

Emeritus Professor Prys T.J. Morgan in conversation with Richard Glyn Roberts

Significant features:

- Recent research into Welsh history:
- Gaps in the research into Welsh history;
- A Promising future therefore for Welsh history?

And turning to recent research into Welsh history, which new areas of research lend themselves to young historians? Where are the major gaps?

Well, one of the biggest gaps, and I could see that when I edited the county history of Gwent, is the history of the population of Wales before 1801. I don't know in fact how historians can work on this area but that is one of the major *desiderata*. David Williams believed that and he sought to write a note on the population of Wales many, many years ago, and Leonard Owen likewise.¹ It is such a difficult area but it is one of the things we need most. What were the changes in the history of the population of Wales? My cousin Nia Watkin Powell is attempting to analyse the history of Welsh towns etc., but it is very complex and technical work.² One of the other things I would like to see is more being written about the history of establishments. There are several societies in Wales and there is a need not only for the history of the individual societies, but also for the history of the growth of establishments as such in Wales. I have worked to some extent on that but I cannot carry out the work required, a younger person is needed to carry out such work on establishments. The history of the *élites* in Wales is associated with establishments and I began to notice that and did some work in this area when I wrote a chapter in memory of Glanmor Williams in *Degrees of Influence*.³ I don't know if you're familiar with the volume *Degrees of Influence* but I wrote a chapter about Glanmor as a member of the *Welsh Establishment* between the 1960s and the 1990s or the beginning of the twenty



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first century. At the beginning of the chapter I talk about Glanmor himself and all the committees and commissions etc. of which he was a member. By the second half of the chapter I show that Glanmor had been influenced by people such as Henry Lewis, Alun Oldfield Davies and Sir Grismond Philipps, people who were completely different from one another and Grismond quite surprising in a way, being a die-hard Tory and a country squire from Carmarthenshire. And later, I draw comparisons between Glanmor and all manner of public figures such as Sir Wynn

¹ David Williams, 'A note on the population of Wales, 1536–1801', *Bwletin Bwrdd y Gwybodau Celtaidd* 8 (1935–7), 359–63; Leonard Owen, 'The population of Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1959), 99–113.

² Nia M. W. Powell, 'Do numbers count?: towns in early modern Wales', *Urban History* 32 (2005), 46–67; idem, 'Urban population in early modern Wales revisited', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru* 23:3 (2007), 1–43.

³ Prys Morgan, 'Some sort of public machine': The Public Servant', in Geraint H. Jenkins & Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds.), *Degrees of Influence[.] A Memorial Volume for Glanmor Williams* (Cardiff, 2008), pp. 164–81.

Wheldon etc. There are a hundred or so of them who are on every committee in Wales. They are Deputy Lieutenants for the County, they govern the Forestry Commission, they are members of the Festival of Britain's Committee for Wales, W.I. Committee for Wales, Girl Guides for Wales, they're on the Urdd committees and the Eisteddfod committees, etc. They are more or less the same individuals, and there are about a hundred of them at any time. Llew Haycock, say, in Glamorgan and Sir Wynn Wheldon in Bangor and Huw T. Edwards. Gwyn Jenkins has published a book on the latter as the unofficial Welsh prime minister.⁴ Glan belonged to that group and I went out of my way to emphasise this in the chapter hoping to attract a young historian to do a PhD on the history of the Welsh establishment in the twentieth century.

Or the previous century?

Well yes, the previous century also of course. Well, John Gwynfor Jones has done some fine work on the Welsh aristocracy between 1530 and 1642; and David Howell on the aristocrats of the eighteenth century; and Melvin Humphreys as well on the aristocrats of that period.⁵ That is another thing that struck me while I was writing about the beginnings of the Museum, and subsequently the opening chapter I wrote on the Davies Sisters of Gregynog to celebrate the centenary of the National Museum.⁶ Who were the two Davies sisters, how were they related to John Jones of Tal-y-Sarn and how were all these people, people such as T. E. Ellis, J. H. Davies and Herbert Lewis somehow related to John Jones of Tal-y-Sarn and the Methodist *élite*; it was either because they were Methodists, or were friends of these Methodists. And they were the ones behind so many of Wales' 'Young Wales' (*Cymry Fydd*) type of establishments, such as the Library and the Museum. And the two Misses Davies then made their own contribution by donating art to the Museum and establishing all kinds of other things. This *élite* was different from earlier *élites* in Wales because they felt some sort of patriotism, and they had had their fill of denominations and wanted to go beyond that. Their fathers' and grandfathers' generation were content to some extent with being figures within Methodism or within Congregationalism or within the Baptist denomination etc., but by 1890 the rising generation saw beyond the religious denominations.

And saw themselves as national figures

They saw an entire nation. And therefore, I was emphasising this to some extent, in the chapter about the two Misses Davies, in order to capture the attention or persuade a young historian – without any success so far – to delve into the history of these various *élites*. Matthew Cragoe has done similar work in English on Carmarthenshire and also in a second volume, but by now I'm not sure how much genuine interest Matthew has in the history of Wales, he's moved on to English history.⁷ But I consider that as one of the major gaps in our knowledge of Welsh history, the fact that no one has studied the Welsh Establishment and the various *élites* found in Wales.

Would you feel rather uncomfortable because you yourself would probably be one of the players in that history?

No, I wouldn't feel uncomfortable at all. I believe I am a perfect example of the sort of people we're talking about, you know.

The second generation?

Yes, the second generation and all the relatives, people like my cousin Dewi Watkin Powell, my brother of course and even people like William Wilkins, founder of the National Garden, he is distantly related to me. I certainly believe that the history of the *élites* in Wales is a *desideratum*. But I am glad to be able to say that I spoke three days ago with Richard Griffiths, an example for you of a historian coming from a French Department – he was a Professor of French at King's College, London. Richard, who comes from Barry is a descendant of several capitalist families from the Valleys and he is about to publish a book on the industrial *élite* in Glamorgan, people like his own ancestors, the Mathias family, etc. And, you know, I remember discussing Merfyn's excellent book about the Quarrymen,⁸ with Rhodri and we both came to the conclusion that it was very important for us to consider the development of trade unionism but that the picture will not be complete until we have discussed the attitude of Lord Penrhyn, the Ashton-Smiths and the Oakleys – the capitalists in Gwynedd – towards the quarries. They were the ones who caused the trouble, not the workers, so the capitalists should be studied as well as the unions. And I hope that

⁴ Gwyn Jenkins, *Prif weinidog answyddogol Cymru: cofiant Huw T. Edwards* (Talybont, 2007).

⁵ John Gwynfor Jones, *The Welsh Gentry 1536–1640: images of status, honour and authority* (Cardiff, 1998); idem, *Beirdd yr Uchelwyr a'r Gymdeithas yng Nghymru, c. 1536–1640* (Denbigh, 1997); idem, *Concepts of order and gentility in Wales, 1540–1640* (Llandysul, 1992); David Howell, *Patriarchs and Parasites: The Gentry of South-West Wales in the Eighteenth Century* (Cardiff, 1986); Melvin Humphreys, *The crisis of community: Montgomeryshire, 1680–1815* (Cardiff, 1996).

⁶ Prys Morgan, 'Cyflwyniad: byd y teulu Davies' in Oliver Fairclough (ed.), *Cyfoeth, Celf a Chydwylbod[:] Llafur Cariad Chwirydd Gregynog* (Cardiff, 2007), 16–24.

⁷ Matthew Cragoe, *An Anglican Aristocracy: The Moral Economy of the Landed Estate in Carmarthenshire, 1832–1895* (Oxford, 1996); idem, *Culture, politics and national identity in Wales 1832–1886* (Oxford, 2004).

⁸ R. Merfyn Jones, *The North Wales Quarrymen 1874–1922* (Cardiff, 1982).

Richard Griffiths' volume will motivate others to carry out more of the same kind of work. L. J. Williams,⁹ for example has one or two chapters on the owners but there is not much written about these people as an *élite* who intermarried.

Would it be fair to say that, traditionally, historians have been less analytical when discussing the nobility and that they have been charmed to some extent by the subject?

Well yes. There is a tendency for us to be genealogical and antiquarian again you know. Of course the subject itself is a very picturesque subject because they live in large, fine houses, and their portraits are striking, and their tombstones in the churches are very beautiful. And historians tend to talk about the marriages, as Francis Jones used to do, but, even so, he managed to do it in a very interesting way.¹⁰ But one could argue to the contrary, that the entire Left tradition in Wales was militating against discussing the landowning aristocrats or the capitalist aristocrats.

The correspondence would be a veritable mine of information to a researcher, and a study of a selection of that correspondence would be revealing.

Yes indeed. You know, I have an enormous suitcase upstairs in the attic – I am about to donate it to the National Library – and it is filled with hundreds and hundreds of letters to my father between the 1920s and 1980s from people like T. H. Parry-Williams, Ifor Williams, Henry Lewis, Saunders Lewis, Thomas Jones, Kenneth Jackson and so forth. And it is obvious that a whole circle of people like Ifor, W. J. Gruffydd and Griffith John Williams, used to correspond regularly with each other, in minuscule handwriting, and, very often on very small scraps of paper. They would write to one another on Celtic matters, The Board of Celtic Studies, *Y Llenor* or on books, etc. The only part of the correspondence that has been published are the letters of Saunders Lewis and Kate Roberts, and this of course due to the great interest in Saunders.¹¹ Saunders possesses some sort of star quality, which is lacking in the others. But there are hundreds of letters in this large suitcase that is on its way to the National Library and I'm certain that that was my father's intention, although he didn't mention anything, but he had kept everything carefully in their envelopes so that we had the dates. And I feel it is time for someone to tackle this material, someone like Simon Brooks – another example of a historian in a Welsh Department.¹² Perhaps someone like that should write about these

scholars who used to correspond with each other in the period before the telephone. I'm sure that there are hundreds of letters from Thomas Parry and their tenor would be completely different from everyone else's. Thomas Parry could be so scathing and reproachful compared to the letters of, say, T. H. Parry-Williams, which were so heedful of everything he said, and so diffident. Welsh historians have not dealt with these circles of friends as has been done in England. There, for example, they refer to the Bloomsbury Group and plenty has been written about the friends of Evelyn Waugh and Virginia Woolf and there are ample examples of this in France also with Balzac's friends, etc. And then we have Noel Annan who has written rather flippantly and light-heartedly about the English intelligentsia.¹³ He was at death's door when he wrote *The Dons* therefore he wasn't deterred from saying nasty things about his friends but it's a very interesting book about the intellectual *élite*, which reveals that several of these *dons* intermarried, etc. This, in my opinion, is the approach we should adopt as regards the Morrises of Anglesey. A book filled with quotations from the letters of the Morrises would be oppressive but if the Morrises were discussed as a part of a circle of friends ...

That is what the Iolo Morganwg Project¹⁴ did with another portion of the history of eighteenth century Wales. You co-directed that project with Geraint H. Jenkins.

Well yes, I should say that one of the most interesting things I've done in my old age is to direct young scholars who were working on the Iolo Project. It was an extraordinary pleasure collaborating with Geraint, who was one of my former students in Swansea. And when you consider that this developed from something as insignificant as a rather slight and superficial article I wrote back in 1975. Dealing with so many young scholars working on Iolo has been one of life's greatest pleasures. But yes, you're right, that, to some extent, is what has happened by publishing Iolo Morganwg's letters in three bulky volumes that show circles of friends and explain a lot concerning Wales' cultural history. But this kind of work could and should be extended to deal with the correspondence and connections of circles of friends in later periods. Who were Tom Ellis' friends, for example, in the 1880s and the 1890s? With whom did he correspond, and how did people like Sir John Lloyd fit into this friendship. Some light will be shed on this in 2011 when Huw Pryce's research on J. E. Lloyd will be published. And how did T.H. Parry-Williams and Thomas Parry, and Iorwerth Peate and Gruffydd John Williams and my father and Saunders, how did they all

⁹ L. J. Williams, 'The coalowners of South Wales, 1873–80: problems of unity', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru* 8:1 (1976), 75–93.

¹⁰ Francis Jones, *Historic Carmarthenshire homes and their families* (Carmarthen, 1987).

¹¹ Dafydd Ifans (ed.), *Annwyl Kate, Annwyl Saunders: gohebiaeth, 1923–1983* (Aberystwyth, 1992).

¹² See Simon Brooks, *O Dan Lygaid y Gestapo* (Cardiff, 2004).

¹³ Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (London, 1999).

¹⁴ See <http://iolomorganwg.cymru.ac.uk/prosiect.php>

create some kind of circle? A truly biographical history and yet it is not the biography of one man but the biography of a circle of friends. Someone like Simon Brooks would be able to deal with the subject, but what one would call this type of history, I do not know.

A history of networks

That's what it is, networking history. We can understand so much about a certain period by exploring these networks. The book written by his daughter, Kitty, on Sir Herbert Lewis, although she herself called it a brief and superficial work, is another example.¹⁵ Herbert deserves more attention. What, for example, was the significance of their friendship with Llywelyn Williams? Kitty spoke so interestingly about Llywelyn Williams and his wife and the way they used to go on picnics together in the outskirts of London at the beginning of the twentieth century and their opinion of Lloyd George and so forth.

How then does one go about producing this type of research? In the case of Iolo Morganwg, is there a danger that devoting so much time and resources to the study of one man exaggerates his significance in comparison to someone like Edward Lhwyd, say, who has not received as much attention?

Well of course Edward Lhwyd has received less attention because he was from an earlier period and because less correspondence has survived, despite the fact that a substantial amount of correspondence has survived in reality.¹⁶ The work of Brynley Roberts is going to be critical in this respect.¹⁷ I believe that the friends of Edward Lhwyd at the end of the seventeenth century were extremely interesting. Let the day come soon when we shall see a complete history of the Edward Lhwyd circle and those people who wrote about him, people such as Moses Williams, and their subsequent connection with the Morris. We do not know exactly how they liaised with one another.

And people like Humphrey Foulkes that Caryl Davies and Mary Burdett-Jones have been working on recently.¹⁸

I do not find Humphrey Foulkes to be as warm a character as Edward Lhwyd, although he is of great importance as a scholar, but I believe that Caryl Davies' book on the linguistic ideation of

the eighteenth century is a masterpiece, and an unexpected masterpiece, coming as it did in her final years.¹⁹ She was a very reserved, extremely shy woman, but astonishingly intelligent and no one knew about her genius, in a way, in Wales. She had lived all her life in Leeds, being the wife of a college professor there, and it's a pity in a way that non-Welsh speakers are unaware of her genius. Her method is very original, she uses material in an extremely original way in shedding light on the period from Lhwyd to William Owen Pughe. But she doesn't treat Pughe as if he were a blockhead, as Griffith John tended to do. He had lost patience with Pughe and following John Morris-Jones, considered him to be a sort of imbecile, but people like Caryl Davies, they deal with Pughe seriously and understand why he held these ideas. I have been much enlightened about Pughe by reading Glenda Carr's excellent book about him.²⁰ I myself have worked on Pughe and recently I gave a lecture on his work in Lampeter and there I said that perhaps Pughe's poetry was incomprehensible and unreadable but that Pughe's entire poetry found its way into his vocabulary. The beauty of Pughe's creativity lay in Pughe's vocabulary and not in his poetry, which is terrible and completely unreadable. And this opens yet another new area of study and someone should write a volume similar to that of Caryl Davies on the history of linguistic ideation of the nineteenth century and even the twentieth century, the work of people such as Sir John Rhys and John Morris-Jones. No one has traced their ideas or treated them as a circle of scholars who influenced one another.

One would have to have a historian/philologist combination to address the subject, as in the case of your work on names.

Yes, probably, but that is another fruitful field of study. I have been working recently on place names and have been involved quite a lot with the Names Society of Britain and Ireland. I find them very interesting people. We held a conference recently in Carmarthen, which was a big success, one of the best conferences for years and I have been going to these conferences since 1986 more or less. And it is very clear to me, although the late Melville Richards and people like Hywel Wyn Owen today have published books on Welsh place names, that one needs to consider their work alongside the work of the Medievalists, such as Ralph Griffiths for example, who is a neighbour of mine and a very fine historian.

¹⁵ Kitty Idwal Jones, *Syr Herbert Lewis, 1858–1933* (Caerdiff, 1958).

¹⁶ R. T. Gunther (ed), *Life and Letters of Edward Lhwyd*, in *Early Science at Oxford*, 14 (Oxford, 1945).

¹⁷ See select bibliography in Dewi W. Evans & Brynley F. Roberts (eds.) *Edward Lhwyd, Archaeologia Britannica[:] Texts and Translations* (Aberystwyth, 2009).

¹⁸ Caryl Davies and Mary Burdett-Jones, 'Cyfraniad Humphrey Foulkes at Archaeologia Britannica Edward Lhuyd', *Y Llyfr yng Nghymru* 8 (2007), 7–32.

¹⁹ Caryl Davies, *Adfeilion Babel[:] Agweddau ar Syniadaeth Ieithyddol y Ddeunawfed Ganrif* (Cardiff, 2000). See Prys Morgan's review of this in *Studia Celtica* 35 (2001), 378–81.

²⁰ Glenda Carr, *William Owen Pughe* (Cardiff, 1983).

The contributions of these people need to be brought together in order to explain the locations of Wales's boundaries. What is the explanation for all these inner boundaries between the hundreds and commotes? What is the reason behind them? In what way are parish and manor boundaries different? Very often this cannot be explained. Why, for example, is the boundary between the episcopacy of St David's and Llandaff located in the village of Skewen? Llansamlet is an episcopacy of St David's, or the old episcopacy of St David's, and Skewen and Neath lie in the episcopacy of Llandaff. Why does a completely insignificant stream, a mere trickle as it reaches the sea, why does it mark such an important boundary? The place name specialists and the Medievalists have not come together to explain this to us. One of the things I was going to write about when I worked on Calais and Elis Gruffydd was French boundaries. Trevor-Roper was very interested in this subject, the French boundaries of the sixteenth century. France didn't have boundaries, and it was only gradually that it was decided where France's boundaries would lie. Even in the eighteenth century most people would not know where France's boundaries were. Similarly, there was a genuine need for a study of what makes the March a March. And now we have books on the subject by Max Lieberman.²¹

In another field connected with the significance of boundaries, my cousin Nia Watkin Powell is working on a very difficult subject, namely how Wales was treated completely differently financially in the period following the Acts of Union. Wales had not been entirely engulfed by the English system in 1542. And the financial system continues into the eighteenth century, as far as I can see, unlike England. Why then?

Well, this is an example of an important subject that hasn't yet been researched fully. What happened to the Principality, the old royal Principality, at the end of the eighteenth century? How was it that the Principality, which had been a unit since 1542 had disappeared? What was this process that led to its disappearance sometime between the eighteenth and nineteenth century?

Several questions remain unanswered and several quarries have yet to be worked and so there is a bright future for the history of Wales?

It's just a matter of getting young historians, that is what we need. Take for instance that young lad, Owen Jones, who recently wrote an article on the divisions of Powys.²² That is what made me think about these boundaries. It was a wonderful article; and although I do not specialise at all in the Middle Ages I read the article with great astonishment. The subject matter was simply the Pillar of Eliseg at Valle Crucis, Llangollen and what the pillar tells us about the divisions of Powys in the early period. And he merely deals with the pillar and what Edward Lhwyd had read on it, and a few family trees collected by Bartrum. And yet armed with this material, that no one had addressed properly, he managed to recreate an entire period of Powys' lost history. Well, for me, this shows that talent is emerging, you see, in the *Hanes Cymru Magazine*. But we must discover and nurture these young talents through establishments such as the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies at Aberystwyth and in the History departments of our colleges.

²¹ Max Lieberman, *The Medieval March of Wales: The Creation and Perception of a Frontier, 1066–1283* (Cambridge, 2010); idem, *The March of Wales 1067–1300: A Borderland of Medieval Britain* (Cardiff, 2008).

²² Owen Wyn Jones, 'Hereditas Pouoisi: The Pillar of Eliseg and the History of Early Powys', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru* 24:4 (2009), 41–80.