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Darren Chetty, Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, Iestyn Tyne (eds). *Welsh [Plural]. Essays on the Future of Wales* (Repater Books: London, 2022) 260 pp, £12.99.

There is a reason Günther Grass called his autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (*While Peeling the Onion*). Title and process conjure up exposing multiple layers, but also the pain and the tears which may accompany honest explorations of individual and collective identities. Such introspection invites pluralities, whether they be the chronologically subsequent or parallel identities of one person or, as in *Welsh [Plural]. Essays on the Future of Wales*, the approaches to Welshness, Wales and identities taken by twenty authors tasked with resisting ‘any idea that national identity can be based on a single story’. The four editors of this anthology, inspired by a workshop at the Hay festival which left them feeling that Wales was lacking the visible and manifest ‘brand’ enjoyed by Scottish and Irish writers, asked contributors to ‘imagine a Wales both distinctive *and* inclusive’ in the second decade of a twenty-first century-Wales marked by legacies of Empire and migration movements and by twenty years of a devolved Welsh government that ‘gave everyone political citizenship’, but also continued concerns about the survival of the Welsh language and a distinctive Welsh culture. Raymond Williams’s 1975 quest for the location of ‘Wales’s real identity, the real culture’ introduces their texts, which explore intersections of place, race, language and class predominantly (gender is less obvious here) and their role in the formation of identities. The concept of *cynefin* – whether it is mentioned or not – appears to be central to most texts. Personal and public histories intermingle in most essays as the private becomes political, the anthology a kaleidoscope moving on to different combinations of perspective, style, voice and location in every contribution: from Cardiff to Rhyl and London, from the rural to the urban and the metropolitan, Muslim voices to those of agnostics and cultural Nonconformists, from Welsh speakers to Welsh learners and those pondering the meaning of accent, at times all rolled into one.

The editors rightly insist that by pulling back from the ‘immediacy of politics’ cultural entrepreneurs are well placed to contribute to the ‘collective imagination’, and the contributors all attempt to do so – the more obviously literary authors and poets in a different way from the academics. Yet, musician Cerys Hafana sums up what emerges in a number of essays when they conclude that it is ‘the infrastructure: education, media, housing, jobs – that does the most in protecting the future of marginalised and minoritised groups’. The authors cannot escape referencing the *Realpolitik* that may make or break imagined identities and nations. Their focus on Welshness and Wales necessarily throws light on England, Britain and

the UK, ‘a nation state little more than two-hundred years old’ in the words of Mike Parker, just as Richard Wyn Jones’s recent volume on *Englishness* threw light on the remainder of the United Kingdom.¹ England and the UK are always present, as the context of Welsh identities and as starting or end points of migratory movements. As Joe Dunthorne puts it: ‘Full of shit, it was also full of job prospects in the creative arts, members of our extended families, and good universities’. The essays are not all an easy read for those who love this country. Uncomfortable passages, like Parker’s extended rejection of the ‘replica flatpack nation’ Wales too often attempts to be, the multiple references to racism, or to having to negotiate ‘racialised identity in white spaces’ as in Shaeen Sutton’s chapter, force an honest look at ourselves, warts and all, no airbrushing, just *Wales [Plural]*. While the more academic writers set the scene and analyse histories and data in the way they do well and as expected (perhaps because they tend to be of my generation), it is the more literary and autobiographical essays, often by the (younger) cultural entrepreneurs – novelists, poets, musicians – which truly excited me, made me laugh, annoyed me a little, angered me on their behalf, or made me want to give them a good Welsh ‘cwtsh’ to let them know that we are here for them.

In order to look forward, stock must be taken to establish how we arrived at a Welsh national identity which, though not problem-free as many reflections show, is no longer that of the ‘naked people under an acid rain’ imagined by Gwyn Alf Williams in *When Was Wales* in 1984. Martin Johnes’s opening chapter explores our emotional relationship with a past that non-historians prefer to be simple. Welsh history, despite devolution ‘not at the heart of most pupils’ history education’, for many still means focusing on perceived mistreatments by England rather than exploring a complex story of complicity and the advantages of union with England, mention of which may elicit ‘angry letters, tweets and emails’. His timely reminder of the darker legacies of Empire is combined with a plea for writing the histories of a diverse Wales. Mike Parker also takes stock, mainly of the work of Leopold Kohr and Jan Morris, focusing on the former’s remarks on Wales’s abundance of resources – perhaps Kohr would use *cynefin* if he were to write today – the latter imagining a Wales ‘where multiple identities are allowed to exist even within one person’ and Machynlleth is a capital city. Topical and political, some passages are deeply uncomfortable, but therefore thought-provoking. Kohr’s ‘power theory of aggression’ is as applicable today as it was in 1971, and so is Morris’s turn from political nationalism following the 1990s atrocities in Yugoslavia. Charlotte Williams’s comprehensive thoughts on ‘Cynefin, the Curriculum and Me’ – sixteenth in the collection –

¹ Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones, *Englishness: the political force transforming Britain* (Oxford, 2021).

should be read with those two, combining as they do reflections on her childhood as a lone black child in the middle of an all-white school photograph in north Wales with exploring definitions, challenges and the potential of *cynefin* – ‘the place where we feel we belong, where the people and landscape around us are familiar, and the sounds and sights are reassuringly recognisable’ according to the new Welsh Curriculum Framework’ – and a review of research on race, ethnicity, equality and history teaching that reaches from the present back to Bernstein’s 1970s views on the role of education and society to explain persisting inequalities in the Wales of today. Dan Evans completes the more academic historical stock taking. Merfyn Jones’s 1992 essay ‘Reconstructing Wales’ informs his discussion of Welsh histories produced in the second half of the twentieth century, which often divided identities into ‘nationalist’ and ‘Labourist’, and the effects of devolution on Welshnesses that, perhaps, are no longer as binary as that. Most interesting is his application of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ to exploring Welsh identities.

The majority of the contributors focus more closely on how their individual histories – childhoods, migrations and encounters with racism, accents and languages, rurality and urbanity – reflect changing historical realities of Welshness as much as they have shaped the authors of the essays. Place is a starting point for many. ‘Welsh Indian South African Londoner’ Darren Chetty chooses the changing appearance of the ‘Black Boy’ pub sign to explore his Swansea childhood and attitudes to race. We meet a Sikh Elvis impersonator, learn about everyday casual racism, Charles II and the Georgian fashion for black ‘exotic’ servants as markers of status. Was the black coachman painted as a trumpeter for the Yorke family of Erddig a member of the Welsh nation?² His love for Swansea City and the Vetch highlight the way team loyalties shape local and national identities and attitudes to race. Joe Dunthorne’s ‘We Bleed Red’ adds another perspective on place, sport and belonging, charting the attempts of a half-English boy to sound as Welsh as possible at the Vetch and as posh English at university, until his Welshness ‘vanished for months, only to reappear come Regional Awards season’.³ He feels fraudulent until the conflict is resolved by a community of ‘wish-we-were-Welsher’ rugby fans in London, the digital age having helped him learn all three verses of *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*. Accent and language are as important as place.

² <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1151289>.

³ This was a poem written for him by his friend Tim Clare.

Kandace Siobhan Walker's reflections begin with Welsh rurality, the Brecon Beacons to which she is transplanted as a child and where the history of her composite family reflects complex migration movements that unite Hong Kong, Jamaica and London. Her insightful comments that 'nature belongs to whiteness' are backed up with sociological studies, and with hauntingly beautiful descriptions of rural and urban environments:

At dusk, I am a teenage girl standing in a field in the shadow of surrogate mountains, bare feet in the knee-high cornsilk grass brushing my skirt, submerged in the clear plasticity of world almost without time ... I feel small but right. The moon and stars begin to appear faintly now, above the darkening plateau. A multitude of shapes without consistent form.

When I hear the engine, I know what I will see, through the hedge, a white man in a black Range Rover, sleeker than a big cat in a zoo. His white family staring from the passenger seats. Each watching the other, questioning which is the intruder, whose presence is authentic, whose is artificial. To me, the clean tyres give them away. To the tourists, my skin is its own betrayal. Suddenly I am nowhere.

Her adult return to the metropole means a liberating familiarity but also delivers racism, 'the slaver' still on its pedestal. The 'Welsh rural' may provide a 'generative space for the articulation of Welshness' after all. For Durre Shahwar, too, Welsh identity is constructed through nature and place, as someone not born in the UK, but 'having lived, been educated and worked in Wales for the greater part' of her life. As other people of colour in this anthology, she is forced to question her Welshness, not least by the UK Border Agency (the 'nation state' intruding into private Welsh lives again) attempting to deport her family. Benedict Anderson and Charlotte Williams are cited, as explaining ways of 'belonging to something bigger than yourself'. The difficulties of filling in equality and diversity forms are partly overcome by venturing out into the rural 'forests, mountains, rivers, coasts', a process by which Wales becomes the home of a Welshness which is not a 'performance for others'. In the application of 'place identity' – a key concept in environmental psychology – *cynefin* springs to mind again. Shaheen Sutton movingly describes the multi-ethnic community of 'Pill' in Newport and becoming Welsh outside Wales, called a 'Taffy' in Birmingham for her Welsh accent as a child and accepted as Welsh in Glasgow as an adult, perhaps on the basis of a 'shared aversion to English nationalism'. Back home, the 1970s 'unrelenting barrage of racist abuse' which had forced her best friend's family to leave slowly changes to less obvious forms of racism, and female role model, a white woman 'in her mid-forties', introduces her to a complex imperial history which includes the drowning of Tryweryn, the Aberfan disaster

and ‘good immigrant’ Paul Robeson, Chartism and the 1919 race riots: ‘a forgotten Wales beneath a forgotten Wales’. Just when we breathe a sigh of relief – things have turned out well for her – we are shocked back into reality with descriptions of brutal racist attacks in her home community. This, too, was our country – is our country? – where ‘black and brown people, im/migrants and non-migrants’ are forced to prove and validate their Welshness, now more often by learning Welsh and sporting Welsh rugby shirts.

Our new national poet Hanan Issa has placed her essay ‘Have you heard the one about the Niquabi on a Bus?’ almost at the end of the anthology she co-edited. I had heard this urban myth and – like her and many others – revelled in the public scolding of an English racist in a Welsh bus. Her unpicking of the story reveals a ‘double whammy’ of otherness Welsh Muslims endure that had escaped my attention: marked as other by ethnicity and by religion. She uncovers fascinating historical Muslim presences and legacies in Britain and Wales (with handy references), and uses her nan’s changing attitudes and her mother’s journey to Islam to chart the meaning of clothing perceived to be ‘unWelsh’. The final passage in her essay describes a practice through which Welshness may be defined by *care for your cynefin*:

Muslims believe that every person has an obligation to be a caretaker of the Earth. I prefer the word caretaker as it emphasises responsibility over ownership. When my son was born we had a tree planted in a patch of forest near Bridgend. It felt just as important as getting his birth registered at City Hall or hosting an aqiqah. In measuring a person’s Welshness, could a respect for the landscape and its people take precedence over aesthetics?

For those contributors born to white, Welsh or Welsh-speaking parents, Welshness may appear less fraught, but their search for communities, their questioning of accents, language and class, and attempts to maintain integrity in the wider culture of the UK, is not unproblematic either. Though the majority of essays are written from the perspective of north Wales, they present very different accounts of Welshness. Cerys Hafana allows fresh insights into the life of a queer folk musician, and the tensions between the ‘woolly’ concepts tradition and change – folk being traditional music ‘that can and will be changed’. Moving tributes to their teacher Nansi Richards and references to the Welsh Romani who contributed to the Welsh cultural renaissance after 1815,⁴ take turns with exploring tensions between tradition

⁴ It is interesting to note that the fullest description of their contribution was published in Welsh first and in English ten years later. A. O. H. Jarman and Eldra Jarman, *Y Sipsiwn Cymreig: teulu Abram*

and innovation: think male voice choirs and Iolo Morganwg's Gorsedd. The Celtic folk music scene – viewed by outsiders like me as a happy alternative community – is revealed to be home to shockingly homophobic and misogynist behaviour, and the continuing heteronormativity of dance at the 'spine tingling' new Dinas Mawddwy Mari Llwyd is questioned. But Hafana also interrogates their own privilege as a white Welsh speaker with a Welsh first name. Interestingly, this is the only essay which pulls back the veil on the continuing problematic of Welsh identities defined by outdated nineteenth-century muscular masculinities. Iestyn Tyne explodes any notion of a common British farming community in his beautiful and poignant essay on upland marginal farming communities, often perceived as areas 'where long-lost ways of life', including the Welsh language, survive, yet which hide a dark truth of a rural poverty deepened by their roles as tourist attraction and provider of second homes. The wider explorations are backed up by recounting a rural work experience, when aged seventeen, his world unexpectedly clashed with that of a wealthy Worcestershire family farm complete with tennis courts (note the plural!), where a mostly Eastern European migrant labour force was relentlessly exploited and denigrated. His Welshness, rooted in ancient landscapes and community spirit, does not stem from this encounter, but his conviction that Welsh independence is the only solution, certainly does, for: 'How does one defend the oppressed from under the roof of the oppressor?' Grug Muse focuses on internal Welsh divisions rather than the other side of Offa's Dyke, using 'Datganoli/Devolution' and 1997 as the temporal span of her memory and the changes in her native village Penegroes as markers – of decline but also of the hope embodied by the community café in which she sits. Responses to the devolution referenda are measured in music, places, and the routes which connect them – between A470 and M4 – a cultural geography of Welsh pop and its meanings, before she pays homage to a day in the life of a high street in north Wales, its fate threatened by out-of-town shopping centres and e-commerce, and apparently by the 'strangers' moving in, who surprise by forming community cooperatives and Caffi'r Orsaf, a new civic space:

The new cafés are surprising not simply because they are new uses for old buildings, but because they are a new type of public space in this post-industrial valley. Civic space has traditionally been dominated by the chapel and pub. Traditionally these were masculine spaces, in a valley of masculine industries. ... Y Banc has its own

Wood (Caerdydd, 1979); Eldra Jarman and A. O. H. Jarman, *The Welsh Gipsies. Children of Abraham* (Cardiff, 1991).

softplay area for children. Yr Orsaf is filled regularly with tables of young mothers, parents with children, grandparents and grandchildren.

The wider political meaning of changing place and spaces is demonstrated by the migration of Welsh speakers to Cardiff, the gentrification of Grangetown, and the destruction of Butetown. Should evolution not mean decentralisation? Niall Griffiths, hailing from Liverpool, is made Welsh on an outward bound experience in Snowdonia, which sets him on a path to the political, Celtic Welshness reflected in his topical essay that interprets the pandemic border monitoring as a 'foretaste of the fracturing of the UK', reminds us of the fact that 82% of the UK Parliament is English, but also asserts that this parliament is facing a growing Celtic challenge in the Senedd, at Stormont and the Scottish parliament. Having chosen to live in north Wales and rooted in Ned Thomas's writings, his is a nationalism 'that seeks to express and include', from Catalunya to the expatriate Welsh communities of Ohio, all experienced at an independence march in Caernarfon.

Andy Walsh and Morgan Owen explore their Welsh identity by connecting place, language and accent. Walsh's Rhyl accent – perceived by outsiders as a 'generic north-western twang' and by his peers as 'uniquely not-Scouse, not-Chester definitely northeast Walian' – leads to explorations of his family history and of neighbours who built the Rhyl that attracted the Victorian tourists who in turn made the local Welsh change their accent to accommodate the paying guests. David Crystal's studies on Welsh dialects underscore assertions that the multiple Welsh accents are 'each as valid as another'. Walsh's quest for a Welsh identity returns him to political realities and infrastructures, as in the other essays. How can a man develop a national identity if a '180-mile journey from Rhyl to [the capital] Cardiff takes more than four hours on two trains and even longer by car', but a trip to Anfield just over an hour? How can a feeling of being Welsh be achieved if your home town is never on the Welsh news? Is there a 'sliding scale' to Welshness which proceeds to 'very, very Welsh' for eisteddfodic Welsh speakers? Walsh does not offer answers – for himself or for us – but his questions are poignant and worth considering. Merthyr Tydfil – so memorably imagined as the post-industrial capital of the Socialist Republic of Wales in Jasper Fforde's novel *The Eyre Affair*, is the centre of Morgan Owen's essay, which almost angrily rejects perceptions of his home as the death bed of nature and the Welsh language, as he sits 'in a grove of oak with bluebells and wood sorrel at my feet, watching my town and thinking to myself in Welsh'. Like the Merthyr he defends passionately, Owen faces multiple challenges, as he explores the divisions within the Welsh-language community outsiders may well miss: the assumption that native Welsh-speakers do not hail from working class Merthyr, the

cultural dominance of middle-class children from *Y Fro Gymraeg* (whatever that is by now), described as having ‘direct access to, and participation in, the institutional Welsh-language culture, and more importantly, with ample encouragement and opportunities’. Somebody my age has a slighter different perspective on this which recalls that the mothers and fathers of those fellow students fought as much for that access – by founding their own schools and organisations and going to prison for refusing to comply with a monolingual English state apparatus – as his working class parents. We return to explorations of *cynefin*,

The three most consciously literary pieces touched me in very different ways. Gary Raymond’s ‘How to be a Welsh novelist: A Choose your Destiny Adventure Game’, structured around computer game logarithms, injected humour with its treatment of the serious matter of trying to write a novel with ‘characters that are true, plotlines gleaned from your own life growing up in Wales’, while making a living, staying in Wales and contributing meaningfully to our culture. Twenty-one choices send you back and forth, between writing in Welsh or English, selling your integrity to an agent who wants you to make the novel ‘less Welsh’ and more Scottish noir (or not in which case your book launch takes place upstairs in a Cardiff pub), realising that if you are not a white middle-class man ‘getting your novel published is going to be harder’, and being advised by kindly academic uncles that Welsh literature’s problem is ‘that it was never fetishized like Ireland was during the Celtic Revival, and it never had a marketing executive like Walter Scott’. I am not divulging the end scenarios – don’t want to spoil this for you – but one is not sure which is sadder. Marvin Thompson ‘Welsh citizen brought up in England by parents who were born in Jamaica’, explores form very differently and in the minor key in ‘On Writing a Modern Welsh Horror’. Investigating his own creative process in writing a twelfth-century ‘sestina’ on Brecon and slave trade as part of the ‘Outposted’ project of 2020, his text is a deeply impressive bitter ‘Triptych’ on the pain of ‘living in a nation that celebrates slave traders’, where blue plaques to men who ‘grew rich from selling slaves’ are still unveiled; on the imagined journey of enslaved brothers, the shame of being a slave and not persisting with an alien university degree, the forgotten contributions of black soldiers in Empire wars, and the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on people of colour (a fact which many of us most likely have by now forgotten). There is also past and current resistance as portable jackhammer or a woman’s hand remove the blue plaque to the slaver. The horror genre itself comes under the microscope, when Thompson conveys his reading of African-American Goth Leyla Taylor, and is related to identity and the whiteness of public spaces with which other contributors, too, have had to contend all their lives:

To be black is to be the fear, to be the thing that goes bump in the night, hiding under the bed.

It is one thing to use literature or film to process social anxieties but what do you do when you are the social anxiety? What do you do when the villagers with torches and pitchforks are coming after you?

There is hope of teaching future generations. His 'Mixed Race children' are capitalised, as well as 'Welsh' and 'Black' to indicate respect for their dual heritage and indicate the beginning of new Welsh identities, as does the Anti-Racist Wales Action plan envisaged when he wrote his contribution, which has now been published.⁵ If Raymond's piece made me chuckle, Thompson's filled me with shame about whitewashing and a stasis that took the deaths of too many people to be broken. The volume closes with a series of literary letters to the editors by artist and curator Rabab Ghazoul, moving in their honest admission of the mental unwell-being which has led to this form, the slowly healing fractures of all our multiple identities. Conversations with friends and fellow sufferers lead to readings of authors from Arundhati Roy to Adam Price and reports from the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales from the 2018 UN summit. His four letters to the editors may have given up on 'trying to catch one clear thought', but they give us the most succinct and down-to-earth portrayal of Wales's role in Empire, and his dreams for our future, perfect coda to the volume:

When I think of Wales, I think of its injuries and hurts and wounds, and also its complicities, its willingness to go along with the looting and depravity, not perhaps as the principal actor, not the leader of the pack, not the bully at the front always making a show of himself in the playground taking everybody's sweets and homework, but the keen pupil sitting at the back of class, not so prominent – the one that tags along.

Towards the end of the Radio 4 piece where they invited me to talk about Wales, I made a kind of pleas, I think I was dreaming a little. I said that when the Welsh independence movement struggled alongside other anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, when the yearning in Wales to dismantle white supremacy was as strong as the yearning to free ourselves from English supremacy, when we championed multiple liberation struggles as our own and drove all emancipatory aspirations into one – when we did this, we'd be moving in the direction of something, we might be

⁵ [Anti-racist Wales Action plan | GOV.WALES](#) / [Cynllun Gweithredu Cymru Wrth-hiliol | LLYW.CYMRU](#).

getting somewhere. We'd still be small, yes, but formed perfectly as some kind of force to be reckoned with.

Some of the more overtly political essays in this volume – referencing raw pandemic experiences and Brexit as they do – whilst losing topicality, may gain importance as demarcations of change, reminders of forgotten EU policies, and of the campaign slogans of, in the words of Griffiths, the ‘age of the political liar utterly unburdened by shame’ the early 2020s appear to be. I hope all of the texts will move the reader as they have moved me, often to feel unease, but rightly and necessarily so. We need to read all stories and react to all voices if we want our future Wales to be plural. Representing a complete set of voices is impossible, but it should have been imaginable to Welsh people of (Eastern) European origin – beyond the Polish migrant workers mentioned by Tyne – members of post World War Two migration movements, who have contributed to our culture, and who may reveal to us different sets of complex Welsh, European identities. I am also missing more conscious intersections with gender, and strangely for me, mention of or the voices of the mothers who surely influence identities – faced with decisions on which language to speak with their children, which schools to choose, which food traditions to maintain or merge. As Johnes and Sutton remind us, family and community shape identities perhaps more than formal education. Statistics – ‘Black British women are four times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than their white counterparts’ – are not enough here. It also grates a little that the ingrained reverence for the (older) male still appears to unduly influence the choices of those who are shaping the future of Welsh culture. One would have expected Charlotte Williams’s essay to open the collection and establish direction. Then again, the lacunae perhaps leave room for a further volume with a slightly different focus. You shake the kaleidoscope and get an utterly different pattern. *Welsh [Plural]* will be on the reading list of our Year One History module *Inventing a Nation*, which kicks off with a seminar asking the students to reflect on ‘identity’. I look forward to discussing the volume with them.

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