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The massive impact of the complex and unpredictable events set in motion by the French Revolution on British political life has long been a subject for study. Its significance for the "colonized fringes" (Edwards, Poetry from Wales, p. 1) of Britain, in spite of the recent shift in perspective to the "four nations," however, according to the general editors of the series under review, continues to be "misrepresented and overlooked" (Constantine, Johnson, Footsteps of Liberty and Revolt, p. 2). This is particularly the case for Wales, where historians have maintained that the early absorption of the country into the English realm resulted in a lack of distinct sources of information. These volumes, the outcome of a four year research project at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies at Aberystwyth, mainly involving scholars of Romantic era literature, will do much to fill the gap. [1] They include an excellent introductory collection of essays, together with anthologies, each preceded by a substantial introduction.

The focus is on the identification, recovery, and interpretation of texts offering insights into the experience and perceptions of revolution and war and revealing the "diversity of voices" in both the languages of Wales (Löffler, Press and Public Discourse, p. 2). In addition to Welsh language poetry and that in English, the various volumes are devoted to ballads, journals, periodicals, newspapers, letters and pamphlets, and draw on both published and manuscript sources. The parallel translation of Welsh language material, particularly demanding in the case of highly stylized strict metre verse—a centuries old poetic tradition characterised by cynghanedd (harmony) with "its own very specific themes, forms and rhythms" (Edwards, p. 6)—provides an extremely valuable resource. Moreover, before publication of the Swansea Cambrian in 1804, and in the absence of a Welsh newspaper press due to financial and distribution difficulties, particular attention has also been paid to Welsh contributions to the English press in border areas.

In spite of the universalistic language of political discourse, a sense of place, as well as of the conflicting perspectives of time, generation, class, gender, nationality, politics, and language, all matter when considering the reception of the Revolution in Wales. On the eve of industrialization,
90 percent of the population of 590,000 spoke only Welsh. In the absence of separate legal and cultural institutions on the Scottish model, the language remained the primary mark of the nation’s distinctiveness and of its relative isolation from a wider British culture. Its continuing vitality was clearly evident in the demand for reading matter and adaptability to new concepts. The publication of the Bible in Welsh in 1588, together with the efforts of charity schools, ensured high levels of literacy in the native language. This was catered for in the late eighteenth century by eighteen publishers with an output of religious and political pamphlets, almanacs, and ballads distributed by bookshops, at fairs and by pedlars. Nevertheless, the processes of subordination and assimilation into a British sense of identity were well under way.

The Act of Union of 1536/43—often regarded by poets as an act of liberation by a king with Welsh ancestors—had fully incorporated Wales into the British state as its first “internal colony.”[2] Welshmen gained equal rights of citizenship. The use of their language in legal and administrative matters was prohibited, however, promoting Anglicisation and the development of contemptuous attitudes toward Welsh culture within a landed elite that historically had provided patronage in return for praise poetry. The status of the bards who had served as “the mouthpiece of [their] communities” was sharply reduced, their output confined to the elegies and occasional verse typical of the country poet (Charnell-White, Welsh Poetry, p. 415). The “creeping Anglicization” of the overwhelmingly dominant Anglican state church was another key factor (Jenkins, “The Rural Voltaire” in Constantine, Johnston, Footsteps, p. 154). A rapidly expanding metropolitan print culture further encouraged writers to operate bilingually, if not entirely in English.

As the sense of “a culture in crisis” developed from the early eighteenth century, and particularly from the 1770s, a considerable effort was nevertheless made to preserve and revitalise the Welsh language (Charnell-White, “Networking the Nation,” p. 154). In addition to informal gatherings, local eisteddfodau were organized at which poets might gather for adjudicated competition, as well as mutual support, to re-define the conventions of traditional bardic poetry, employing rhyming couplets and both strict and free-metre verse. In effect, a medieval institution and the bardic networks associated with it were revived and underwent a process of “modernization” necessary to re-cast “a surviving manuscript culture” and stimulate the emergence of a print culture, as well as a sense of cultural nationalism employing the indigenous language (Löffler, Press and Public Discourse, p.1). The adoption by participants—usually artisans and farmers with a leavening of teachers and clergymen—of bardic pseudonyms (usually related to place of origin) was indicative of a sense of identity which transcended social, religious and political divisions.

The role of the London Welsh in this process has frequently been stressed. Such eminent expatriates as the dissenters Dr. Richard Price and David Williams and the naval surgeon David Samwell, a witness to the death of Captain Cook, had roles to play but were arguably “more London than Welsh” (Heather Williams, “Rousseau and Wales,” in Footsteps, p. 38). Price certainly revealed little interest in Wales or Welshness, although he remained in very close touch with his kin in South Wales. More significant in the Welsh context was the development of “a network structure” (Charnell-White, “Networking,” p. 145) linking professional men, clerks and artisans, and members of the Gwyneddigion (1771)and Cymmrodorion (1751) societies with bardic circles in Wales and thus serving as “a displaced public sphere” (Edwards, English Language Poetry from Wales, p. 9). The geographical isolation which so impressed travellers to Wales did not prevent those prepared to travel long distances on foot, on horseback, by coach or cart from widening their horizons. Postal delivery of letters and printed materials was another possibility. So too was the irregular publication of almanacs, the only Welsh serial publication before the nineteenth century, passed from hand to hand at social gatherings. Members of the London societies also patronized eisteddfodau in Wales and contributed substantially to the recovery and publication of medieval Welsh poetry, including the bloody ninth-century saga of Llywarch Hen and the brilliantly evocative fourteenth century love poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym, to which might be added the brilliant forgeries penned by “the visionary but deeply unreliable” stonemason Edward Williams (bardic name Iolo Morganwg) (Edwards, English Language Poetry from Wales, p. 4).
The situation was to be transformed further by the French Revolution, “the era’s crucial event and key literary subject.”[3] As Catherine Charnell-White points out, echoing Keith Baker, traditional forms of social action would “acquire different meanings in new contexts or when the political situation [was] redefined”(Welsh Poetry, pp. 29-30). Repeated popular protest was already a sign of the times in an under-developed country with only small towns and a low capacity transport network, in which the already miserable living conditions and sense of insecurity of a largely peasant population were constantly threatened by harvest failure and hunger. The satirical ballads of Thomas Edwards (Twm o'r nant) attacking landowners, lawyers, land agents and the clergy, reflected resentment of absentee, arrogant, and avaricious landlords. The growing strength of disaffection within the state church as well as dissent from Baptists and Quakers, Methodists and Unitarians, engendered a religious ferment and particularly close links in Wales between religion and politics. Although the 1689 Act of Toleration no longer required attendance at Anglican services, the payment of tithes and church rates remained compulsory and much resented by both religious dissenters and an impoverished peasantry.

The ideas, aspirations and fears of political radicals had previously been very much shaped within an Atlantic forum. Close contacts, for example, remained between Welsh-American dissenters, many of whom had been involved in the American War of Independence, and those who remained in Wales. Now, Revolution in France and the ideals of peace and harmony affirmed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man in August 1789 ensured that the legitimacy of Britain’s own ancien régime would be questioned. Numerous groups were founded to celebrate the new found liberty of the French, to exchange fraternal greetings, and press for the extension of the liberties of the British people. Dr. Richard Price was well known for his support for the American cause. Informed by Thomas Jefferson and his nephew George Cadogan Morgan, who passed through Paris on his travels, Price wrote a letter two weeks before the fall of the Bastille to the Comte de Mirabeau, a leading figure in the recently convened Estates General, welcoming the bloodless revolution. He hoped that it would “extend itself to surrounding nations,” overcome “the obstacles to human improvement and make the world free, virtuous and happy” (quoted by P. Frame, G. Powell, “Our First Concern as Lovers of our Country,” in Footsteps, p. 54). In a sermon delivered on 4 November 1789, Price linked events in France to both the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in Britain and to the American revolution of 1776. “Tremble all ye oppressors of the world!” he warned (Ibid. p. 56) while demanding constant vigilance against injustice and exploitation through the mechanisms of representative government, inspired by reason, universal benevolence and the Gospels. This set the tone for much of the subsequent debate on religious and political reform in Britain.

As Marion Löfler insists, to a substantial degree, the ideas of the French revolution were received in Wales by indirect means (Press and Public Discourse, “Introduction”). Much of the material appearing in the three infrequently published Welsh language periodicals would translate (often without attribution), adapt or else reflect on a primarily London-based discourse as copies of English provincial and metropolitan newspapers and of journals like the Gentleman’s Review passed from hand to hand. Translations of the Marseillaise, both from the French original and via English, were sung with great enthusiasm in many informal gatherings and were adapted to local circumstances with the “bloodthirsty” chauvinism of the original toned down (Constantine, Johnson, Footsteps, p. 7). Nevertheless, one anonymous translator (known only by the pseudonym Gwilym) of the “Song of Liberty” (Cân Rhyddid) enthusiastically celebrated the fact that “FOR YOU sons of Liberty the time has come” (Löfler, Press, p. 277). The widely circulated works of Tom Paine, himself indebted to Richard Price, influenced the pamphlets and poems of the likes of John Jones (Jac Glan-y-Gors) in condemning hereditary monarchy, together with the corrupt aristocracy and clergy who oppressed the British people. Those works also influenced the Unitarian weaver Thomas Evans (Toms Glyn Cothi) in his criticisms of a “cruel and tyrannical government” (Edwards, Poetry from Wales, p. 26) and Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg), whose song to the tune of “God Save the King” invoked the rights of man. In 1790, the Gwyneddigion Society set “Liberty” (Rhyddid) as the subject for the poetry competition at the Saint Asaph eisteddfod. The medals for prize winners featured the head of Liberty wearing a Phrygian cap and were engraved in Welsh with the motto “Right is mightier than Tyranny.”
Poets who welcomed the dawn of freedom often employed an evocative and familiar biblical discourse inspired by the feeling that the world was being turned upside down. Familiarity with the works, or at least the language, of Voltaire, as well as of Richard Price, offered further encouragement. A Protestant intellectual framework was also employed. The short-lived Welsh language periodical *Cylch-grawn Gymraeg* was illustrative of a pronounced eschatological explanation of events representing the Revolution as “God’s retributive justice for Capet’s bloody persecution of the Protestants and for their vicious abuse of power” (Morgan John Rhys quoted by Löffler, *Press and Public Discourse*, p. 43). Religious dissenters and popular balladeers alike were inspired by the Book of Revelation and a millenarian belief that the fall of the Bastille marked the immanence of Christ’s Second Coming, as well as heralding the demise of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church they identified with the Anti-Christ.

Enthusiasm for the Revolution declined, however, in response to widely circulated conservative contributions to an increasingly intense ideological debate, as well as to news of the radicalisation of the Revolution in France, the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and the outbreak of war in February 1793, events which lent considerable weight to the warnings previously issued by Edmund Burke. His response to the publication of Richard Price’s *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* in November 1790, the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, presented an impassioned and ferocious defence of monarchy and the established social order. Burke insisted that established institutions and the accumulated wisdom of the generations could not be overthrown without dangerous and probably catastrophic consequences. Drawing on the precedent of the English Civil War, he predicted that the Revolution would unleash violence and war, and probably culminate in the establishment of a military dictatorship.

The pamphlets written in response, including Paine’s *Rights of Man* and Mary Wollstonecroft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, represented further stages in the radicalisation of political discourse. Social fear intensified. In Wales, even before the onset of the Terror in France, conservative contributors to the Saint Asaph *eisteddfod* like Walter Davies and David Thomas were expressing a preference for the “true liberty” established by the “Glorious Revolution” in 1688 (Charnell-White, *Welsh Poetry*, pp. 12-3). Davies (Gwallter Mechain), a former apprentice cooper whose literary efforts gained him entry into Cambridge and preferment as an Anglican clergyman, perceived the French Republic to be a threat to the God-given institution of monarchy as well as to the Protestant religion. Thomas was similarly encouraged to write “An exhortation to obey the government; advice to content oneself; warnings against harbouring false principles and anarchist thoughts; caution against violent and unruly acts” (*Ibid.*, p.18). In similar vein the London draper’s assistant Edward Charles (Siamas Wynnedd) used the traditional format of the *englynion* to defend in 1794 the trial for treason of members of the London Corresponding Society, describing the accused as “wicked,” “false,” “vain,” “vipers,” and concluding that “in Hell you may burn for all eternity with the dark Devil” (*Ibid.*, pp. 233-5). From a more elevated social position, Hester Piozzi, writing in English in such pamphlets as “Three Warnings to John Bull,” called for unity in defense of the government and national church, and of good manners (John Mee, “*A Good Cambrian-Briton*,” in *Footsteps*, p. 213).

War further stimulated this powerful current of loyalism. Initially the Revolution had inspired hope of an end to the centuries old struggle between Britain and France, and of a serious weakening of the old enemy. In a speech to the House of Commons in February 1792, Prime Minister Pitt expressed his belief that fifteen years of peace could be expected. Instead, from 1793 the glorification of war and affirmation of a belief in final victory, together with the labelling of even the most moderate reformers as Jacobins, and a determination to defend family and home against the depredations of the French, served as the central elements in the development of a British patriotism. Moreover, the immediacy of the French threat was brought home to the Welsh by the landing in February 1797 of a small and poorly organised French force near Fishguard on the west coast. This had originally been planned as a raid on Bristol, and as a diversion in support of a major landing in Ireland. The troops involved, demoralised by the lack of local support, rapidly surrendered, but not without causing widespread local fear and arousing concern in London about the efficiency of the navy and the government’s ability to control some of the remote regions of Britain. In May, a serious naval mutiny greatly exacerbated the sense of panic. Robert Morris (Robin Ddu Ystudwy) thanked God
for the storms with which, in December 1796, He had prevented a French landing in Bantry Bay in Ireland (Charnell-White, *Welsh Poetry*, p. 446).

The contrasts drawn by Piozzi between the patriotic Welsh, boldly resisting the French at Fishguard, and the Catholic and disloyal Irish, were well received in the London press. The ferocious contribution of Welsh militia to the suppression of the Irish rebellion in 1798 would be celebrated in song as further proof of the British patriotism of the “ancient Britons” (Hywel Davies, “Terror, Treason and Tourism,” in *Footsteps*, pp. 258-62). The popular Welsh language almanacs adopted a similar tone, taking pride, as did Mathew William, in addressing “the Welsh” (*T Cymru*) to recommend payment of the taxes needed to defend “Our Liberty, our Possessions, our Laws, and our Lives” against the godless French (Löffler, p. 6). An appeal was also made to the past. Paradoxically, in fulfilling their traditional role as the “nation’s rememberers,” (Charnell-White, *Poetry*, p. 45) the authors of war poetry written in Welsh, as well as commemorating the heroism of Welsh archers in battles against the French during the Hundred Years War, often drew for inspiration on medieval texts alluding to struggles against the English. Richard Llwyd described the mountains of Snowdonia as the last bastion of Welsh liberty, and the ruined medieval castles constructed as part of the campaign to subdue its defenders, as the picturesque reminders of oppression by Edward I’s “callous steel-clad crew” (Edwards, *Poetry from Wales*, pp.14, 29). Thomas Gray’s poem “The Bard” (1757) remained popular. It drew on the mythical slaughter of 500 bards by Edward as a means of diminishing resistance to conquest, and attracted the interest of Welsh antiquarians as well as of poets like Iolo Morganwg. “The massacre of the Welsh bards” was even adopted as the theme for the poetry prize at the Denbigh *eisteddfod*, and would be taken up, incidentally, by the Hungarian poet Arany János in his epic poem “The Bards of Wales” written to protest the first visit of the Austrian Emperor Franz-Josef to Hungary after the crushing of the nationalist revolution in 1848/49. Still regarded as inspirational, it remains part of the Hungarian national curriculum and was recently set to music by the Welsh composer Karl Jenkins.\[4\]

Further proof of the strength of loyalist sentiments was offered by participants in the *eisteddfodau* patronised by the London Welsh which increasingly interpreted “liberty” in a conservative sense, and particularly by the rapid spread throughout Britain, from 1792, of Loyalist associations through which respectable citizens could ritually affirm their loyalty to the crown. The distribution of propaganda in the form of pamphlets and prints, and in the press, occurred on a vast scale, funded through patriotic contributions and by enterprising printers. The mass arming of a conscripted militia and formation of volunteer regiments, particularly in threatened coastal areas, as well as commercial and industrial centres like Merthyr in South Wales, further contributed to the militarization of society.

Following the brief interlude of peace in 1802, this loyalist propaganda focused almost exclusively on Napoleon and the military threat to British liberties. In 1804, Robert Holland Price published a long poem warning about “The Horrors of Invasion” (Edwards, *English Language Poetry*, p. 38). While generally offering a particular perspective, Welsh writers were influenced by the outpouring of propagandistic literature across an uncertain border, as well as by the works of such eminent poets as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, Blake and the Shelleys, or the painter Turner. All of these writers were attracted, as were many others, by the proximity of Wales and its attraction as a substitute for the traditional Grand Tour in time of war. The country’s sublime landscape, as well as the “provincial barbarity” represented by the incomprehensible language of its people, ensured that English tourists simultaneously felt that they were “at home” and travellers in a foreign land (Edwards, *Poetry from Wales*, p. 8). Accounts of their travels are invariably replete with condescending colonial accounts of the natives.

Repression combined with loyalism to represent a powerful response to the threats—exaggerated but nonetheless real—posed by French-inspired subversion and the threat of invasion. It was intensified by the widespread protests by the “rabble” against high food prices, taxation, and military service, which constituted the “desolating impact of twenty-two years of war” (Edwards, “The voices of war,” in Constantine, Johnson, *Footsteps*, p. 276). For the loyalist poet and hymn writer John Thomas (Eos Gwynedd), this suffering represented divine punishment for the sins of the nation.
(Charnell-White, Welsh Poetry, pp. 411-3). Richard Llwyd’s graphic descriptions of the adventures and suffering of a young seaman from Anglesey in the epic poem “Owen of Llangoed” exemplify, however, a widespread sense of anger and sorrow (Edwards, Poetry from Wales, pp. 1-3). In “Winter Incidents”, Iolo Morganwg invoked “the terror of a wintry sky” to represent the mindless horror of war, while in an “Ode on Converting a Sword into a Pruning Hook,” he contrasted “detestable war” with an idyll of rural harmony (Edwards, p. 42).

Confrontation became all the more likely as the authorities instructed magistrates and police spies to intensify their surveillance of suspected subversives, suspended habeas corpus, and legislated against seditious organizations and literature. Together with the informal authority exercised by social elites anxious to combat popular protest and workers combinations as well as political subversion, these efforts fragmented political organization and drove Jacobinism underground. Although the relative obscurity of the Welsh language served as a means of concealment, censorship nevertheless encouraged wider self-censorship. Not surprisingly, the Unitarian minister Thomas Evans (Tomas Glyn Cothi) would be imprisoned in 1803 for publishing a “Song of Liberty” in which he denounced “Vile George” and appeared to welcome “the thundering sons of France” (Jenkins, “The rural Voltaire,” pp. 180-1). As Elizabeth Edwards points out, “dangerous times” promoted hesitancy, and the result was a “lost generation” of radicals (Poetry from Wales, pp. 24, 27). Undoubtedly, dissidents like Iolo Morganwg were scared off. His initial resolve rapidly weakened, and Iolo felt obliged to write poems in praise of the heroic Nelson and the volunteers.

As a result, allusion, satire, and oral presentation rather than publication became more common. Political radicalism in Wales failed to develop as an organised movement. Marion Löffler describes it as “a fragile web of like-minded men who dared oppose the hegemony of the landowner, state and church” (“The Marseillaise in Wales,” in Footsteps, p. 98). The sentiment of Welshness was clearly outweighed by a sense of British nationalism, just as radicalism was overwhelmed by counter-revolutionary emotion. In spite of widespread distress, loyalty remained the dominant emotion in political discourse. Among the many disappointed religious and political dissenters and those desperate to escape from poverty, America already represented the Promised Land. Drawing for sustenance on the example of Prince Madoc, the mythical founder of a Welsh colony in 1170, Iolo looked forward to emigration as a means of securing liberty and escaping from English efforts to eradicate the Welsh language and culture (Edwards, “The voices of war,” p. 279).

The Welsh emerged from the long crisis with little sense of political nationalism. In addition to a strengthened sense of Britishness, in the longer term, religious and political radicalism would re-emerge, most notably in the shape of Chartism in the 1840s. The Welsh language remained a mark of distinctiveness. In the following century, however, and particularly in the rapidly developing industrial areas with their high levels of in-migration, its hold was to be seriously weakened. English came to be seen by the authorities, and by many parents, as indispensable to personal and collective progress, as well as to the civilizing, imperial mission. The official report on education in Wales published in 1847, still bitterly referred to as “the treason of the blue books” (brad y llyfrau gleision), blamed the Welsh language for what was perceived by its English authors to be the backwardness and immorality of the population. In spite of the development of English as a universal language, it is worth noting that, in the words of the folk singer and nationalist politician Dafydd Iwan (1981), “Despite everything and everyone” (Er gwaetha pawb a phopeth), we’re “Still Here” (Tma O Hyd). Understanding the impact of the French Revolution contributes to our understanding of both linguistic decline and survival.

The history of Wales and the French Revolution remains to be written. Nevertheless, the volumes reviewed represent a substantial contribution towards that goal. They provide much of the raw material and a great deal of effective, well written analysis. If I have a complaint, it concerns the over-dominance of literature specialists within what could have been a more genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise. The range of questions asked as well as the documentation discovered and the answers suggested might well have been enlarged. That should not, however, detract from my sense of wonderment at what has been achieved.
LIST OF ESSAYS in Constantine, Johnson, eds., Footsteps of Liberty and Revolt

M-A. Constantine and D. Johnson, “Introduction: Writing the Revolution in Wales”

C. Franklin, “Wales as Nowhere: the tabula rasa of the ‘Jacobin imagination’”

H. Williams, “Rousseau and Wales”

P. Frame and G. Powell, “Our first concern as lovers of our country must be to enlighten it’: Richard Price’s response to the French Revolution”

M-A. Constantine, “The Welsh in Revolutionary Paris”

M. Löffler, “The Marseillaise in Wales”

G. Jenkins, “The Rural Voltaire and the French madcaps”

C. Charnell-White, “Networking the nation: the bardic and correspondence networks of Wales and London in the 1790s”

D. Johnston, “Radical adaptation: translations of medieval Welsh poetry in the 1790s”

F. M. Jones, “‘Brave Republicans: representing the Revolution in a Welsh interlude”

J. Mee, “‘A good Cambrio-Briton’: Hester Thrale Piozzi, Helen Maria Williams and the Welsh sublime in the 1790s”

M. Pittock, “What is a national Gothic?”

H. M. Davies, “Terror, treason and tourism: the French in Pembrokeshire 1797”

E. Edwards, “The voices of war: poetry from Wales 1794-1804”


NOTES

[1] Previous and very productive research programs have included “The Social History of the Welsh Language; ‘The Visual Culture of Wales’” and “Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales, 1740-1918.”


[5] This does not represent a personal complaint. The author of this review is after all a specialist in the history of France!