

Remaking and rediscovering national memory in early modern Wales through national history writing

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1. Introduction

In my research project I argue that national memory in Early Modern Wales was rediscovered and remade using narratives of national history. I will use **Cultural Memory**, the seminal theory formulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann, which understands as an intrinsically cultural phenomenon with the written word and history a common medium.

This research contributes to our understanding of the relationship between history and memory, arguing that national history is a vehicle of **Cultural Memory**, by providing a past that the nation can claim as their own, upon which they can base their collective identity.

To do this I will study five historical narratives from early modern Wales all of which approach writing history as a literary enterprise:

- *Historiae Britannicae Defensio* by **John Prise** (1551)
- *Cronica Walliae* by **Humphrey Llwyd** (1559)
- *Historie of Cambria* by **David Powel** (1584)
- *Y Ffydd Ddiffuant* by **Charles Edwards** (1677)
- *Drych y Prif Oesoedd* by **Theophilus Evans** (1716, 1740).

2. Cultural Memory

In recent years collective memory has become a major field of scholarly inquiry, focusing on the past as a human construct. Jan and Aleida Assmann's **Cultural Memory** (1995) argues that memory is a cultural phenomenon and is mediated through culture and by cultural artifacts. **Cultural Memory** provides a group with a cultural identity, based on a shared past that transcends diachronic boundaries, and reaches into the past as long as it can be claimed as 'ours'.

One of these cultural artifacts, is national history writing Aleida Assmann (2011). National history can be considered a vehicle of **Cultural Memory** providing a nation with a past that can be claimed by them and informs their historical consciousness. Stemming from the authoritative status of history writing, as a task that demands scholarly endeavour, historical account carry societal weight in defining the collective past. Thus shaping the collective historical consciousness and telling the nation who they are and what defines them. The historical narratives studied here are vehicles and expressions of a Welsh **Cultural Memory** that disseminates and reveals a Welsh historical consciousness.

3. Renaissance Histories

The histories of Renaissance Wales express a **Cultural Memory** that is distinctively Welsh. This memory is shared with a transnational audience, in Europe and the British isles.

Prise addresses a European educated audience in Latin, expressing and vindicating the Welsh **Cultural Memory** in light of the contemporary stain on Galfridian historiography. Providing the Welsh memory in Latin places the Welsh past within a European transnational framework. Elevating the Welsh as an ancient people like the Greeks and the Romans, and crucially a part of an ancient European heritage.

Llwyd and **Powel** write in English at the behest of English Lords in Wales. Situating the Welsh memory within a Tudor context. The Welsh and the English are portrayed as equal partners following the Acts of Union 1536. Emphasising that the Welsh narrative is a central part of Tudor memory. Here is an island heritage which unites and defines the peoples of Tudor Britain.

4. Y Ffydd Ddiffuant

Written by the Puritan **Charles Edwards** shortly after the Restoration, *The Unfeigned Faith* has the turmoil of recent years alive in his mind. Edwards sets the Welsh past within a Biblical framework, fashioning himself as an early modern Jeremiah. His **Cultural Memory** emphasises the covenantal relationship between God and the Welsh nation. This is clear from the spiritual blessings he has placed upon them through the ages.

His account has clear mnemonic qualities expressing an understanding of the Welsh people as a people chosen by God, and their true identity orbiting the unfeigned faith and their cultural uniqueness, which has sustained and kept them.

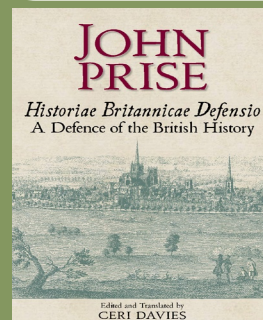


Figure 1: *Historiae Britannicae Defensio*

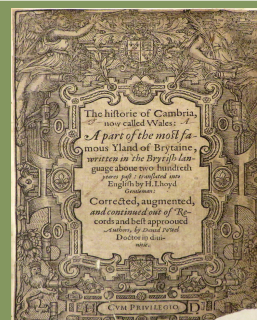


Figure 2: *Historie of Cambria*



Figure 3: Map of Wales by Humphrey Llwyd

5. Drych y Prif Oesoedd

This is the first extended account of the Welsh past for the nation in their tongue, with a patriotic zeal informing this of **Cultural Memory**. **Theophilus Evans' Mirror of the Prime Ages** exalts the Welsh by connecting and defining them as a people of Classical and Scriptural stock. This is done through their ancestors, firstly Gomer, a descendant of Noah, and from Brutus of Troy, a descendant of Aeneas. **Evans** also reveals a symbiotic relationship between Christianity, particularly Protestant Anglicanism, and the Welsh nation.

Displaying their ancestry with pride, a chief aim here is to inspire the Welsh people to grasp their past firmly, as it is the basis of their identity.

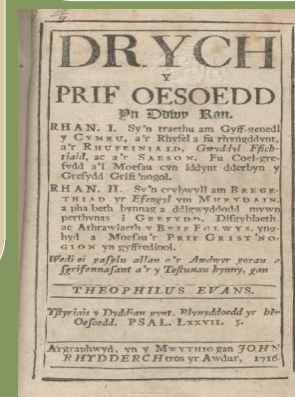


Figure 4: *Drych y Prif Oesoedd*

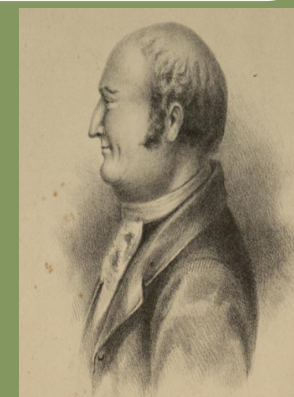


Figure 5: Theophilus Evans

References

- Aleida Assmann. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jan Assmann. 1995. 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity'. *New German Critique*, 65, pp.125-133.

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