning out to Welsh Language Society protests, decide to greet the millennium on the top of Snowdon, but, before that can happen, the narrator of the first person narrative dies—which does not prevent her going on talking to us and even being carried up to the top of the mountain. Death at this stage is merely a device which allows the book to stand at a greater distance from the world. The heroine remembers the language campaigns of the past and turns off the Welsh TV channel in disgust: “What made yesterday’s struggles so much sweeter than today’s?” In an independent Wales, someone asks, will people like us have any real power to change things? And the answer comes: “In a free Wales, you know as well as I do, that the same slime would rule as have always ruled’ ‘But they’d be Welsh slime’ I answered, full of mockery.” After this we should not be surprised (though we are) that the book heads for a wholly religious ending.

So here, one might say, is a novel still written from under the hatches and determined to stay there, with the oppressed and disenfranchised, and never engage with the compromised world brought about by limited political and pressure group success, yet also assailed by doubts about the protest culture. It is the enactment in a Welsh context of that loss of faith in social solutions which are a global phenomenon since the collapse of Marxism and which redirect Angharad Tomos to the religious tradition of Wales, a resolution which I must confess to finding too otherworldly, but which is also a product of our times.

Finally, Emyr Humphreys’s novel *The Gift of a Daughter*, written in English but from within the Welsh-language culture. Emyr Humphreys has always had a formidable talent for satire, which can range from genial social comedy to strong moral condemnation. The university world in Wales with its formal anglicised pomposities and informal malice offers plenty of scope for the former. The narrator partakes of this English secular world, and often sparkles in it, but at the same time judges it by a more severe internal standard. That same Welsh, nonconformist and seemingly rural standard is implied in the more sweeping terms of the narrator’s description of Buddy, their daughter Rhiannon’s boyfriend (which before the end of the novel he will have to revise): “another of the army of malcontents and misfits slouching out of the quagmire of suburban sprawl, looking for some romantic spot to be reborn”. The sudden death of their daughter switches the moral searchlight on to the par-
ents themselves and on to the values by which they have lived—what they call “our revolutionary conservatism”—Saunders Lewis nationalism perhaps. During their falling out over her boyfriend Buddy with whom she had intended to drop out, Rhian-
on had mounted a critique of her parents’ values which in death acquires a greater resonance than it would have had for them otherwise: “You live in a farmhouse and you never have muck on your boots... You’ve turned what you stand for into a ref-
uge, haven’t you. I mean, how much did you really gain? And what have you done in the end except turn the language into a vested interest?” She goes on to defend her proposed life with Buddy in very different terms, but still by reference to her fa-
ther’s own book about the Celtic saints: “Think of St Brendan, Tada, and all the peregrini ... Drift with the wind and the tide... Tada. Listen There’s nothing more im-
portant than being free.”

I think Wales is embarking on a new epoch. Our literature seems to tell us so. It is not the result of a very unsatisfactory referendum and a very inadequate elected Assembly. In my view these merely mark rather conveniently the end of one period of struggle whose real gains were made already before the Assembly arrived. The struggle for cultural survival will now take place in a different constitutional context, but also in a different European and global context, all of which ask for different qualities. There is a space for inventiveness, and a time for going out into the field rather than for defence of the ghetto. For the Welsh language to be at a cultural crossroads rather than in a cultural enclave with a wall at one’s back, is both dan-
gerous and exhilarating.

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