

WALES SINCE THE WAR

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OF all the developments that have taken place in Wales since the end of the war, perhaps those most vital to the life of the nation are the efforts now being made to preserve and extend the use of the Welsh language. Until recent years it was taken for granted that the language was such an integral part of the average Welshman's being as never to be in serious danger, and this in spite of the early defection of whole counties like Radnor and Monmouth and of parts of several others. Now, however, with the immigration which started with the war we find people of English and other nationalities settled not only in the towns and villages but even in farms and homesteads in the remotest parts of the country. In my own village, for example, fifty per cent of the children attending the village school are of English parentage and many of the farms in the valley have been bought by English people. In former days such immigrants were rapidly absorbed into the native population and soon became Welsh both in speech and outlook. Occasionally that still happens, but the trickle of immigration has become a flood and the process of absorption is in danger of being put into reverse. Added to this, there is the influence of television, the wireless, English newspapers and magazines and, by no means least, the increase of rapid transport to cities and resorts, most of which have long been anglicized. The wonder is that Welsh culture and what is known as the 'Welsh way of life' survives at all under such extreme pressure; but it does survive, even in the most anglicized towns and cities, consciously and actively.

In many towns the Welsh parents have banded themselves together to oblige the local education authority to open special Welsh schools where their children shall be instructed solely through the medium of Welsh. At present there are forty-five such Welsh schools in the country having between them more than 3,500 pupils and their number is increasing. The initiative for this movement came first from Sir Ifan ab Owen Edwards, founder of the *Urdd Gobaith Cymru* (Welsh League of Youth) who, some years before the war, opened an all-Welsh school at Aberystwyth which had a remarkable success. The initiative now comes from groups of parents in areas hemmed in by the

tide of English who might well have been tempted to despair. They must have heard it said often enough that there is no future in the Welsh language for children who want to get on in the world, yet they defy material considerations for motives that can only have their roots in the things of the spirit. For this reason Catholics should salute them: it is doubtful if they themselves always attach as much weight as this to the imponderables.

The fact is that the language of a people is not just a convenient vehicle of expression; rather, it enshrines the very personality of a nation and the nation that loses its language finally loses its personality. That is why Mr De Valera once declared that he would rather see Ireland Irish-speaking than Ireland free and the language lost. That the position of the language in Wales today is critical there is no denying. In spite of the continued vigour of the literary and cultural side of Welsh life, there has been a marked decline since the 1931 census in the numbers speaking Welsh and chiefly amongst the younger age-groups. For this decline the schools have been in very great measure responsible, for few education authorities hitherto have taken sufficiently seriously their duty to foster and safeguard the language. Even if there is to be a recovery it will probably not be reflected in the figures of the next census which are likely to show an even greater decline in the number of those speaking Welsh.

At present the Welsh language is spoken by close on a million people, counting those who have left Wales to find a living in the towns and cities of England, and over the greater part of the total area of Wales itself Welsh is still the ordinary speech of the inhabitants. In spite, therefore, of a decline which cannot be minimized, the Welsh language cannot be called moribund, yet it faces a much greater crisis than any it has met in the past. Hitherto, it survived naturally and inevitably through its own interior vigour and, more specially, as the vehicle of the religious impulses of the great Revival two hundred years ago. A fresh impulse seems needed to take their place, but from what quarter can it come? Not as yet from Catholicism which still remains very much on the perimeter of Welsh life. Catholics are tempted to feel impatient about this, but without justification. The Welsh people are closely knit; they form not merely a nation but a family group and the very word they use to describe themselves, *Y Cymry*, means the 'kindred'. Their institutions, more particularly

the Chapel and the Eisteddfod, are an extension of the hearth. It is as an intruder upon that hearth, not knowing its language nor fully appreciating its intimacy, that the Church still too often appears to them. Yet the Welsh people still remember that the Christian faith is the foundation of this nationhood, and indeed it is for that reason they survive.

Though since the war Wales has lost two of its leading poets and men of letters in T. Gwynn Jones and W. J. Gruffydd, literary life is still vigorous. The publication of a new volume of T. H. Parry-Williams' poems and critics like Bobi Jones and Waldo Williams have continued to break fresh ground. Perhaps we could call the publication of David Jones' *Anthemata* a Welsh occasion also, but here we are on delicate ground. Most people would hesitate to call Vaughan or Herbert or Traherne Welsh poets, or to claim that W. H. Davies and Arthur Machen were Welsh authors, though doubtless they all owe much that is distinctive in their work to their Celtic temperament and background. The question of the 'Anglo-Welsh' school of authors is another matter. By and large, their claims to interpret the Welsh temperament and the mental climate of Wales—more especially of anglicized Wales, is certainly open to question. All of them are Romantics of a kind and we should, for example, no more accept Dylan Thomas' splendid verbal romps as interpreting Welsh life than we do Synge's Playboy as representing the way of life and speech of the west of Ireland peasantry. The fact is that as long as the Welsh language endures as the vehicle of a living culture, so long will Welsh literature connote simply and solely literature *in Welsh*.

In the field of Drama Wales is hampered in that the towns and cities which might support a professional theatre are so largely anglicized and anything but centrally placed. The work of the theatre has therefore had to be sustained by amateur companies. The biennial drama festival at the private theatre at Garthwin¹ and that initiated at Llangefni last year (both under the auspices of the Arts Council), together with the drama performances at the National Eisteddfod, have introduced Welsh audiences to many of the classics in translation, including the plays of Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, Camus and T. S. Eliot. The years since the war have also witnessed a series of first productions by the Garthwin Theatre Company of the plays of Saunders

¹ Cf. 'Garthwin', by Illtud Evans, O.F. in BLACKFRIARS, October, 1954.

Lewis, whilst noteworthy productions by other companies have included the verse plays of H. C. Fisher (an Englishman who writes ably in Welsh) and *Y Gwr Llonydd* ("The Quiet Man"), an experimental play by John Gwilym Jones.

The National Eisteddfod of Wales as an institution of a great many years' standing does not come within the scope of this article, though it may be noted that since the war it has greatly widened the range of its activities in such fields as the drama, choral verse-speaking and Welsh folk-dancing. It also provides an increasingly wide forum for literary debate which has rapidly become popular. But the most notable popular event to have taken place in Wales since the war has undoubtedly been the International Eisteddfod at Llangollen, now in its sixth year. There are some who deny that the International Eisteddfod benefits the cultural life of Welsh Wales, but that would seem to be looking at the question of national culture from altogether too narrow an angle. Nothing but good can be gained from enjoying the achievements of other countries in music and dance, and already it is clear that the recent revival of Welsh folk-dancing owes much to the inspiration to be found at Llangollen. Perhaps it is not so much in the huge canvas pavilion of the Eisteddfod that the chief enjoyment of the Festival is to be found as in the care-free crowds and the gay groups in national costume which throng the streets and surge to and fro across the old bridge between town and tent. And at night, when all is over at the pavilion, hotels and club-rooms echo with the songs and music of many lands and cheerful greetings are exchanged in as many tongues. It is a far cry from the informal spirit of Llangollen to the civic dignity and dress occasions of the Edinburgh Festival, but many of those who have experienced both prefer the former. The International Eisteddfod *could* have been organized elsewhere in Britain than in Wales, but somehow one cannot imagine it would ever have been quite the same. That a small town of some three thousand inhabitants manages to cope with this enormous yearly influx is a miracle of organization and, as its visitors testify, of hospitality and good-will.

A brief glance at the political scene may perhaps conclude and indeed comment on this very general survey. In the last general election Wales reached the final stage of its transition from being a Liberal to a Labour stronghold. At about the same time the

British Labour Party shed the last remnants of the idealism which had caused so many of its adherents in earlier days to advocate self-government for Wales as for Scotland. To palliate Welsh feelings on this matter the Labour Government had set up a National Council for Wales having only advisory powers. Going one better, the Conservatives on their return to power appointed a Minister for Welsh Affairs in the person of the Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe, who took this new office seriously and won for himself considerable respect and no little regard. In the meantime a national petition was organized on an all-party basis and is now under way to make known the desire of the Welsh people for a Parliament for Wales, albeit one endowed with only limited powers. The returns so far obtained have shown a high proportion of people in support of the petition: as much as 75 per cent even in the most anglicized areas and a much higher proportion elsewhere. The Labour Party have meanwhile censured those of their M.P.s supporting the petition but these (only about five in number) have so far resisted this pressure and one or two other prominent Socialists and Trade Union leaders have taken a similarly determined and independent line. Not so, however, the great majority of Welsh Labour M.P.s and union officials who, indeed, are proving themselves the toughest opponents of even the mildest form of devolution and whose philosophy in this respect consists of the open disavowal of former Socialist ideals. What the upshot will be it is yet too early to say. In such a situation one would suppose that the Welsh Liberals would play their cards boldly in favour of a measure of Welsh self-government: it would be the one sure way for them to regain a considerable measure of support—at least in rural Wales. But the Welsh Liberals' support for devolution has all the appearance of being an after-thought—a mere attempt to climb on to the Nationalists' band-waggon. In this predicament it is clear that the Welsh Party (as the Welsh Nationalist Party is now called) holds not a few of the cards. Though its voting strength is still small it has set the pace during the past ten years, compelling other parties and groups to think and act 'nationally' in spite of themselves, whilst at the same time receiving a steady accession to its own ranks.² The process is slow, it is highly distasteful to many, but it continues.

² It is to be noted that at the Wrexham by-election in March the Welsh Nationalist Candidate trebled his vote, though he still lost his deposit.