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## **'CHIEF CREATOR OF MODERN WALES': THE NEGLECTED LEGACY OF PERCY THOMAS**

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### ***Abstract***

The architecture of Percy Thomas, and the practice he founded (Percy Thomas Partnership), are neglected aspects of the development of twentieth century Wales. Twice president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and awarded its Gold Medal, the architect's work remains largely undocumented and unanalysed. This paper begins to address that deficiency. It argues that by virtue of its breadth and nature the practice's work both responded to and helped shape perceptions of Wales as a modernising nation-state. In so doing, it identified itself with, and benefited from, a political project which assumed hegemonic status in Wales in the inter-war period and beyond. Yet the practice was not simply responding to clients' requirements, as is illustrated by the process of designing the administrative block for the National Folk Museum at St Fagan's in the 1960s. This reveals the contribution the architects made to reinterpreting modernity, amidst competing conceptions of Welsh identity and futures for the nation.

### **Introduction:**

It reads like a tricky question in a Welsh-themed edition of Trivial Pursuits: 'which Welsh architect was awarded the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), knighted, described on his retirement as "the chief creator of modern Wales" and yet has not been the subject of any monographs or extended studies of his work?' Percy Thomas (1883-1969) is that man, and this paper begins the process of redressing this neglect.

Son of a sea captain, Percy Thomas became an architect through working in the offices of E.H. Bruton FRIBA in Cardiff and passing his architectural examinations, as an external candidate, through the 'War Special Final'. By 1904 he was working in Lancashire

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for J.C. Prestwich. By 1913 he was back in Wales, having set up in partnership with Ivor Jones as clerical partner and quantity surveyor. Their partnership was to last until the 1930s. In 1911 the partnership won the design competition for the Cardiff Technical College in Cathays Park, Cardiff (now Cardiff University's Bute Building). From 1936 Thomas built up his own firm, which became Sir Percy Thomas & Son in 1946. From 1961 this was headed by his son, Norman, who retired to become a consulting partner in 1971. The practice converted to a limited company, the Percy Thomas Partnership (PTP), in the same year. PTP was taken over by the Capita group in 2004, of which it remains a part. Over the ninety and more years of its existence the firm grew to be an international presence with offices throughout the UK and beyond. Yet, its headquarters was always in Cardiff, and its work in Wales had a special significance for its founder and many of its most prominent architects.

The significance of the partnership's work in Wales will be discussed in the next section. Here, let us note the personal honours bestowed on Thomas during his lifetime: as well as the RIBA Gold Medal (1939) and knighthood (1946) he was twice president of the RIBA (1935-37 and 1943-46) and was Chair of the Welsh Board of Industry (1946-1955). Notwithstanding this recognition, Thomas was not lauded as an especially innovative or inspirational architect during his lifetime, nor has he been since. He was more than competent, it is true, and a particular strength appears to have been in understanding and interpreting what clients wanted. Much of his early prominence came through success in architectural competitions, where attention to text and sub-text of a brief is vital, and the ability to sometimes extend a client's aspirations can also be important. In his early days Thomas designed alone or with a partner, but as the practice grew he displayed an ability to recruit very able staff, and to put together teams which could produce quality that he might not have managed himself. Thomas's approach to design, through a thorough study of the clients' requirements, meant that he became the acknowledged expert in the design and planning of public buildings and in this capacity presented a paper to the RIBA on 'The Planning of Municipal Buildings' in February 1935. This paper will discuss an illustration of this capacity to put together a team that was apparently just right for the job at hand in a case study of the designing of the Main Building of the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans.

Thomas's readiness to pursue and accept honours of British institutions was compatible with an obvious pride in his Welshness. Ready to base himself in Cardiff, he also pursued work elsewhere. The argument of this paper is that the practice's work in Wales helped consolidate and develop a by-now familiar narrative of the nature of Wales, a narrative that has been politically hegemonic from at least the inter-war years of the early twentieth century. This narrative is fairly termed 'nationalist' in the sense that it assumes that Wales, understood as the kind of territorial and historical unit that constitutes a nation, is a helpful and meaningful unit or entity for understanding the world. There are two key strands which weave together to sustain the narrative, and within both, the built environment (buildings, streets, public spaces) play a vital role (Davey, 2014, chapter 3).

The first strand is that as a nation, Wales must develop (and deserves to have) the institutional infrastructure that has been associated with nationhood from the nineteenth century onwards. These will include: defined administrative boundaries, distinctive governance arrangements, a capital city (Morgan K, 1982), a 'national' system of education, including universities (Davies, 1994), museums (Morgan P, 2005), and its own legal system. From the mid-nineteenth century shifting coalitions of interests have struggled and lobbied

for one or another of these to be established in Wales (Adamson, 1991). Highpoints have included the establishment of the colleges of the University of Wales (from 1872 onwards), the National Museum (1907), designation of Cardiff as capital city (1955), and, of course, devolution legally from 1998. Making these institutions credible requires proper funding and governance, of course; but in addition, the institutions must have appropriate settings and buildings. Thus, Cardiff's ambitious burghers saw the significance of acquiring Cathays Park as a setting for civic buildings worthy of a city and, in time, capital city (Thomas H, 1999); similarly, the newly established National Assembly for Wales quickly set about commissioning an appropriate building to house its chamber, feeling it inappropriate to meet in a converted office (1997). Percy Thomas's firms played a central role in providing Wales with the kinds of buildings it needed.

A second strand in the narrative has been the notion that Wales requires modernization, particularly economic modernization, and is beginning to undergo this process. An early evocation of this was Professor Hilary Marquand's 'South Wales Needs a Plan' (1936), which developed David Lloyd George and John Maynard Keynes UK schemes for 'pump priming' the economy. In the sixties, modernization was at the heart of the Labour government's White Paper 'Wales. The Way Ahead' (1967); and it is still potent in contemporary Welsh governance, underpinning initiatives such as the regeneration of Cardiff Bay, and the development of the Second Severn Crossing. As these examples suggest, there is support for this way of thinking of Wales and Welshness across the political spectrum. And here, again, the built environment both symbolises and facilitates the narrative's claim: modernization *requires* new facilities (factories, offices, roads, etc) and if these are designed appropriately they also come to *symbolise*, very powerfully, the process that is claimed to be taking place.

As Rees and Lambert (1981) noted many years ago, this idea of Wales as a relatively newly-established, modernising, nation, became hegemonic in Welsh politics over the course of the twentieth century, structuring the very terms of debate about all manner of aspects of Welsh life and governance. Percy Thomas would have been exposed to this nationalist 'common sense', not least through his wartime role, as we shall see. We argue, in the next section, that his and his firm's work contributed significantly to strengthening the narrative's dominance by providing so many of the structures which came to epitomise a modernizing Wales.

### **Percy Thomas and the modernizing of Wales**

A database, compiled from a number of sources, of the main schemes completed in Wales by the Percy Thomas Practice (PTP) has established that PTP was heavily involved in designing buildings and other structures at the heart of standard narratives of the development of 'modern' twentieth century Wales (Davey, 2014, chapter 4).

The significance of this contribution begins to become apparent when the number of PTP buildings noted on Vining and Parry's (2003) database of major twentieth century Welsh buildings is compared with other architects. PTP has twenty nine mentions, Alex Gordon eight, as does Bowen Dann Davies and also S.C. Foulkes, these three practices being the next highest after PTP. Analysis of databases at the RIBA and Cardiff Library produce similar results. The quantity of references noted for each architect is an admittedly crude measure of comparison but does highlight the prominence of Thomas and the practice.

What emerges is a picture of a practice at the heart of the physical expression of twentieth century Welsh nation building.

It was Thomas, for example, who acted as Honorary Architect to the Wales and Monmouthshire Industrial Estates Ltd., developers of Treforest Trading Estate in the 1930s (figure 1). The sixty factories designed by Thomas were mostly to a standard pattern, but the whole initiative received UK wide recognition as an example of the modernising of the economy, and nation (Short et al, 2003).

If Treforest symbolised (and facilitated) Wales's industrial modernisation, some of Thomas's earlier work had marked him as a significant contributor to another element in the developing narrative of Wales as a new, modern European nation – the emergence of Cardiff as the dominant city in Wales and a city worthy of being considered a capital (Thomas P, 1963). Though the town (and , from 1905, city) had to share some of the early institutional infrastructure of nationhood with, for example, Aberystwyth (national library, university college ) and Swansea (university college), its growth and relative prosperity – even in bad times – ensured it was undoubtedly the country's major settlement. Thomas's buildings included: the Marments department store in Queen Street (1922), Empire House (1926) and Imperial Buildings (1913, major offices, now demolished) in Mount Stuart Square, The Edward Nicholl Home (1921) at Penylan and many Arts and Crafts Cotswold Vernacular style houses for wealthy patrons. He brought to these an awareness of fashionable styles from across the country, which, suitably applied, could symbolise Wales's being a distinctive, but integral, part of wider cultural circles (Davey, 2014). In Cardiff, too, he was responsible for a massive extension to E.V. Harris's exceptionally fine Mid Glamorgan County Hall on Cathays Park in 1932. This was a direct commission and further evidence of Thomas's reputation and skills, as it was larger than the original building and needed to be designed as a good companion to such an important civic building.

Six years later there opened another important building by Thomas in Cardiff's civic centre, the Temple of Peace and Health, commissioned by Lord Davies of Llandinam. Messages of encouragement from 'illustrious sons of Gwalia' were sent from across the world to the opening ceremony; these even included a message from the President of the United States, through his Ambassador to Belgium, Joseph Davies. The Temple of Peace and Health was clearly meant to be an important symbolic, national building in memory of the fallen of the Great War and housing the Welsh Council of the League of Nations Union and the offices of the King Edward VII Welsh National Memorial Association who worked to eradicate tuberculosis, regarded as a peculiarly Welsh phenomenon (Morgan K., 1982:234). It was Thomas's third large public building on Cathays Park. Lord Davies noted at the ceremony that '[t]o Mr. Percy Thomas we are indebted for the architectural design in which I think he has expressed, with dignity and simplicity, the ideas and aspirations for which this building stands. I am sure everyone will agree that he has added another gem to the galaxy of public buildings in Cathays Park-unique, I believe, in this country, and a monument to the foresight and wise initiative of your City Fathers' (Anon, 1938). The Lord Mayor, Alderman Howell, responded 'this has been a great day for Cardiff and for Wales, for these twin ideals, so important to the well-being of a nation, have been crystallised in the Temple which it is a joy to behold'. Thomas was invested with the King's Royal Gold Medal for Architecture for services to architecture and the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1939 'as a designer of important British buildings'.

Thomas did not confine his Welsh work to Cardiff. What he was to judge his 'greatest success', was in Swansea – the New Guildhall – for which he won a competition with his then partner, Ivor Jones, in 1930 (Thomas, 1963:29). It was awarded an RIBA Bronze medal and is Listed as Grade 1 by Cadw as 'the most important building in Wales of its period'. It has an interesting iconographical scheme with some Viking imagery referring to Swansea's ancient history. Overall however, '[i]t was a deliberate policy that Welsh national and local associations should play an important part in the decorative scheme throughout the building' (Woolley, 1984:85). Later in the decade Thomas designed the County Hall of Carmarthenshire in a striking, historicist style on a prominent site, which was not finally completed until well after the War. It is Listed by Cadw 'as one of the most notable mid C20 public buildings in Wales, by a leading Welsh architect' (Cadw List Description).

In the 1930s, Thomas was invited to meet the Principal of Aberystwyth University and produce the formal master plan for the University in 1935, and so began a long relationship with the University and the Principal. The Development Plan for Bangor University followed soon after. As Percy Thomas Partnership's promotional literature from the late 1970s said, these were 'national projects'. The association with these universities was renewed in the 1960s and 1970s and in these decades and thereafter the partnership built many well known buildings for all the major Welsh university colleges. Significantly, one of these – the Physics and Mathematics building at (what is now) Aberystwyth University – was chosen by the G.P.O. (now Royal Mail) for a series of postage stamps that illustrated post-war university buildings in Britain, thereby symbolising the kind of modern Welsh identity that all major Welsh institutions and elites sought to create. Thomas's reputation was to rise even further during and after the Second World War. In 1940 he was made Regional Controller for Wales for the Ministry of Supply and in 1942 became Chair of the Welsh Regional Board for the Ministry of Production, which meant accompanying the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, to factories around Wales when necessary (Thomas, 1963:44).

1946 was a memorable year for Thomas: he was awarded a knighthood by the King for services to architecture, was re-elected for a third year in the second session of his Presidency of the RIBA, and was made the first Chairman of the Welsh Board for Industry. The Boards were a continuation of the Regional Boards structure to aid the transition to peace. It is plausible to suppose that Thomas made influential contacts that would serve the growth of his practice in peace time.

An important commission for Thomas's practice in the Development Area of south Wales was the factory for British Nylon Spinners at Pontypool in 1945. It was the sole source of all the nylon yarns produced in Britain. The factory is considered to be 'a pioneering example of industrial architecture applied to a pioneering industry' and a 'centre-piece of post-war reconstruction' (Cadw List Description) and was acclaimed at the time of its completion as one of the finest examples of modern industrial architecture (figure 2).

As well as attracting new industries, the restructuring of the Welsh economy in the late 1940s was planned to involve new investment in the recently nationalised heavy industries, coal (in the form of the National Coal Board) and steel (Steel Company of Wales (SCW)). The SCW's 'showcase' Abbey Works at Port Talbot, a technological giant, came into production in 1951 allied to the new cold reduction plants at Trostre, Margam and

Felindre. The Directors of the newly formed Steel Company of Wales appointed Thomas as their consulting architect. The great Abbey steel works at Port Talbot were laid out to his designs which were based on efficient detailing and highly functional planning. Thomas's planning skills had been officially acknowledged in 1944 when he became a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute. An office headed by Thomas's son Norman was opened in Swansea to cope with the SCW work which included, by then, the Strip Mills at Trostre (Llanelli) and at Felindre (Swansea); 'these were the first of a long series of industrial buildings which at that time formed the greater part of my practice in the early post war years' (Thomas, 1963:49).

The Attlee government in 'full acceptance of Keynesian economics' (Jones, 2005:275) nationalised the supply of electricity in 1947. As consultant architect for the Wales region of the newly formed British Electricity Authority, Thomas was commissioned to design power stations at Burry Port in Carmarthen Bay, Aberthaw in Glamorgan and Rogerstone in Monmouthshire before the work was taken 'in house' to the London headquarters with Thomas remaining as a consultant and responsible for all BEA's activities in Wales (Thomas, 1963:53).

After the formation of the National Health Service in 1948 there was a national programme of hospital expansion and building. Thomas's practice was responsible for a large number of projects commissioned by the Welsh Regional Hospital Board from the 1950s. One of the first was the Cardiff Maternity Hospital, parts of which were in Thomas's interpretation of the 'International Style' (figure 3).

Many more hospitals were built all over Wales over the next three decades to designs by the practice (or advised by the practice) which included Glangwili in Carmarthen, Rhyl District General, Nevill Hall in Abergavenny, Llanfdechfa Grange in Cwmbran, Prince Charles in Merthyr, Glan Clwyd in Bodolwyddan, Whitchurch Radiotherapy Hospital . Thomas was also appointed as one of the adjudicators of the designs for the large teaching University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff, thus influencing the built form of the modern Wales through a different mode (Thomas, 1963:51).

When the UK fell into recession in the late 1950s the Conservative government maintained Keynesian policies and Wales again became the recipient of state intervention and massive investment through the 1960 Local Employment Act. The car industry was established in Cardiff and Llanelli but more impressive was the development of the vast, three mile long RTB/Spencer Steelworks at Llanwern. In 1962 Thomas's practice was commissioned to give the largest elements of the Spencer Steelworks at Llanwern architectural coherence. The authors of the 'Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion' gazetteer note that Trostre, Felindre, Port Talbot and Llanwern are 'among the best large industrial buildings of their time' (Lloyd et al, 2006:87).

The transport network was deemed in need of improvement to facilitate economic expansion and increasing vehicle ownership. Thomas was appointed consultant architect on numerous post-war Ministry of Transport schemes in Wales (Thomas, 1963:53), notably the Conwy bypass bridge, Neath and Newport bypasses and the Severn Bridge, which when it was finally completed had the longest span in England and Wales at the time and was built using innovative design concepts: 'this is the first bridge in the world to use the revolutionary concept of the streamlined deck and inclined hangars' (English Heritage List Description). Thomas designed the towers, piers and anchorages. Crucially for Wales this

bridge facilitated greatly improved access to commercial markets, London and European ports and became a potent symbol of the 'New Wales'.

The dominant view, in Wales and England, about what were the weaknesses of the Welsh economy and society and how these weaknesses needed to be addressed remained that Wales had become over reliant on declining economic sectors and needed to modernise, redistribute and diversify the industries and the workforce. By the late 1960s and into the 1970s these declining sectors included the coal and steel on which post-war hopes had been pinned (Rees and Lambert, 1981).

PTP's work on two key national institutional buildings in the 1960s, epitomised this direction in both form and content. Both buildings were in a modernist idiom; the first was the purpose built headquarters of BBC Wales at Broadcasting House in Llandaff (figure 4); the second key building was the Galleries and Administration Block of the Welsh Folk Museum on the St. Fagans Castle site which had been given to the National Museum in 1946. Both of these institutions were in the service sector and both reflected a distinctive Welsh identity. Their buildings were designed by a senior member of PTP, Dale Owen, who was a direct link with one of the fountain-heads of international modernism, having studied and worked with Walter Gropius and the Architect's Collaborative in the USA.

For the remainder of the twentieth century the steadily growing practice continued to work on projects in Wales which signified a nation emerging to find its place in a world of nations, some of which would be independent states and others not. By the late 1970s there were approximately 140 professional and technical staff and 40 administrative staff in the practice with two of the major Groups based in Cardiff office, which still housed the Central Administration and Computer Aided Design Centre, and nine partners including the Company Secretary.

Notable among the kinds of development which were meant to define the emerging Wales were factories for the kinds of advanced technologies which were to replace the industries in structural decline (Jones, 2005:276-278). Amersham International (1974 -81, and 1987), on the outskirts of Cardiff, was an example. Other research laboratories the practice designed were the Research Laboratories (1969 and 1975), at Trawscoed, Ceredigion for the National Agricultural Advisory service and the award winning Parke Davis Pharmaceutical Research Centre (1971-1973) at Pontymoile. The internationally recognised quality of design in these, and other, schemes was itself a part of their value in re-fashioning the image of Wales (Day, 2002).

Less glamorous, but also linked to an industry of the future not the past was the 'most efficient aircraft maintenance works in the world' (*Building*, 31/1/1994) for British Airways. With the lowest possible production costs in an innovative building form that could accommodate future changes and with easy access to the M4, this facility received the 1995 RIBA Regional Award for Architecture in Wales.

Equally important for the future of diversified employment, was the servicing of decentralised government departments such as the Royal Mint, Driver Vehicle Licensing Centre and the Business Statistics Office. The BSO building was designed by the practice (1970 -1973) for a sensitive parkland site that was part of the estate surrounding Tredegar House, Newport. It is now known as the Office for National Statistics and was relocated from Middlesex by the Board of Trade and Industry (figure 5).

The faith put in the practice by Welsh political, economic and social elites was well illustrated by its appointment as architect for the Millennium Centre in Cardiff in 1996.



Having formerly been chosen as associate architects by the Zaha Hadid team, which had twice won the international competition to design the Cardiff Bay Opera House in 1994 (Edwards, 1997), following the failure to implement the Opera House scheme a new brief was drawn up and a new business plan prepared for a multi-purpose national arts centre, 'a powerhouse of Welsh performing arts' (*Building Design*, 26/11/2004). The architectural idiom, in the absence of a Welsh contemporary architectural idiom, drew inspiration from environmental, social and cultural themes to evoke images of the landscape, culture and working traditions and fulfil the brief for a building that was 'unmistakably Welsh and internationally outstanding' (WMC). The quest for an iconography for such a visible symbol of a newly devolved nation meant that the complex imagery would necessarily have multiple meanings; even the name of the building does not clearly indicate its purpose. Irrespective of the controversies and architectural judgements of this unprecedented building it has succeeded in showcasing the contemporary metropolitan culture of Wales (figure 6).

In 2004, PTP was taken over by Capita, only hours after 'the 94-year old practice...went into administration' (*Building Design*, 18/6/2004) to become Capita Percy Thomas, after several years of successfully avoiding liquidation caused by delays and cancellations of pending Private Finance Initiative projects. Upon his retirement Thomas, who had been – *inter alia*– a businessman, had commented on his sadness at the greater commercialisation of the profession and 'the emphasis...on organisation...rather than on purely architectural and aesthetic problems' (Thomas, 1963:55). It is unlikely, given the current operating conditions for architectural firms, that Wales will ever have a practice like that of Percy Thomas again. Moreover, in an age more attuned to the diverse modes, and aspirations, of Welshness (eg Mackay, 2010), it is unlikely that a single practice will have quite as clearly dominant a model of Welshness to reflect and instantiate in major buildings. That the firm's work was closely aligned to the idea of Wales as a modernising nation should be clear from the number, range and significance of the projects it was involved with over close to a century. The discussion has also noted Percy Thomas's strongly felt and self-proclaimed Welsh identity, which he followed through into decisions about his own career, and the location of the firm's main offices.

In the next section we use a case study of a major national building in the 1960s to suggest that the firm were active participants in the design of buildings which represented the particular Welsh identity their clients required, but perhaps could not always visualise in built form. The case study draws upon interviews with key informants, minutes of committees of the National Museum, and archived drawings.

### **More than bricks and concrete: the case of the National Folk Museum at St Fagans**

Cyril Fox, director of the National Museum, had declared in 1930 after a visit to Sweden that the 'museum service in Wales is incomplete without illustration of the Welsh culture-complex such as can only be afforded by an open-air field museum' (Lord, 1993:37). Components of Welsh rural cultural heritage and folk artefacts had been collected by Dr. Iorwerth Peate from the 1920s, in the spirit of the Scandinavian folk museum movement, as emblematic of the true spirit of the nation. However, the establishment of an open air museum only became feasible because of the donation, in 1946, of St.Fagan's Castle and eighteen acres of grounds for the purpose, by the third Earl of Plymouth and his mother, the Countess of Plymouth, with an additional eighty acres of grounds and gardens sold for

a 'nominal sum' (Bassett, 1993:14). The myth of the rural 'gwerin' as holders of the true spirit, the perspective that informed the establishment of the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans, was challenged later in the twentieth century (Adamson, 1999:65). However, there was to be no serious challenge to the idea of having some kind of folk or social history dimension to the national museum.

As early as 1948 Sir Percy Thomas and Son had prepared a development plan for the Folk Museum, and in 1955 designed a large, flat roofed scheme in its then characteristic 'modern' style (of which only a small red brick storage building was built). By the late 1950s, the practice had a more sophisticated approach to architectural modernism. Dale Owen had been appointed as Thomas's personal assistant and designer in 1958, and later became a partner in the firm. Thomas, probably encouraged by Norman, his son (who had worked for a time in the USA with leading exponents of modernism) realised that there was a need for a new architectural approach in the practice, if it was to address the demand for buildings designed in a British form of the fashionable International Modern Style, which expressed post war optimism, progress and offered new design solutions for modernisation and regeneration (Weeks et al, 1999:14, Short et al, 2003: 6-9). Owen's experience of studying and working in the U.S.A. - including a spell in Gropius's Architect's Collaborative - could help achieve this vision through the introduction of Bauhaus derived principles. Owen was a graduate of the Welsh School of Architecture, as was Norman Percy Thomas, and a post graduate of MIT and Harvard University. Thomas persuaded Owen, who was a passionate Welshman, to remain in Wales even though the practice had expanded beyond Wales as 'there was much work to be done' (*The Independent*, 28/11/1997). Owen was one of the practice's principal architect planners. His obituary in the *Architect's Journal* (November 28 1997) records that he 'masterminded the first really big Modern buildings in Wales' in the 1960s and 1970s at Aberystwyth, Cardiff and Swansea universities.' It was Owen who was to be in charge of a team designing a new galleries and administration block (a so-called 'Main Building') for St Fagans (figure 7).

The story of how the Main Building moved from being an aspiration in the early 1950s to development (in two phases) in the late 1960s and early 70s, opening in 1973, is a tangled tale of electoral politics, institutional rivalries, Treasury intransigence, and the changing - but ever-contested - administrative arrangements for Welsh affairs (Davey, 2014, chapter 6). This paper will not delve into these aspects, but will simply consider the influence of the architects over the design of the building, and the way that this reflected their own commitments to expressions of Welsh nationhood.

How Percy Thomas came to be commissioned to design the Main Building is not clear, though in interview (February 21 2011) John Hilling - who was to be Project Architect - was adamant that only a Welsh firm would have been seriously considered, and Sir Percy Thomas and Partners was the pre-eminent Welsh firm. Moreover, as Maureen Kelly Owen, Dale Owen's widow and herself an architect in the practice, put it in interview (February 28 2011) the practice was 'a safe pair of hands'. The architects appointed by Percy Thomas to handle the commission were Dale Owen, as partner in charge, and John Hilling (who asked to work on it). This was significant on two counts: both were self-consciously Welsh (and Hilling was a Welsh Nationalist), and each had a commitment to modernism. Owen, as we have seen, had a first class pedigree as an architect steeped in the modern movement. Hilling, also a product of the Welsh School of Architecture, had worked outside Wales, but had returned so that his children could be educated in a Welsh school. An

admirer of Scandinavian modernism, he had subscribed for many years to a Norwegian architectural journal after visiting an open folk air museum at Bygdoy near Oslo. Both appreciated the significance of the Welsh Folk Museum for creating a consciousness of Wales as a separate nation, and the potential role of the proposed Main Building in that project. On the client's side, a Building Committee of the National Museum, constituted in December 1964, was responsible for overseeing the project. The minutes of the committee suggest that its major pre-occupations were costs and progress; design matters appear to have been rarely discussed at length. Only once does a design matter appear to create significant open tension or conflict between client and architect: when there is objection in August 1970 by Iorweth Peate, curator of the Folk Museum, to the apparent loss of a gallery space in the proposed design of Phase 2 of the building. An explanation by the architects is minuted and apparently accepted (Davey, 2014:207). The relationship between architects and the staff of the Folk Museum appears to have been exceptionally cordial, with Hilling presenting a specially drawn map of the museum area to museum staff in appreciation of this (item 220 of the minutes of the Welsh Folk Museum Committee, April 11 1969).

As Lukes (2005) has noted, lack of overt conflict does not necessarily imply an absence of relations of power and influence. The significance of Iorweth Peate - long-standing promoter of the Folk Museum, Welsh Nationalist and passionate advocate of the 'gwerin' as the soul of Welsh identity - could not have escaped Percy Thomas. Peate had joined the National Museum in 1927, had become keeper of the newly- created Department of Folk Culture and Industries in 1936 (and took the title 'Curator' from 1953) , and was instrumental in the development of St Fagans on the model of Scandinavian open-air folk museums, with which he had regular contact for decades (Davey, 2014:242). Peate's vision was to boost 'Welsh national pride through a cultural revival, especially as expressed in a Welsh Folk Museum' (Stevens, 1986: 5; see also Peate, 1948: 33). The choice of the two architects who would lead the project was astute. They were sympathetic to nationalism, and - perhaps more importantly in this context - attuned to Scandinavian modernism, a style which had been employed in the design of new buildings for some of the Scandinavian folk museums which had inspired Peate to push for a Welsh Folk Museum (Davey, 2014:183). And they built on these foundations. In interview, Hilling spoke of the frequent meetings he had with Peate, sometimes accompanied by Owen; 'right from the beginning, sometimes with Owen, sometimes just myself, we were able to discuss options ...and say why this is the best option ....' It suggests a partnership of architect and user.

Once appointed, in just under six months preliminary design ideas had been prepared , and approved, which already suggested a striking modernist building, quite different in style from the rather ponderous effort by Percy Thomas himself over ten years earlier (Davey, 2014) . Owen and Hilling were then authorised by the Building Committee to visit several Scandinavian folk museums. They returned with some significant amendments for the building, though these were largely functional rather than stylistic (Davey, 2014: 196-197). The drawings make it plain that the architects understood, and likely shared, Peate's aspiration for a building which would fulfil for the Welsh Folk Museum what the better versions of Scandinavian modernism achieved for their museums - a building which was not a pastiche of older styles, which drew upon the principles of international modernism, and hence was undoubtedly forward-looking, but which gave this approach a twist, or flavour, that marked it as Welsh. With its clear Scandinavian overtones, such a building could be read by Peate and those sympathetic to him, as an

endorsement of the importance of the 'gwerin', the kind of 'folk' that were so important to some Scandinavian conceptions of nation (Lord, 1993), while the obvious modernism of the building resonated with the conception of Welsh nationhood that remained so significant in Welsh political life. The lack of conflict over their designs suggests that they succeeded in their aims.

### **Redressing the neglect**

This paper has argued that Percy Thomas was an important figure in twentieth century Welsh history, with a significance extending beyond the design of some fine and/or imposing buildings. Most of our lives are lived in and around buildings and other structures ; hence, political projects which aim to (re)shape national and community identities - our views of ourselves and our lives - benefit enormously if a built environment can be created which resonates with and helps consolidate that project. In part because of his skill in understanding client needs, and in part through the continuity of his firm through the twentieth century, Percy Thomas and his colleagues were responsible for an astonishing breadth of symbolically significant built structures in Wales. His was not an approach that questioned the politically dominant view of Wales and Welsh nationhood which held sway in Wales for much of the twentieth century, and that view has come under scrutiny in recent decades. But this paper may have shown that this does not negate Percy Thomas's contribution to shaping Wales. The neglect of Percy Thomas by researchers to date means that much remains to be done to better understand his, and his firm's, importance. There is no scholarly biography available, no comprehensive critical assessment of his firm's output, and he remains a marginal figure in most accounts of the politics and administration of twentieth century Wales. It is to be hoped that this situation is rectified in decades to come.

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### **Obituaries of Percy Thomas**

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### **Acknowledgements**

Figures 1, 2 and 3 are from Percy Thomas Partnership photograph albums now held at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

Figures 4, 6 and 7 are photographs by Elaine Davey

Figure 5 is from a Percy Thomas Partnership promotional brochure c 1975

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