The Place of Wales in Europe

Ned Thomas FLSW

Academia Europaea Annual Meeting 2016: After dinner talk

Little did I think, Mr Chairman, when many months ago you kindly invited me to address this gathering of the Academia Europaea on “the place of Wales in Europe” that I should be speaking a few days after the UK referendum on membership of the European Union; still less could I have imagined speaking in the aftermath of such a seismic result.

My sense of shock and profound dismay is something I'm sure I share with close on half of the UK's voting population – and possibly more than half by now – but in the context of Wales there is an extra factor. Europe is important to my own sense of being Welsh, so to discover that such a considerable proportion of the Welsh population, here on our own territory, endorses a virulent British rejection of the European project, leaves me feeling more exposed and vulnerable, my own sense of identity more precarious. For to posit a distinctive place for Wales within Europe is to make a statement about Welsh identity and that can never be wholly uncontroversial. Each of the various and competing narratives of what it is to be Welsh have their linguistic, cultural and political dimensions, and the presence or absence of an idea of Europe within these narratives affects the sense of who we think we are.

During my lifetime Europe has moved from being a geographical and cultural concept, and an aspiration for some, to being a political and institutional reality, albeit imperfect, incomplete and still, it seems, precarious. The very same things can be said of Wales. Long recognized as a territory, and as having a distinctive linguistic and cultural character, it has never been a fully-fledged nation-state as Scotland once was. We acquired our first ever democratically elected autonomous Assembly and Government as recently as 1997. This has given us a welcome degree of control over many areas of Welsh life, including education, and has begun to offer a civic framework which can contain the various and competing narratives of Welshness and offer a democratic space in which to work out our internal differences.

In recent years the Welsh government had begun to develop direct contacts with Brussels, and large parts

of Wales have been among the principal beneficiaries in the UK of EU regional funds. Our universities, which are major contributors to the economy, have also benefited immensely. But our Welsh democracy is a still precarious creation – we do not have a national press,whether in Welsh or English, strong enough to scrutinize government and help form a distinctively Welsh public opinion, and an informed public opinion is as necessary a part of democracy as is an elected chamber. That too is something we have in common with the EU, which suffers from a lack of effective pan-European press and media and a pan-European public opinion..

This is not a promising moment for Wales at the level of the European institutions themselves.There was a time when European integration at a supra-national level on the one hand, and the strengthening of regional autonomies on the other, seemed to go hand in hand. People even discussed a second elected chamber in the European parliament which would give equal represention to the regions alongside the first chamber which is elected on a population basis. But by the time we in Wales had our own National Assembly, European integration was on hold. Widening the Union now took precedence over deepening the democratic structures. The economic project – extending the market – displaced the political project, a direction very much encouraged, it has to be said, by successive UK governments, who, in the biblical phrase, having sowed the wind have now reaped the whirlwind.

That is perhaps all that can be said for the moment about the place of Wales in Europe at the political and institutional level except to add that while we await political developments we must continue to maintain our personal contacts and European networks as best we can, and to lobby at all levels. But the place of Wales in Europe can still be discussed, as it always has been, in terms of social and cultural history. In the short time at my disposal you will not want me to attempt a blow-by-blow account of Welsh history and its European dimensions nor to offer a catalogue of individual facts, interesting as these might be. Instead in a few broad brush strokes I shall mention a few of the historical experiences which have made us European and left their deposits in our culture, and the way perception of ourselves from inside and outside have formed our sense of who we are.

The island of Britain first swims into wider European consciousness in texts from classical antiquity and in particular in parts of Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and Tacitus's *Life of Agricola*. The tribes the Romans met on their arrival in 55 B.C. were the Britons who occupied the territory of modern England and Wales, and Scotland as far north as Edinburgh.They gave their name to Britain, Britannia in Latin – Prydain in modern Welsh – and their language Brythoneg was the direct ancestor of modern Welsh.

When the Romans arrived they perceived the Britons as exotic, brave and primitive, with their warrior-queen, their war chariots and druid priests – not so unlike African peoples in the perceptions of early European explorers. But the Romans occupied England and Wales for four hundred years, during which time a hybrid Romano-British culture developed which outlived the Roman departure.This I see as a pattern which repeats itself in our history. We are perceived from outside as living on the western extremities of Europe, exotic and “other”, a cultural island; but then we proceed to absorb influences and be absorbed into the wider current, to assimilate and be assimilated, but never entirely, so that, like all

other cultures I know, we become a hybrid, not a unique cultural island but a unique cultural crossroads.

Four hundred years living alongside the Romans is a long time and has left its mark in all kinds of way, not least in the Welsh language. Whereas English borrowings from the Latin come either through French after the Norman Conquest or at the Renaissance as learned borrowings directly from the Latin, the Latin element in Welsh is early and consists of very basic words , for example *ffenestr* for window, *ffos* (Latin *fossa*) for ditch. We call the days of the week after the Classical gods not the Nordic ones, thus Friday is Dydd Gwener after Venus, Wednesday is Dydd Mercher after Mercurius. The Romans never reached Ireland and their incursions into Scotland did not lead to occupation, so the early history and culture of those countries is rather different. When the Germanic tribes attacked and later occupied what became England, they called us Welsh, usually glossed as "foreigner" but almost certainly meaning "Romanized Foreigner" - compare the Walloons in Belgium or those Alpine regions where German-speakers refer to Italian-speakers as Die Welsche. Our name for ourselves, by the way, is Cymry and our language is Cymraeg.

The Welsh were converted to Christianity very early, possibly from Ireland and certainly not from Rome, as the English later were. The Celtic Church had a number of special characteristics and did not merge with the Roman Catholic Church in Britain until the end of the seventh century. It is today the object of renewed interest. Much later, after the Protestant Reformation established a national Church in England and Wales with the monarch at its head, Wales moved in an even more Protestant direction, giving its allegiance by the end of the nineteenth-century overwhelmingly to Puritan sects. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the Anglican Church in Wales (known as the Church in Wales) has ceased to be the established Church and consequently the Queen, who is the nominal head of the Church of England, has no such status here. The dominance until quite recently of the Puritan sects in Welsh life has had far-reaching consequences – both negative and positive - for the culture. The popular culture of folk-music and dance has been impoverished as a result, but on the other hand a very high level of literacy in Welsh was achieved (before the introduction of state education in English) so that people might learn to read the Bible in their own language. The pattern will be easily understood by those coming from Scandinavian cultures.

My third and final example of interaction and hybridity comes from the very complex nineteenth-century whose legacy is still very much with us. It was the century in which parts of South Wales along with parts of England became some of the earliest centres of heavy industry in the world. The same century saw the British Empire expand to be the most powerful in the world. The second half of the century witnessed the rapid expansion of a rail network to cover the whole country, and also the introduction of compulsory elementary education, both processes of integration that were parallelled in other European states.

Herder's ideas of language, culture and nation reached Britain and Wales in the early nineteenth-century, and had an influence in the cultural sphere, reinforcing an already existing antiquarian interest in the early literature in Welsh. But they did not provide the same early stimulus to political nationalism which they exerted in the Germanic and Slavonic-speaking lands of central and eastern Europe, and Welsh language-

nationalism did not emerge until after the First World War and took much longer to gain credibility. This delay may be because, as in the case of France, the British nation-state had been long established on a dynastic basis and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered the rising Welsh middle-class wide opportunities in the overseas empires.

This cooption was much facilitated when historical linguistics (a discipline with an influence going far beyond the academic world) established in 1851 that the Celtic languages too belonged to the Indo-European family.The Welsh were now invited to take part in the British project as equal partners – but on a particular set of terms. The early Welsh texts were to be considered an important part of the British national heritage and deserved to be studied; but for all modern purposes the Welsh would leave their language behind. While this proved an acceptable bargain for many in the rising middle class – after all it was not long before one of them, Lloyd George, became Prime Minister of Britain – it discriminated against the wider population who did not speak English.

It was in this climate that compulsory state education was introduced in 1871 in English only. And when the University of Wales was established in 1890 its Department of Welsh taught the subject to Welsh students through English, as if Welsh were a dead classical langugae. It was not until after the First World War that Welsh universities began to use Welsh as a medium of instruction, and only in the last few years have we seen a substantial effort to teach a wide range of subjects through the Welsh language at university level. Once more we see a pattern of assimilation and reaction to assimilation, a pattern which has affected both the mainly Welsh-speaking part of the population and the mainly English-speaking, since we are describing a shifting situation in which at one time many Welsh-speaking parents were abandoning the Welsh language, and more recently many English speaking parents are choosing it on behalf of their children through the Welsh school system.

There have been and still are other narratives of what it is to be Welsh. The notion that we are a distinctive regional culture within English-language Britain is perhaps in retreat following devolution which has strengthened the sense of being a nation. But what sort of nation? Another narrative claims that the industrial revolution in south Wales produced a Chicago-like melting-pot in which people from all kinds of background (including Welsh) forged a common culture in the English language which is still distinct from mainstream English culture. The weakness of this argument is that it does not apply equally to the whole territory of Wales and that the industrial culture of south Wales had more in common with similar centres of heavy industry in England than with its Welsh hinterland; and finally that an industrial culture which was once dynamic and vibrant has by today largely disappeared except as a mythology. The third narrative - the kind which I have outlined - seeks to offer a sense of continuity beyond recent changes and is connected with the continuity of the Welsh language. That continuity, in turn, cannot be understood except in terms of interaction with the major currents of European history and thought.

Cardiff, 28 June 2016