

# Why Wales Studies needs to be protected and preserved

## LEARNED SOCIETY OF WALES

**H**ow long is the coast of Wales? Hyper-accurate satellite measurement would seem to settle the matter. But not so. As a famous mathematician pointed out decades ago, the distance is in fact indeterminate. Why? Because if, say, an ant were to traverse it, laboriously scaling every Everest of a rock en route, the distance would greatly exceed that "definitive" satellite finding.

Calculations completed by a horse, say, would produce a very different result. And so on.

The closer we get to ground level the more extensive and varied the ground. A truth well known to those engaged in the study of Wales.

Tiny the country may be, but it is also fascinatingly complex. Over the past couple of decades that complexity has been spectacularly "mapped" through the operation of a range of scholarly disciplines across humanities and sciences.

A convenient short-hand term for this area of collective effort is Wales Studies.

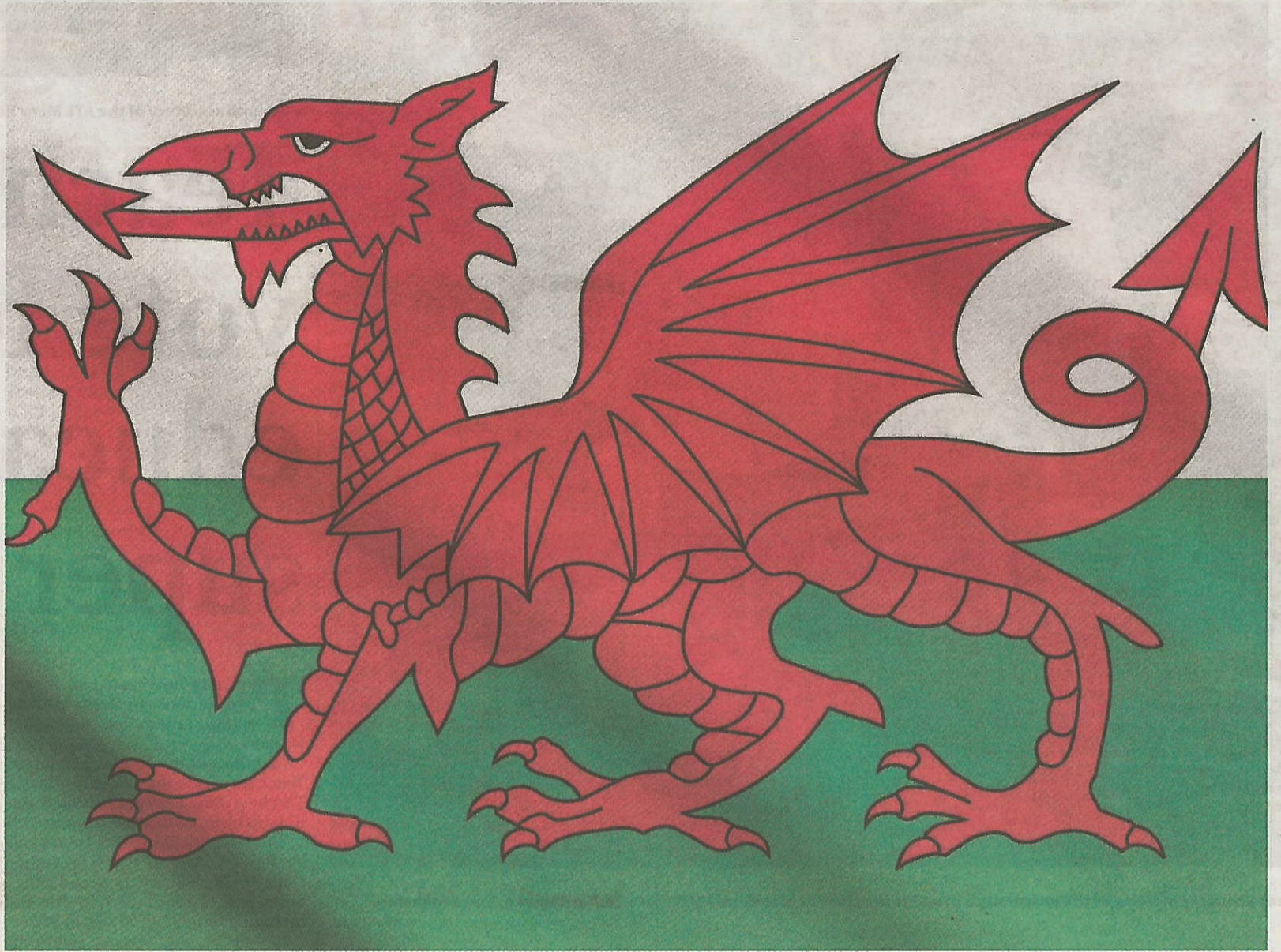
Its "greatest hits" might include The Encyclopaedia of Wales; the uncovering of a substantial body of Welsh Women's Writing; the revolutionary mapping of Wales' native Visual Culture; pioneering work on Wales and Black America; the multi-volume project on Iolo Morganwg and his circle; the chronicling of Welsh responses to the French Revolution; research programmes on post-devolution governance; digital mapping of writers' territories; the cultural rehabilitation of Dylan Thomas; the posthumous editing of RS Thomas's Uncollected Poems; the reclamation of Copperopolis; revealing work on early Medieval stone inscriptions; a pioneering biographical series on great Welsh scientists. And so on.

Public benefits include the Government-supported Library of Wales series; the Western Mail-sponsored New History of Wales; the online Welsh Dictionary and Dictionary of Welsh Biography; the BBC series on the Welsh past; the Dylan Thomas Festival; and much more.

The achievement of Wales Studies deserves to be celebrated within Wales and beyond.

The Irish long ago turned the multifaceted study of Ireland into a global brand, a "soft power" initiative of staggering world-wide success.

Since the devolution settlement, Scotland has engaged in similar



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state-supported enterprises. But Wales?

Not only have we totally failed to capitalise on our successes, we have neglected even to protect the infrastructure on which they depend. From time to time sink-holes appear in the research landscape to remind us how alarmingly unstable is the ground.

A couple of decades ago, Wales stood on the brink of losing all its Welsh historians. A senior generation had retired en masse, and HE institutions were reluctant to appoint successors - no "consumer" demand. Currently Wales' only academic publisher (the historic and prestigious University of Wales Press) is on the verge of being unable to publish any new Wales Studies research, for want of funding. The future of renowned specialist centres, such as the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, is worryingly uncertain. The Welsh Dictionary Unit is in process of radi-

cal scaling down. One of our universities is currently resisting, for financial reasons, the formation of a Wales Studies Centre.

The future of Wales Studies; the promotion of its "public face"; its exploitation as a national resource; the training of a new cohort of scholars: these are all challenges that need urgent addressing. And the challenge must first be met by the sector itself.

What is needed is a basic organisation - an interdisciplinary association or federation - of scholarly practitioners dedicated to the custodianship of Wales Studies.

Only by forming a determined, and potentially powerful, common front can specialists protect and develop their individual research interests.

Only through concerted lobbying can they lever from government the funds identified as essential for growth in a series of recent government reports. And only by struc-

tured co-operation can they hope to realise the public and global potential of their research.

But who will take the lead? Who will kick-start such an initiative?

The obvious answer is the Learned Society of Wales, our National Academy of advanced scholarship in the arts, the humanities and social sciences, medicine, engineering and the sciences, both pure and applied.

The Society has therefore already committed itself to a Wales Studies Project to be developed over three overlapping phases.

Phase One will include a public celebration of Wales Studies at the Senedd and the construction of a multipurpose website to collect and collate basic data, and to co-ordinate developments. It will both serve the community of specialist scholars and provide an interface with the public.

Phase Two will build on these developments by launching a Wales

Studies Alliance and ensuring it is securely established.

Finally, in Phase Three, the new Alliance will be encouraged to mobilise its collective strength to ensure the sustainable development of a balanced and visionary programme of Wales Studies research across all disciplines and institutions.

Ours is a brave new fractured and fractious world of consumer-led, individual-fixated Higher Education. But it is vital for the future of Wales as a national collective that a programme of research devoted solely to promoting the general good of our own culture and exploring its extensive links to the world at large be protected and preserved.

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