'The sound of battle in our ear':

Presenting the Great War in Welsh

The selection of detailed Welsh language studies of the Great War is very limited. As will become evident, we are not always presented with an objective analysis of the evidence, and often face the same familiar clichés.

It is no surprise that the Great War motivated many historians to publish works, as it was, undoubtedly a major turning point in world history. However, although historians agree on the basic issues with regard to the fighting, many aspects of the developments resulting from the war are still a cause for debate, and there remains some disagreement about what exactly changed and how damaging the consequences were.

In fact, it is this disagreement over so many aspects of the war that has led to the profusion of scholarly works discussing the minutiae – each new analysis inducing a reaction from those who disagree. As many military historians bemoan, there is often an unbridgeable gap between military studies based on current documents, considered in the context of the contemporary standpoint, and the books whose starting point is the steadfast view that the whole affair was futile, purposeless folly. This gap is summarised by military historians as the conundrum of ‘the two Western Fronts’: the front that existed in France and Flanders between 1914 and 1918 and the imaginary front created by the generations that looked back in disbelief and horror at the barbarity of the war years. The essential premise of the latter version is found in the works of the anti-war poets (especially, in the English context, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon) and the abundance of literature about the waste of war, including All Quiet on the Western Front and Goodbye to All That.

The clear impression given, on reading Welsh language historical works on the war is that disillusionment with the war was established much sooner and had permeated deeper among the Welsh intelligentsia than it had with the British population.

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1 ‘Swân yr ymladd ar ein clyw’ – extract from ‘Rhyfel’ by Hedd Wyn (trans. Wade Dowdell). I am very grateful for the kindness of all who helped me with this article, in particular Hywyn Williams, Jen Pappas and the staff of the S4C library, Edith Hughes and the staff of the BBC Wales archive, Owain Meredith of HTV Cymru and Catherine Tiwdor from Canolfan Iaith Nant Gwrtheyrn.


5 The importance of the book All Quiet on the Western Front / Im Westen Nicht Neues (Erich Maria Remarque, 1929) and the popular film of the novel (Lewis Milestone, 1930) has been emphasised by many scholars, e.g. Modris Eksteins (1980), ‘All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War’, Journal of Contemporary History, 15 (2), April, pp. 345-66; Brian Bond (2002), The Unquiet Western Front: Britain’s Role in Literature and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 35-40. Brian Bond (ibid., pp.30-4) noted that Robert Graves, author of Goodbye to All That (1929), did not consider his work as being anti-war, but it was generally interpreted as such.
at large. One aspect of this writing is that many essays give precedence to a particular group, the ministers and prospective ministers who volunteered their services to the cause without taking up arms themselves: individuals such as Lewis Valentine, Dyfnallt and Cynan. In the case of Valentine, who went on to become one of the most prominent members of the budding Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, there is no doubt that disillusionment with the war deeply affected his political/nationalist ideas, setting a precedent for the rest of his life. In 1916, whilst serving in France, Lewis Valentine’s essays conveyed his abhorrence of every aspect of war: ‘My hatred of the military deepens daily. Authority in the hands of the cruel gentry is a dangerous instrument.’ Another author who served in the armed forces and who was totally disillusioned by the war while it was still on-going was W. J. Gruffydd. On Armistice Day he wrote, ‘1914-1918: Yr Ieuain wrth yr Hen’ (‘1914-1918: The Young to the Old’), a ‘bitter’ poem: ‘a vigorous polemic’ in which ‘all Gruffydd’s vengeful fury boils’. And so it was not on the fringes of Welsh culture, but in the mainstream that the intellectual voices expressed their discontent with the war. Gerwyn Wiliams insists that ‘Mab y Bwthyn’ (‘The Cottager’s Son’), which won the Eisteddfod Crown for Cynan in 1921, was a ‘milestone in the history of Welsh poetry’. Note, therefore, that this had earned praise and respect eight years before the appearance of All Quiet on the Western Front.

In addition to these Christian soldiers many influential voices had remained stubbornly opposed to the war. Although this was the voice of a small minority during the fighting years, often ridiculed by many sections within Welsh society, these opinions were later accepted as the quiet conscience of the nation, apparently many years sooner in Wales than in England. In 1923, pacifist George M. Li. Davies (who was imprisoned for his beliefs during the war) was elected as an MP by the University of Wales graduates.

When the fighting was over, one element that struck a chord with all the people of Europe was the extent of the live lost, as numerous memorials appeared all over the continent. As Robin Barlow and Gerwyn Williams note, one familiar aspect of the Welsh narrative given by many historians is the allegation that Wales provided the armed forces with a higher proportion of its sons than the other countries of the United Kingdom. It is obvious that this concept of the particular strength of Wales’ contribution to the war had established itself in the Welsh psyche very early on, and that the idea of the exceptional sacrifice of the Welsh had been used by those who considered the war to be just, as well as those who rejected the military approach. Lloyd George claimed that a higher proportion of volunteers had enlisted in Wales than in any other country in the British Empire.

However, although the claim is a familiar one, it is, according to some historians, erroneous, based on a statement in Ivor Nicholson and Trevor Lloyd-Williams’ ‘boastful book’, Wales: Its Part in the War (London, 1919). Once these figures had been
quoted in K. O. Morgan’s influential book Wales in British Politics, many later historians took them as fact. 15

Therefore, in Wales, although many take pride in the country’s contribution to the victory, there was obvious disillusionment with regards to the justice and value of the Great War even before the major slump in the world economy. When the world economy had sunk into serious depression, and the international political situation had deteriorated, the opinions of the authors and poets about what little had been gained by the terrible sacrifice, were confirmed.

In addition, many works were published that were very critical of the attitudes and decisions taken by the generals during the war. Without doubt, the most important contribution was Lloyd George’s Memoirs, published in six volumes between 1933 and 1936. In the foreword to the new two-volume reprint in 1938, he refers to how the incredible heroism of the common man was wasted by useless officials: ‘in the narrow, selfish and unimaginative strategy and in the ghastly butchery of a succession of vain and insane offensives’. 16

Then came the Second World War to prove that any idea that the Great War would be the war ‘to end all wars’ had been a foolish dream. The Great War faded from the public consciousness to some extent during the Second World War years and the decade that followed. However, there was renewed interest in the Great War in the 1960s, especially during the half-century years. 17 In 1964-65 the BBC broadcast the ambitious series The Great War (initially on BBC2 and later on BBC1; the series was broadcast twice more in the 1970s); as well as exploiting interest in the war, the series created a desire to re-appraise the events of 1914-18. 18

The war described in the history books of the 1960s was different from the one described by the first wave of historians. Rather than focus on the generals, the politicians and the movement of the battalions, a social history of the war was given, giving precedence to the experiences of the people (both soldiers and civilians). Then, following the introduction into history of post structural ideas, from the 1980s onwards, increased attention was paid to the cultural aspects – how new cultures and identities were conceived during the war, the effects that this had on the lives of individuals and communities, and how they tried to make sense of the war and its consequences. 19

In terms of popular conceptions of the war, and its portrayal in works of popular culture, there is no doubt that television programmes are the main vehicles through which the public learn about the event. 20 It is fair to say that the impressions of the war held by many Welsh people, are derived from programmes seen on the British channels – both factual and fictional. An important and influential example is the series Blackadder Goes Forth. 21 In the works of fiction, the familiar caricature of the brave, pitiful soldier, and the asinine officers is inevitable.


16 Quoted in Bond, The Unquiet Western Front, p. 46.


19 Winter and Prost, The Great War in History, pp. 25-31. See also Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites (1999), ‘Introduction’ in Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites (eds.), European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment and Propaganda, 1914-1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1-7. Winter and Prost note that the fall of the communist system from 1989 onwards has helped to promote this idea, as the Marxist concept that had been so influential in social history was derided. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker also note that the fate of the Soviet Union in the 1990s caused scholars to reconsider the war as, according to one, the 1914 war had finally come to an end. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker (2002), 14-18: Understanding the Great War (New York: Hill and Wang), p. 6.


21 Hanna, The Great War on the Small Screen, p. 23. Brian Bond notes in amazement that Blackadder Goes Forth is shown in schools to teach pupils about the Great War (The Unquiet Western Front, p. 79).
The starting point for this discussion is the 1964 series The Great War, which broke new ground and set a precedent for many of the history programmes that followed, irrespective of whether or not they referred to the war. This was the first television production to combine archive footage, eyewitness accounts and an authoritative script written by well-respected historians. Nevertheless, there is no mention in the series of the complicated relationships between the war and the four individual countries of the United Kingdom: we are presented with London’s viewpoint alone.22

In the same year as The Great War, two Welsh programmes were shown on Wales’ independent television channel, TWW. What strikes us today as we look at the programme contents is the restricted choice of eyewitnesses, as, in all likelihood, many thousands of Welshmen were still alive in 1964 who could have spoken of their wartime experiences. However, only men (and one woman) who were eminent members of Welsh society, the majority of whom had already published their observations on the war, were given the opportunity to present their evidence. Contributions were given by the author, the Rev. E. Tegla Davies (a pacifist who opposed the war), the Archdruid Cynan (who served in Salonika with the RAMC and as a chaplain in France), Lady Megan Lloyd George (daughter of the former prime minister; Labour MP for Carmarthen in 1964), D. J. Williams (author, pacifist and prominent member of Plaid Cymru), the Rev. T. E. Nicholas (a poet, who had vigorously opposed the Great War on the basis of his communist beliefs), Sir Ben Bowen Thomas (educationalist, President of the University College of Wales Aberystwyth) and Ifan Gruffydd (who had published his autobiography, Y Gŵr o Baradwys [The Man from Paradise] the previous year, in which he discussed his time in the army in France and Egypt between 1914 and 1920).

As we sift through the catalogue of programmes and items broadcast on TWW and HTV23 during these years, very little content deals with the effects of the Great War on 1960s and 1970s Wales. A programme on Heddwyn was made in 1967 (on the fiftieth anniversary of his death): although a powerful programme containing valuable archive material (such as an interview with Heddwyn’s lover), very little consideration is given to the war other than as an external force that impaired the poet’s opportunity to write, before cutting short his life.24

There has been an abundance of programmes on the history of Wales on S4C ever since the establishment of the channel in 1982. Many series and individual programmes have been (and are still) broadcast, which follow some aspect of our country’s history and the history of the Great War years have not been ignored. Many offer a commendable, intelligent analysis.

One such programme is Y Rhwyg (‘The Tear’), a one-hour programme aired in 1988 presented by John Davies. It not only traces the history of the fighting, but the sharp script by John Davies (with the aid of Gerwyn Williams) also manages to convey the various ways in which the Great War affected the culture, society and economy of Wales. It considers the effect on the Welsh landscape, through the disappearance of many old mansions and the appearance of ‘armies of foreign trees dressed in the monotonous uniform of the state’; it outlines the beginning of the downfall of the coal industry and slate quarries and the economic ramifications of the war; it emphasises the social changes that resulted from the war, including the enfranchisement of women; most of all it emphasises, as Williams Parry says, the ‘wrench of losing the boys’.25

Despite the admirable qualities of this programme, the choice of eyewitnesses does give a cause for concern. We are presented with the reminiscences of two old men (Ithel Davies of Ddinas Mawddwy and Griffith Williams of Llithfaen) and one old lady (Lady Olwen Carey-Evans). It is difficult to argue that this choice is a representative selection of those who could have spoken of their experiences during these years.

In this article we will concentrate on Griffith Williams’ contribution, as his case embodies some of the problems associated with the unquestioned use of oral testimony decades after an event. I am not suggesting that this brave, honourable man is lying, nor that he intentionally misleads the audience: rather, the problem is to do with the nature of human memory.26

The concept of ‘memory’ is complicated. The truth is that individuals ‘compose’ the history of their lives, arranging their memories to create a narrative that is consistent, understandable and which gives them comfort.27 Therefore, the researcher cannot accept the evidence of the eyewitness as fact without

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22 The BBC in Scotland apparently pushed for one of the programmes to consider ‘Scotland and the Great War’, but the producers argued vigorously against the idea. See J. A. Ramsden (2002), ‘The Great War: The making of the series’, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 22 (1), March, pp. 7-19; 14.

23 Harlech Television / HTV started broadcasting an independent television service for Wales in May 1968, replacing TWW.

24 This programme was repeated on S4C in 2011, as part of the Cofio series.

25 From ‘Englyinion Coffa Heddwyn’. This quote is included in many programmes discussed in this article.

26 Griffith Williams published his autobiography, Cofio Canrif, at 102 years of age (Caernarfon: Gwasg Gwynedd, 1990). Many of the factual errors that appear in the discussion below (relating to his contributions to television programmes), also appear in this book.

further investigation. An analysis of what Great War veterans have said at different periods in their lives has clearly shown how present circumstances and current social attitudes influence the story being told.

There is hard evidence that veteran soldiers adapt their stories to conform to current social prejudices and the expectations of the listener. Therefore, as Arwel Vittle notes in his biography of the Reverend Lewis Valentine, the book that he published in 1988 was a ‘literary work’, not an authentic account of his feelings at the time, even though it was entitled Dyddiadur Mihur (‘The Diary of a Soldier’). Vittle declares that Valentine is ‘looking back at the events of the Great War … through the spectacles of pacifist and nationalist middle age’.

Even more unexpectedly, many studies have shown that profound personal memories are extremely open to corruption by outside sources, such as films or television programmes, which can prejudice an individual’s memories of his/her experiences. There is therefore an intricate problem when any work that claims to be ‘factual’ depends mainly on memories supplied by a speaker many decades after the event. Often, rather than an account of what actually happened, what we get is the fruit of many years’ consideration and trying to make sense of extreme experiences.

As John Tosh notes, ‘the voice of the past’ is inescapably the voice of the present too.

However, following the example of The Great War, British programmes on the Great War tend to dignify the veteran’s viewpoint. To the producers, the advantages of hearing the stories directly from the mouths of the eyewitnesses were greater than any doubts about the authenticity of their recollections.

As the number of veterans dwindled they received more and more attention, and there was an increased demand for those who were still alive. Possibly, the individual who attracted most attention – and who became famous as a result of his powerful and poignant statements – was Harry Patch, born in 1898. Similarly in Welsh: in the 1990s a small number of veterans came to represent the hundreds of thousands of Welshmen who had served.

On reaching his 100th birthday, Griffith Williams appeared in some Hel Straeon (‘Telling Stories’) programmes discussing his memories of the old days, which included stories of his personal experiences in the Great War. He was the only veteran to speak in the programme Y Rhwyg, and the voice of John Davies introduces his contribution with the words: ‘By now there aren’t many left of the millions who went to war, but there is one gentleman who joined at twenty-five years of age and who has now reached one hundred years old, and Mr Griffith Williams of Llithfaen remembers it all.’

The problem is that we cannot depend upon the facts presented by Griffith Williams. He states in his book and in numerous television interviews that he volunteered for the army in 1915, but he also states in his autobiography that he arrived at the Royal Welch Fusiliers’ training camp a fortnight after Hedd Wyn, who attended the camp in early 1917. However, according to official records Williams joined the army on 16 June 1917, and could not therefore have met Hedd Wyn at the camp.

One of the most striking and memorable stories told by Griffith Williams was that of his colleague who was executed for daring to question the war. However, although Williams told this tale as if he himself had been a witness, it appears to be a combination of many stories, heavily influenced by the anti-military discussions and attitudes of the decades following the event.

Although this story is extremely powerful and a clear statement of how Griffith Williams viewed his time in the army seven decades earlier, the details are not believable.

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28 Vittle, Valentine, p. 50.
29 For a detailed consideration of an example of a veteran tidying up the narrative of specific events, see Fred H. Allinson (2006), ‘Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing perspectives over time’, in Perks and Thomson (eds.), The Oral History Reader, pp. 221-9.
31 Hanna, The Great War on the Small Screen, p. 64.
32 Williams, Cofio Canrif, p. 47 (in which he states that he joined in April 1915); p. 51 (in which he states that he had been at the Litherland camp a fortnight after Hedd Wyn). In Y Rhwyg (after approx 18’00), he stated that he joined ‘in early 1915’. In Alan Lloyd’s (1991) book, Gwae Fi Fy Myw: Cofiant Hedd Wyn (Cyhoeddadau Barddas Publications), p. 207, he states that Hedd Wyn arrived at Llithfaen in late January 1917.
33 Williams, Cofio Canrif, pp. 62-3, and in the programme, Y Rhwyg.
34 This history is available in Williams, Cofio Canrif, pp. 62-3, and in the programme, Y Rhwyg.
The only interpretation, therefore, that makes any sense of this anecdote is that Griffith Williams had compressed numerous scattered memories and stories into one, influenced by his uncomfortable feelings about his own military experiences as he looked back; and also by narratives heard in subsequent years that emphasised the barbarity of war. In truth, it is unlikely that Griffith Williams had witnessed any executions during his time at the Western Front, but as he ruminated over his experiences decades later he told the tale of an imaginary event as though he had seen it unfold.

In the years following *Y Rhwyg*, Williams published his autobiography, *Cofio Canrif* (*Remembering a Century*), which included 24 pages of recollections of the 1914-1918 years (almost a third of the book), and as he continued to survive, becoming the oldest man in Wales, his photograph and story appeared regularly in the newspapers. 36 An interview with Williams was recorded for the BBC Wales programme, *Shadows on the Western Front*, in 1993, and one was also recorded for *Canrif y Werin* (*The People’s Century*), a series on the oral history of the twentieth century, which was broadcast many years after his death in July 1996.

Therefore, just as Harry Patch came to represent the soldiers of England, so in Wales in the 1990s a small number of veterans came to represent the hundreds of thousands of Welshmen who had served in the Great War. 37 However, another veteran who appeared regularly on S4C was Ithel Davies, who had refused to serve. As well as his contribution to *Y Rhwyg* he was seen in both *Mametz* and *Canrif y Werin: Y Rhyfel Mawr* (*The People’s Century: The Great War*), and his words were quoted in the second episode of *Lleisiau'r Rhyfel Mawr* (*Voices of the Great War*). 38

Ithel Davies’ contributions to the programme *Mametz* cause particular problems. The first, and most fundamental question has to be why does a man who refused to fight appear in a programme focusing on the Welsh who suffered in the carnage of Mametz Woods? No-one can deny the significance of one of Hedd Wyn’s poems (*Distance cannot make us forget / Children of the hills / Our hearts remain one of Hedd Wyn’s poems*). *Shadows on the Western Front* conveys very succinctly the tragedy of the Great War. *Canrif y Werin* therefore seems to allow programme makers to treat harshly, some being persecuted, publicly derided and imprisoned. Here therefore is one aspect that regularly receives more attention in Welsh programmes than in corresponding English programmes. 39

Hedd Wyn is another character that is studied thoroughly in many Welsh programmes. It cannot be denied that, to most Welsh speakers, Hedd Wyn is by far the most famous Welsh soldier who fought in the Great War. His tragic story, which tells of his amazing genius cut down before reaching maturity, came to represent the futility and waste of the Great War. The powerful film *Hedd Wyn*, which received critical acclaim, tells his story in a polished and sensitive manner.

Referring to the story of Hedd Wyn therefore seems to allow programme makers to convey very succinctly the tragedy of the Great War. In *Canrif y Werin* the narrator declares this as being ‘one of the saddest stories of the war’. The series *Lleisiau'r Rhyfel Mawr* begins with an extract from one of Hedd Wyn’s poems (*Distance cannot make us forget / Children of the hills / Our hearts remain together / Although we are apart*). *Y Rhwyg* concludes at the grave of Hedd Wyn in Artillery Wood cemetery,


37 Another who appeared in many productions, in both languages, was Bob Owen from Llandudno (d. 1998), who spoke in an episode of *The Slate* (BBC Wales, 1994); *Shadows on the Western Front* (BBC Wales, 1994); *Week In Week Out: Shot at Dawn* (BBC Wales, 1997) and *Canrif y Werin: Y Rhyfel Mawr* (S4C, 2000).

38 Ithel Davies died in 1989: the piece in *Canrif y Werin* is a repeat of his contribution to *Mametz*, which tells the story referred to in the footnote below. Note that the citation in *Lleisiau'r Rhyfel Mawr* comes from a letter sent by Davies to Y Faner in 1916 – see Ifor ap Glyn, *Lleisiau'r Rhyfel Mawr*, pp. 77-8.

39 No mention is made of the conscientious objectors in two English language programmes produced by BBC Wales that tell the story of the war through the testimony of veterans, *Mametz Wood* (1987) and *Shadows on the Western Front* (1993).
near the village of Boezinge. In the first programme of the series Cerdded y Llhenl ('Walking the Line'), Iolo Williams and Hywel Teify Edwards discuss the story of Hedd Wyn at his graveside with the Professor, in his unique way, discussing how R. Williams Parry succeeded, through his englyniion, to create a ‘sort of universal figure’ from Hedd Wyn: ‘the young soldier full of creative talent, who was killed just like millions of others’. Professor Gareth Williams also travelled to Pilkem Ridge for Ar Doriad Guawr (‘The Last Dawn’), telling the story of the ‘poet heavy under foreign soil’. The final words of this programme are the powerful, harrowing lines of the poem, ‘Y Rhyfel’ (‘The War’): ‘...And the boys’ screams filling the wind / And their blood mixed with the rain’. The same lines are quoted by Merfyn Jones at the end of the segment discussing the Great War in Cymru 2000.

Another Welsh icon of the war years is David Lloyd George, who served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Minister for Arms, War Secretary and (from December 1916) Prime Minister. Gerwyn Williams states, ‘Throughout the War, as the Kaiser was trampled into the mud Lloyd George was elevated to a god’. In the decades following the war, Welsh speakers have continued to idolise Lloyd George. Of the programmes in question, the one that favours Lloyd George most is Canrif y Werin, produced by Emyr Price, who was himself the author of more than one biography of ‘the wizard of Dwyfor’. Considering that Lloyd George himself had been very proactive in fighting the ‘war of recollections’ – portraying himself as one who stood up for the common soldier against the hard-heartedness of the predatory generals, stubbornly insisting on sending thousands of men to their deaths – it is no surprise that Canrif y Werin is very scathing of the actions of the higher ranking officers. On camera himself, Emyr Price talked of the ‘bunglings of the generals’ and the ‘huge ineffectiveness’ of their campaigns; the subsequent narration also refers to this ‘bungling’. Discussing the final year of the war, the narration declares that ‘Lloyd George was ready to get rid of the hard, pitiless British generals. He wished to end the war, and bring the boys home’. This incredibly biased statement is preceded by Bob Owen’s fond memories of the great man:

‘All the boys thought highly of him. He raised our wages, didn’t he? And if you remember, he gave those generals the sack, yes. General Bing, General Plumer, Rawlinson and that Douglas Haig– he was worth nothing after Lloyd George had given them the sack. Lloyd George felt it when boys were killed.’

To summarize the debate, we then have Emyr Price’s contribution, which emphasises how important and key Lloyd George was. Gerwyn Williams refers to the ‘loyalty’ shown to Lloyd George ‘until his death in 1945’, but it seems that this loyalty still holds strong today. However, one of Lloyd George’s most faithful followers often receives strong criticism in the programmes.

In an article that weighs up the legacy of the Reverend John Williams, Brynsiencyn, Aled Jôb states that it would be difficult to discuss the Great War in Wales without any reference to him. ‘For many years now, this Methodist minister, who was so prominent in the recruitment campaign during the War, grew to become one of Wales’ bêtes noires as a nation.’ In terms of television programmes on the Great War Aled’s interpretation hits the nail on the head: almost all the programmes studied discuss this great minister’s contribution to the recruitment campaign, more often than not in a negative way. The veterans themselves are amongst those who derided John Williams most bitterly.

Griffith Williams would tell (erroneously) of how John Williams had left his church in Liverpool in order to go on a campaign to entice men into the army, saying ‘he went like a little dog, recruiting for Lloyd George’. On the other hand, in the programme Mametz Caledfryn Evans remembers the effect Williams had from the pulpit: ‘A very handsome man, preaching to us in the Pavilion in Rhyll ... the place crammed to capacity ... full of soldiers. I don’t remember the sermon, only his presence’.

An actor’s voice is used to dramatize Williams’ speech: ‘You rosy cheeked boys of Anglesey, will you let the sallow faced boys of the towns sacrifice their lives to keep you healthy’ both in Y Rhwyyg and in the first episode of Lleisiau'r Rhyfel Mawr. Excerpts from this speech are quoted in the programme Tocyn Diwnod. A whole programme is set aside to weigh up Williams’ contribution to

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40 Wiliams, Y Rhwyyg, p. 64. See also Llwyd and Edwards (eds.), Gwaedd y Bechgyn, p. 30.
42 Williams, Y Rhwyyg, p. 81.
44 Y Rhwyyg, approx 16’00 in. John Williams retired from his ministry in Prince’s Road chapel, Liverpool, in 1912.
45 For the full quote see Williams, Y Rhwyyg, p. 14.
Wales’ campaign during the war in *Eyr mewn Coler Gron* (‘Eagle in a Round Collar’), which includes a re-enactment of many of his recruitment speeches.46

Thus many Welsh programmes about the war tend to re-produce the same material to tell the story. Presenters are seen in the same locations, such as those parts of the trenches that have been preserved (or rather re-built) as they were, in Sanctuary Wood near Ypres. The producers have even chosen to use similar music: Welsh hymns in minor keys, played at a funereal tempo.

Unfortunately, as they tell the same story these representations of the war also very often re-produce the same ambiguous information. Many of the programmes shown on S4C discussing the Great War spread the same erroneous ideas regarding the degree of recruitment in Wales. In *Ar Doriad Gweaver* Gareth Williams and Deian Hopkin state that a greater proportion of Welsh men joined the army than any other part of the United Kingdom; the presenter in *Lleisiau’r Rhyfel Mawr* makes the same statement. In *David Lloyd George: Prydain a’r Byd* (’David Lloyd George: Britain and the World’) Hywel Williams states: ‘By the end of the war 300,000 Welshmen had served in the armed forces – a much higher proportion than from any other part of the United Kingdom’.47

Another deficiency in the programmes is the failure to explain why Britain was fighting in the first place. There is no explanation of the source or purpose of the war in *Mametz, Tocyn Diwrodd o Y Rhwyg*; the programme *Canrif y Werin* jumps directly from the shooting of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo to the havoc in the trenches. Without any further explanation of why war between the great European powers broke out, this direct shift into the carnage makes no sense, making the fighting seem pointless. It may be that the tendency to give the veterans priority in the programmes clouds the situation: decades later, it is very difficult for these men to justify why they were fighting. ‘We knew nothing of what we were fighting for,’ says Griffith Williams. ‘We had no idea – only to keep the big boys happy.’48

In order to comprehend the true significance of the Great War, and the ensuing chaos and rifts, we must start by attempting to ignore the decades of preaching about the fighting, and draw nearer to the viewpoint of those people who experienced the tragedy and who voiced their feelings at the time. This is the distinct advantage that *Lleisiau’r Rhyfel Mawr* has over other programmes, as it uses current evidence not corrupted by the passage of time.

However, there is a way forward for studying the history of the Great War in which the Welsh have a distinct advantage, and where the later evidence of the veterans themselves will be very valuable. As was stated earlier, the historiography of the war has developed over recent decades to focus on the effects of the fighting years on the culture of the various countries. The fact that Wales has its own culture, which witnessed major changes as a result of the carnage, opens the door to a study of how exactly the talons of war affected the lives of the nation, and the lives of regions, communities and individuals. As there are many scholarly studies that analyse Welsh war literature, much of the essential work has been done, at least with regard to tracing the attitudes of the country’s intelligentsia. I have already referred to the impression that these intellectuals experienced feelings of great disillusionment, much sooner and more deeply than the British population at large. What then of the attitudes of the other Welsh people who were involved with the war?

It is possible to approach this subject from two different angles. We can either consider the current works of the individuals who suffered these appalling experiences – as with *Lleisiau’r Rhyfel Mawr* – and try to follow how some families or communities adapted to their new circumstances, or we can study the statements of veterans as they look back over the decades and try to make sense of their experiences, analysing the way in which they have composed their recollections. The researcher can therefore build a picture of which aspects of Welsh culture these men considered to be important, and how the war affected their identity. In this case, no one can deny the validity of the testimony of the elders, all of whom speak sincerely from the heart. Therefore, why not a study of interviews with the old veterans analysing their statements in terms of what they convey about Welsh culture in the decades after the carnage, rather than accepting every statement as an immutable ‘fact’?

As we approach the centenary of the events of 1914-1918, we are bound to hear ‘the sound of battle in our ear’ once again, with numerous debates in the media regarding the significance of the war and its consequences. We can only hope that we in Wales will hear, respect and understand, the voices of brave men such as Griffith Williams and Bob Owen, as well as listen to the opinions of David Lloyd George and read the poetry of Hedd Wyn.

46 This was a drama-documentary, part of the series *Dilyn Ddoe*, which was first broadcast on 5 July 1997. The part of John Williams was played by the famous actor from Anglesey, J. O. Roberts. Note that no mention is made of John Williams in the BBC Wales programmes, *Mametz Wood* (1987) and *Shadows on the Western Front* (1993).


48 This quote was taken from *Canrif y Werin*, but Griffith Williams used almost the exact same words in *Y Rhwyg*. 