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‘Oes y Byd i’r Iaith Gymraeg?’ The National Eisteddfod and the Welsh Language

Even before I first came to Wales thirty-three years ago, I had started teaching myself Welsh. Humboldt University had a ‘language laboratory’ with an amazing array of courses, so every week, I put on the head phones and followed our Welsh audio-course. Having settled in Wales, I joined *Cymdeithas yr Iaith* because it felt natural to defend a small culture under threat from its hegemonic neighbour, world and Empire language English. This feeling of standing up for the underdog made me raise my children in Welsh and campaign for more Welsh-language provision at my university. However much the young generation – authors, intellectuals, musicians and poets rebel (as they should, perhaps) against what they perceive as ‘the establishment’, the fact that the Welsh language and Welsh identities are fighting an uphill battle will not change.

Having worked as a historian for over thirty years, written about the Gorsedd legacy and the Welsh-language movement, I know that the Eisteddfod has changed with the times in order to flourish and survive, decisions often involving acrimonious public debate. The 1880s ban on alcohol – inappropriate for the national gathering of a temperate Nonconformist nation – was hotly rejected, but so was the reintroduction of alcohol in 2004. Unthinkable even in the 1980s, hotly contested then, but normal today. When, in 1997, Maes B was invented to attract a young generation of Welsh speakers more interested in rock and pop than paintings, poetry and politics, concerns about diluting Welsh culture and lowering the tone were voiced. The ‘little brother’, complete with its own campsite, is the largest contemporary Welsh music festival by now, a must for every young Welsh speaker eager to be part of the scene. So, where do we place the recent spat about which language(s) should or should not be spoken on eisteddfod stages? Does some English in a modern song threaten this small culture – another sign of terminal decline – or does it signify another step-change that takes the *prif-wyl* into the twenty-first century? Will history provided some insights?

A Radical Reinvention

Medieval eisteddfodau were courtly affairs, devised for the licencing of Welsh poets and story-tellers, to uphold the quality of courtly entertainment. Always in Welsh, the last of them were held under the royal licence of Elizabeth I in 1567 and perhaps 1594. She probably had no idea what she had licensed. By the eighteenth century, eisteddfodau were local or regional affairs held in taverns with a merry-making more reminiscent of the recent poetic *stomp*

sessions than the previous high-culture competitions. The intellectuals of the time called them ‘sorry affairs’, yet these tavern eisteddfodau bridged the century to the age of revolutions when the Eisteddfod was re-invented as a space of cultural democracy by a small band of radical hotheads hell-bent on translating ideas of liberty-fraternity-equality to Wales and the Welsh language. Prize topics were ‘liberty’ and ‘truth’, competitions were open to any class and gender, and financial rewards made participating worth while for the less affluent. Iolo Morganwg’s invented Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain – a kind of governing body – admitted women, worked to mottoes like ‘The Truth against the World’ and re-imagined the Druid as radical pacifist. This twin festival of Eisteddfod and Gorsedd was the first and for a long time only national Welsh institution. With Welsh still the language of about 90% of the population and most of the territory of Wales, there was no fear of a cultural erasure, and radical English poetry in support of the French Republic and against war, like Iolo Morganwg’s ‘Ode on Converting a Sword into a Pruning Hook’ after Isaiah 2:4 ‘Swords into ploughshares’ (used by peace movements to this day), was written and recited alongside Welsh work.

A Hundred Years of Anglicisation

This radicalism did not long survive the French republican experiment. By the 1800s, Gorsedd assemblies had been suppressed as subversive, by 1815 patriotic gentry and *nouveau riche* industrialists had taken over the twin institution and coined the phrase ‘Oes y Byd i’r Iaith Gymraeg – ‘The Age of the World for the Welsh Language’. Their eisteddfodau remained a ‘people’s university’, but were steered into the politically safe waters of the musical extravaganzas of gigantic choir competitions and an apolitical Druidic ancient civilisation that helped Europe get a head-start to imperialism. Most competitions were necessarily in Welsh so that *y werin* – the great unwashed working classes – could be educated via this ‘rational entertainment’, but the Welsh language was suffered rather than encouraged, speeches defending its use stressing that the Welshman competing for any prize ‘increases his knowledge of English’, even when they wrote in Welsh. The 1847 governmental report known as *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision – The Treason of the Blue Books* – the first fact-finding step on the way to an English-only education policy, and vicious anti-Welsh media campaigns, as in *The Times* in the 1860s, affected the Welsh psyche profoundly.

As the Eisteddfod became the annual national event we know today, the thinking classes went to it to modernise their most obvious badge of nationhood, introducing a ‘Social Science’ section, whose essay competitions were increasingly in English. From organisation to

adjudications, and published Transactions, the language of the Royal National Eisteddfod was English, Welsh relegated to some prize competitions, and cultural symbols like the Welsh Triple Harp scorned. Between the 1880s and the 1930s, the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales became – to all intents and purposes – an annual national spectacle with imperial overtones aimed at attracting as many visitors as possible to break even financially, which meant monster musical competitions and performances; appointing affluent presidents whose politics did not reflect Welsh attitudes and who did not speak Welsh, and leading winning poets to the stage to the tune of ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes’.

Introducing the ‘Welsh Only’ Rule

Welsh cultural entrepreneurs and campaigners had protested against the Anglicisation of their festival since the beginning of the twentieth century, as census data indicated a steep decline of Welsh numerically and geographically. In 1901, 49% of the population had been recorded as speaking Welsh, by 1931 this had fallen to 36%, by 1951 to a mere 28%. Welsh had retreated from the industrial valleys and was shrinking to a block focused on the rural west coast. The decline sparked a civil rights movement on behalf of the Welsh language which included action aimed at the Eisteddfod that culminated in 1937. The acrimonious debates over the appointment of war-monger Lord Londonderry, responsible for developing the RAF bombing school on the Llŷn Peninsula, as president of the Machynlleth Eisteddfod (because his family had land there) led to the preparation of a new constitution, whose clause three determined that the official language of the Eisteddfod was Welsh. It took until the Caerffili Eisteddfod of 1950 for the rule to be implemented, and worries persisted that adhering to this rule would mean the financial ruin of the national festival, because of declining visitor numbers. Other language-related ructions included the organisation of an official visit by Elisabeth II and her family to the 1960 Cardiff Eisteddfod – organised no doubt to back up applications for state funding. Her speech was quietly dropped from the programme, and neither she nor Philip said a word on stage as they were honoured with inclusion in the Gorsedd.

Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru – The National Eisteddfod of Wales still attracts up to 200,000 visitors during the first week of August every year, the third clause in its Constitution remains that ‘yr iaith Gymraeg fydd iaith yr Eisteddfod a’r Wyl ac ni fydd hawl newid y cymal hwn’, i.e. the Welsh language is the language of the Eisteddfod and the Festival, and there is no right to change this clause’; its main aims are to further, keep and safeguard the heritage and culture of Wales, and the Welsh language, and inform the public of them. When

it is held in an area of our country where Welsh is not a community language, it provides a clear boost to our culture, even if Home Office officials called it ‘a ghastly cows and National Costume affair’ in 1997, when they advised Elizabeth II against opening the Welsh Assembly.

I am a historian, almost an oldie, honoured with admission to the Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain, and therefore, I suspect, a member of the Welsh establishment. I have attended almost every national Eisteddfod since I started learning Welsh around 1992 – giving papers, taking part in round-table panels for other Welsh learners (us *dysgwyr*), enjoying meeting old friends, and making new ones, swimming in a sea of Welsh without having to think of what language to choose.

Not quite, though. As in the whole of Wales, the ‘Welsh Only’ rule has been hard to implement in the commercial sector, and even on the Llŷn peninsula this year – one of the most Welsh-speaking areas in our country – several stall owners did not consider it necessary to employ Welsh speakers. Does it matter? I believe it does. Official recognition is important for a small language, but it is language use that is most important for any language. Which brings me back to the song and words that caused such a storm on the digital media. I am writing this from Berlin, where I am on holiday and enjoying my extended family, my home town and my home dialect. The other night, one of my cousins played us a song her son had recorded: the music and the guitar playing so talented, the English lyrics underwhelming. I asked why he hadn’t written German words and she replied that ‘everybody writes in English’. When larger languages like my own mother tongue German are under threat from English, what chance do smaller languages and cultures have?