

Welsh and British Histories in Higher Education

Stephanie Ward ^{1,*}

¹Cardiff University, UK

*wardsj2@cardiff.ac.uk

I am a Senior Lecturer in Modern Welsh History at Cardiff University. The existence of my post in itself is telling of the value my Department, and University, places upon Welsh History as a distinctive research and teaching subject. In some respects, my post is a legacy of the previously separate Welsh History Department at Cardiff and the Welsh History degree students could study. Welsh History was absorbed into the History Department long before my arrival, but a belief that Welsh History warrants its own appointments has largely continued, although not without its challenges. My teaching responsibilities cover Welsh and British history modules as well as an increasing number of thematic and geographically broad modules. Indeed, in a story familiar to many higher education institutions in the UK, my department has recently undertaken a major restructure of the degree scheme with a steer towards team-taught modules. The danger of such reforms is to promote histories of the centre and marginalize peripheries, especially the perceived local. The place of Welsh history within new degree schemes for undergraduates and taught postgraduates has led to much careful reflection about how to incorporate Welsh history into primarily British history modules. This is not, however, a merely pedagogical question. I am principally an historian of modern Wales, but my research interests extended beyond these boundaries. In some ways, the questions raised by the place of Welsh history in British history modules, and the degree scheme as a whole, reflect the wider place of Welsh history within British history for research and publication.

What is British History?

What exactly is Welsh history is a question historians of Wales probably answer with greater regularity than British historians about what exactly British history is. I am not in any way attempting to provide a definitive answer within a short space and I cannot do justice to such a question. But, attempting to address ‘what kind of British historian am I?’ has proven to be a useful starting point for students new to the subject. I am first and foremost an historian of the working class in twentieth-century Britain, and am interested in gendered identities, family structures, political identities and movements, and the relationship between citizens and the state. I am particularly interested in how these factors are shaped by place, environment and locality and locating my archival research within certain geographical boundaries has, therefore, proven important. Although this might suggest that I am a Welsh historian by default, I also believe that Welsh history is important in its

own right and I have consciously chosen to write and research within this field. Helping students understand that Welsh history matters but is also part of British (and, most crucially in post-Brexit Britain, European, and international) histories has guided my approach to teaching the subject.

In the early twentieth century, the working class of industrial south Wales had much in common with the people of the industrialized north-east, urban Scotland and even industrialized Northern Ireland. The people of Wales and England were further connected through a shared government, jurisdiction, taxation, and economy. Social life and cultures were entangled with ideas, ideologies, and cultural expressions permeating and transcending borders. It is important to acknowledge that sometimes national borders are artificial constructs and everyday life might not have felt significantly different either side of Offa's Dyke. But, there was also a reality to the border between England and Wales long before the successful devolution referendum of 1997. To only view entangled histories risks flattening out the peculiarity of cultures, political identities, and lived experiences shaped by the nation. Depending on the question the historian is seeking to address, national borders within the UK are simultaneously artificial, imagined, and real. But, and this is the key point for teaching British history, national borders have a reality beyond their place in the lives of historical actors. National borders shape the ways historians approach the histories of British people. Distinctiveness *and* commonality are both easily lost when subsumed within the history of a more dominant neighbour. As 'four nations' historians have long acknowledged, British history too often unproblematically offers an Anglocentric perspective.¹

In teaching Welsh history to undergraduate students, myself and my colleagues at Cardiff offer distinctive Welsh history modules but also embed Welsh history in wider British history modules.² In Welsh history modules, I begin from the stance that Wales is a starting point for looking out into the world and considering British and global histories. First-year students have always had a broad introduction to the subject through a Welsh history option module which in its current formation is called 'Inventing a Nation: Politics, Culture and Heritage'. This module explores questions of Welsh identity and nationhood through the social and political upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The module is the only modern British history module for first-year students and the main assessment is a group heritage portfolio.

One outcome of the reform of our degree, is that there are now less Welsh history modules, as teaching teams are formed by a range of British history experts. The design of new modules has enabled the Department to reflect carefully on how we might decolonize the curriculum, promote more diverse historical subjects and actors, and the gendered balance of both subjects and reading lists. Welsh history has been integrated into British history modules which reflects the research specialism and ethos of the Department. While there is a danger, of course, that the move to team-taught modules might prevent specialization in particular subjects, a clear benefit is that it can introduce students to aspects of Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish history, they have might not have previously considered. This is the ambition of a team-taught second-year module 'Politics and the People in Modern Britain: Protest, Citizenship and the State'. It approaches British history from the grassroots and across the four nations.

¹ Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull, 'A New Plea for an Old Subject? Four Nations History for the Modern Period', in Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull, eds, *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History: A (Dis)united Kingdom?* (London, 2018), 3–26.

² In a separate but related issue, students can also study many modules through the medium of Welsh.

Students of British History

How students have responded to Welsh history modules while studying in the capital city of Wales has proven to be an interesting experience.³ Overseas students are particularly receptive and some Erasmus or Exchange students have a requirement from their home institution to study Welsh history. The idea that learning about the country you are living within has not similarly captured the imaginations of all UK students. I have had students declare on more than one occasion ‘but, I’m not Welsh’ when a Welsh history module has been suggested to them. This is not something that my colleagues who teach French, German, Japanese, or North American history have experienced.⁴ Students might still feel anxious about studying a place unfamiliar to them, but their nationality does not factor in a similar way. In part such attitudes are reflective of the British educational system.⁵ Histories of Germany and North America might have a more familiar feel than aspects of Welsh or Scottish or English or Northern Irish history (depending where a UK student has studied) because they have a more prominent place within the curriculum. David Olusoga’s revival of the four nations history argument for schools is very timely and raises the important point about the risk of national stereotypes from nationally focused curriculums.⁶ We should also consider the wider cultural and educational climate in which students study. In post-devolution UK, Wales does perhaps feel more separate. But the idea that histories of Wales or Scotland are only of interest to those who were born or live in those nations is troubling. Welsh history is part of the whole, and is not written only for the people of Wales. In other words, Welsh history is distinctive, but it is not insular.

Those who have signed up to Welsh history modules are drawn by a combination of an interest in the subject, an opportunity to learn histories which were not taught in school, and by feelings of a personal connection to the subject matter. For the latter group, this includes students who are Welsh or have Welsh heritage. For these students, seminars are an opportunity to share family stories and histories which can be an enriching experience for all concerned. The idea of understanding family heritage within the wider narrative of history clearly has an important personal resonance. Even without a personal connection to the topic, the subject matter of my third-year module on interwar south Wales has led to impassioned debates about inequality, poverty, and gendered politics because of the contemporary connections students make. Classes on the 1919 race riots in Cardiff are especially popular for both the revelation of aspects of Black British history, the connections to Wales’s imperial past, and its focus on the city in which many students live.

Rich local library and archival connections have allowed final year dissertation students to produce genuinely original and exciting research. There are definite trends in topic choices which again reflect both disciplinary transformations and popular culture. There is what might be termed the ‘Downton Abbey effect’ where popular films or television programmes lead to an upswing of dissertations in certain areas and help to continue the popular appeal of British history. But politics is also important here. In recent years, the greater number of students wishing to explore Welsh nationalism might be linked to the growing ‘Yes Cymru’ campaign. The number of students wishing to study Black Welsh history is also reflective of current debates within the field. The original research from students and the close engagement with primary sources from my own research reinforce how teaching and learning is a dialogue. Each new cohort of students leads to new ways of seeing familiar source materials. The thrill of a new archival discovery is heightened by knowing it will

³ Roughly 70% of students on the BA History degree scheme are from outside of Wales.

⁴ Historians offering women’s history modules might have experienced something similar.

⁵ Rhonwen Brue-Roberts, “For Wales: See England”: Unsilencing Welsh History in Schools’, *Public History Weekly*, 11 (2023).

⁶ Rachel Hall, ‘UK Schools Should Teach All Four Nations’ Histories, Says David Olusoga’, *The Guardian*, 26 September 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/26/uk-schools-should-teach-all-four-nations-histories-says-david-olusoga>> accessed 18 December 2023.

be shared with students in documentary workshops. While an academic historian of modern Britain brings expertise to the classroom, it is the student body which helps to make clear the relevance, importance, and future of the discipline.

Futures

A four nations approach to teaching British history enables us to consider bigger questions of how government operates, the relationship between the centre and the periphery and the sheer complexity of how individuals construct and express national identity in different places and moments. But, when my teaching relates most closely to my research, the focus is less on nation and nationality and histories of working-class people in Wales are a way of exploring questions of gender, community, protest, social movements, sexuality, and political identities. This is important not because the historical actors are Welsh, but because it reminds students that those particular Welsh people had and have a history worth considering as part of the British whole.

* * *

© The Author(s) [2024]. Published by Oxford University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Modern British History, 2024, **35**, 59–62

<https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwae024>

Article