

# Post-War Wales

*Gareth Elwyn Jones*

The purpose of this book is consistent with that of companion volumes in the series: to provide interpretations of the kaleidoscope of happenings over time (in this case the last half century), and some insights into the raw material on which those interpretations rest. However, it might be argued that the nature of the task is rather different in a volume which deals with contemporary Wales. While all historical writing reflects elements of the authors' personality, distance lends greater disinterest. When historians attempt to impose patterns on events in which they have themselves been participants — however passive — those patterns may be more subjective and more distorted than with earlier periods of history. The nature of the sources has been modified. For very recent history the historian is, to however marginal a degree, his or her own source, with some lines of enquiry, perhaps some factual information, emanating from personal experience. Particularly significant also is the technological revolution of the last fifty years. The cave drawings of Altamira or Lascaux, of course, pre-date the written word, but nothing has foreshadowed the impact of the visual images of the ubiquitous television pictures which dominate the leisure hours of all generations.

Yet it might be argued equally forcefully that the concerns of individuals, families and societies remain essentially the same. The transmission of those grainy monochrome newsreels of the D-Day landings with which the fiftieth anniversary was recalled evoke a seemingly distant world of outdated weaponry, transport and equipment. Yet there were few extended families in whom the same newsreels did not promote poignant memories. Those who survived unscathed in 1945 speak now, as they did then, of their determination at the time that no future generations would be subjected to similar experiences. There were many in Britain who were also determined that the war should see the end of the kind of society which had tolerated the Depression of the inter-war years, that the waste of life in wartime should not see a return to blighted lives in peacetime.

In this context the principles of the Beveridge Report, published in 1942, which were to form the basis of the welfare state, had a particular relevance to Wales because so much of the country had been devastated by the decline of heavy industry in the inter-war years. With a determination fostered by the common sacrifice of war that Britain should build a fairer post-war society, the Labour Party was swept into government in 1945. Welsh radicalism, once channelled so effectively into Liberalism, was now predominantly socialist and, as a result of the 1945 election, in the mainstream. Welsh MPs, particularly Aneurin Bevan, were now able to play their part in translating a social programme forged in the most adverse economic conditions into a welfare state. But that state was not Welsh. Bevan, in particular, would have no truck with the creation of specifically Welsh institutions. Indeed, in Wales as in the rest of Britain, the priorities of people and politicians in the aftermath of war were economic and social reconstruction.

The Labour governments of 1945–51 forged a new Britain, and Wales took its share of the benefits. A broad political consensus, encompassing the welfare state and high rates of employment, determined that the Conservative administrations which were in power for thirteen years after 1951 allowed the great majority in Wales, as elsewhere, to participate in growing economic prosperity, especially from about 1955. Gradually, motor cars, washing machines and television sets symbolized revolutions in patterns of work and leisure. Again, there was nothing peculiarly Welsh about these changes. On the contrary, such changes in transport and communication threatened traditional manifestations of Welshness. In some chapels in Wales the time of the evening service was rescheduled to allow congregations to watch episodes of the *Forsythe Saga* on television. More compelling was the realization after the 1951 census that the number of Welsh speakers had declined so substantially in the twenty years since the previous census. Reaction took many forms as a more affluent society could afford to extend its vision. The threat to the language, and to other manifestations of Welshness, were taken increasingly seriously and Janet Davies's chapter informs us of some of the responses. Kenneth O. Morgan's essay explains that political nationalism, of the most marginal significance immediately after the war, impinged increasingly on public consciousness in the 1960s.

No book dealing with the plethora of subjects and source material in this period can aim to be comprehensive. Some of the essays which follow concentrate substantially on events within Wales but we insure against introspection by including essays dealing with the relationship of Wales with Europe and a wider world, and with some of the images which Wales projects to that world. It must always remain that the complexity of the story even within Wales itself defies full analysis. Let us take just one example. Perhaps the only institutional experience which all readers of histories of Wales have in common is school. For better or worse we have, with the rarest of exceptions, been compelled by law to attend school from the age of five to the age of fourteen or more. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the history of schools in Wales often merits hardly a mention in general histories. One clue to the extent of consequent deficiencies in historical analysis is supplied by Peter Stead's essay on popular culture, which makes the intriguing point that one of the most significant social divides in post-war Wales was that between the products of the grammar schools and those who went to secondary modern schools (or even the all-age secondary schools which took an unconscionable time to phase out). Authors and editors never recognize such a divide in the historical patterns they impose by their chapter headings — as they do, for example, by commissioning separate chapters on women's history — yet its significance cannot be underrated. Indeed, the existence of a discriminatory examination for all pupils at the age of eleven, and its discontinuance with the coming of comprehensive schools, raises the most profound questions about the political, social and cultural history of Wales in the post-war period.

First, it reminds us of a theme basic to this book, the relationship between the historian and his or her sources. The editors and those authors who have written about the history of Wales in the chapters which follow attended schools which operated under an education system formulated by the

Education Act of 1944. Those of us who were pupils in the Welsh grammar schools remember school uniforms, lessons in a strict hierarchy of subjects, O level examinations, a segregated sixth form for the élite, begowned masters and mistresses (rather than teachers) possessed of a dramatic variety of intimidatory weapons, Saturday morning games and an array of extra-curricular activities. This whole complex of pleasure or misery was made accessible by success in that dreaded, ubiquitous eleven-plus examination. So much was part of our day-to-day experience, branded on our personalities and ingrained on our memories. What we did not understand was that we were pawns in a game of political power and fodder for social experiment, and that our schooling experience was to affect the linguistic and cultural history of Wales.

Secondly, historians have stressed the success of the partnership between central and local government for more than three decades after the war. In fact the way in which the 1944 Education Act was implemented in Wales illustrates the tensions which have always existed between the localities and central administrations. They also have a Welsh dimension which illuminates the uneasy nature of the relationship between Wales and England in the post-war period.

Under the terms of the 1944 Act, local authorities had to submit plans for the reorganization of education in their areas. Counties and county boroughs in Wales were constrained in two directions. In the most rural areas, given physical distances and the scattered population, it did not make sense to establish separate grammar and secondary modern schools for pupils between the ages of eleven and fifteen. Therefore, often reluctantly, the rural local authorities established some bilateral schools, taking in all pupils from the local catchment area. One council, far less reluctantly, moved immediately towards the establishment of bilateral/multilateral schools and, by 1953, Anglesey became the first local authority in Wales or England to provide secondary education in area secondary schools rather than by selection at the age of eleven.

In two of the most populous parts of Wales a more overtly political problem presented itself. The education committees of Glamorgan County Council and Swansea County Borough Council submitted plans which proposed the creation of different kinds of multilateral area secondary schools. These plans arose out of a belief in the ideal of equality of opportunity and the injustice of a segregating examination at the age of eleven, rather than of any geographical necessity. As such, they were unacceptable to senior civil servants in the Ministry of Education and its Welsh Department who successfully directed their political masters into establishing a system of bipartite/tripartite education. This was based on a rigid distinction between the more academic pupils who proceeded to grammar schools, having passed the eleven-plus, and those of a more 'concrete' cast of mind (to cite the Norwood Report of 1943) whose secondary education took place in secondary modern schools. In this way the future life chances of the population were determined at the age of eleven, because Ministry officials also ensured that external examinations, which provided entrance to university and teacher-training college for the select few, should be restricted to grammar-school pupils who completed a course terminating beyond the statutory leaving age. While civil

servants reluctantly allowed geographical factors to determine breaches in the grammar/secondary modern system in some areas of rural Wales, they were implacably opposed to any infringement on doctrinal grounds. Neither Swansea nor Glamorgan got its multilateral schools. The grammar/secondary modern divide was almost universally applied in both areas, with the result noted by Peter Stead. The Ministry allowed only two multilateral schools in Swansea — Penlan and Mynydd-bach — on the grounds that they were 'experimental'. But there was more to it. These schools were tolerated because they served new working-class housing estates. Post-war educational structures and civil servants' class judgements went hand in hand. The outcome of the 1944 Education Act in Wales indicates that, in the last resort, the partnership between central government and local authorities was extremely unequal.

Despite Secretary of State Anthony Crosland's Circular 10/65 of 1965, which impelled local authorities towards reorganization along comprehensive-school lines, central government's grip on the administration of education and, especially, curriculum, loosened in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the Welsh experience indicates that there should be no surprise that in the 1970s (and Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976 was the major public manifestation of it) central government's ministers and civil servants set out to reassert control. By means of the 1988 Education Act, the National Curriculum and an unceasing stream of legislation and administrative reordering, government dogma has pushed civil servants many a bridge further than they anticipated in the late 1970s.

Thirdly, decision-making in education provides a vivid example of a central paradox in post-war Wales: that there has been an increasing number of administrative bodies exclusive to Wales which have implemented policies neither emanating from Wales nor necessarily reflecting public opinion within Wales. Symbolically, there has been a significant Welsh dimension to post-war reorganization of schools. Although it resulted in ending an administratively separate set of Welsh secondary schools, first established under an Act of 1889 which applied only to Wales, there were still Welsh administrative structures in being. One was the Central Welsh Board, largely made up of local authority representatives, which gave way in 1949 to the Welsh Joint Education Committee. Aptly, perhaps, in view of the balance of power which had been evident in the post-war settlement, the Welsh Department of the Board of Education, established in 1907, had long ago asserted its supremacy over the CWB. In turn, the Welsh Department of the new Ministry of Education, situated in London, followed the policies of its parent body in implementing a divided system of secondary schools. Policies of central government were to be carried out as far as possible; any adaptation to meet the peculiar needs of Wales was a departure from the norm rather than a policy for Wales. Under the 1944 Education Act an Advisory Council for England was paralleled by an Advisory Council (Wales). Both were nominated bodies. In 1947 the Welsh Advisory Council advocated that all Welsh secondary schools should be bilateral or multilateral. The Council's advice was totally ignored.

Central-government control over the education system weakened in the 1960s and early 1970s at a time when there were increasing devolutionary

trends in educational administration. At first it was tokenism; in 1947 an office of the Welsh Department of the Ministry of Education was established in Cardiff, the first time that any aspect of its work had gone outside Whitehall. Then, five years later, most of the Welsh Department's work was transferred to Cardiff. In 1963 the new permanent secretary of the Department was based in Cardiff — for the first time since the inception of the Department in 1907. By 1970 the implications for education of the creation of a secretaryship of state for Wales six years previously became apparent. All responsibility for primary and secondary education was transferred to the secretary of state for Wales.

For the moment the implications of this were disguised by a consensual approach to school organization and reorganization. In particular, the movement towards 'comprehensivization', gathering pace in the 1970s, roused very little opposition in Wales (Cardiff was an exception). But as soon as central government determined to claw back control of the system at the expense of local authorities and teachers' unions, the education situation in Wales illuminated the wider Welsh condition.

Since 1979, Conservative governments have been in power, while, as Kenneth O. Morgan's essay reveals, commanding only a minority of parliamentary seats in Wales. The policies of these governments, especially since the mid-eighties, have been to centralize control of the curriculum and testing, and to devolve detailed administration, including finance, to individual schools. This strange mixture of centralization and decentralization has been necessary to allow the ultimate goal of competition and market forces to operate in the inimical world of education. In this situation the strains inherent in Welsh governmental structures have become particularly evident. Despite devolutionary devices, the secretary of state for Wales and the Welsh Office Education Department have implemented these policies, as happened in the 1940s and 1950s, without regard to their suitability in the Welsh situation. City technology colleges and specialist schools for particular subjects are of the most marginal relevance to Wales. Market forces may or may not be appropriate to urban Wales but they are a wholly inappropriate motor for change in rural Wales. The drive towards grant-maintained schools, independent of local authorities, has had singularly little response in Wales, affecting only sixteen schools so far, yet the individual grants being offered to them by the Welsh Office are vastly greater than for those remaining with the local authorities. Subsidiarity, it seems, is an ephemeral concept. Wales cannot be allowed to diverge. Has anything changed since the 1940s?

The degree of independence allowed to educational institutions in Wales therefore prompts a whole range of questions about the nature of the government of Wales as a whole. The minister of state in the Welsh Office takes responsibility for education in Wales under the overall charge of the secretary of state for Wales. A raft of educational quangos in England is replicated in Wales. There are Higher and Further Education Funding Councils for Wales and, in 1994, the Curriculum Council for Wales gave way to a Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales. The inspection of schools in Wales is organized by a separate inspectorate. Yet it remains that major policy initiatives have not been formulated with the needs of Wales in mind; the most that has been allowed is adaptation at the margin.

Fourthly, reorientation in the content of school education in Wales has raised essential questions about the nature of 'Welshness', to the extent that the former chief executive of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority, charged with planning the curriculum for England, has used the example of Wales to argue for a similar debate about the nature of an English cultural heritage. Success indeed! At first glance this would seem to cast doubt on earlier concentration on the stark limitations of Welsh autonomy. In the immediate post-war years, subject matter in Welsh schools was governed substantially by tradition and the examination system. Secondary (grammar) school curricula had been laid down by regulation at the beginning of the century and, despite loosening of this control, the menu of academic subjects had been little modified. The hierarchy of subjects which had been maintained by matriculation requirements still dominated thinking — and requirements for university entrance which, from the 1950s, was regulated by Ordinary and Advanced level examinations. In the secondary modern — and indeed the all-age schools — the curriculum was far more utilitarian. Despite the transition to comprehensive schools and the raising of the school-leaving age the divide was maintained into the 1980s — until the advent of the General Certificate of Secondary Education — by the separate O level and CSE examinations. The latter were intended for the middle cohort in the ability range and were far more practical. Their currency was limited.

The external examination system was particularly significant since central government control over the curriculum was less marked than at any time in the history of state education. From 1964 the Schools Council, with its teacher majority, was entrusted with curricular initiatives which included a range of exciting subject projects but no attempt to tackle the problem of the whole curriculum. Although there was a Schools Council Committee for Wales it inevitably echoed the parent body's piecemeal approach. Therefore the one substantial overview of the 'Welshness' of the whole curriculum which it produced had little impact. As doubts about Britain's economic performance and the education and training practices which underpinned it escalated, so civil service and government pronouncements more overtly invaded the secret garden of the curriculum. James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin College speech publicized the new agenda. Curriculum concerns meshed eventually with political dogma to produce the 1988 Education Act. This Act provided for a curriculum which was to be taught in all schools in England and Wales. The list of subjects was drawn up by Secretary of State Kenneth Baker personally and certainly without consultation with any Welsh interest. However, its form and implementation have had unforeseen consequences for Wales. A traditional subject-based curriculum encapsulated notions of education as the transmission of cultural heritage; the concept of a 'national' cultural heritage immediately raised questions as to which nation's heritage was involved. The issues were then fought out on intellectual and institutional bases. The ambitions of the Welsh Office Education Department and the Curriculum Council for Wales to stake out their independence meshed with theoretical analyses to produce a National Curriculum for Wales which is substantially at variance with that in England. The Welsh language, though not now to be compulsory as a second language beyond the age of fourteen, has a more secure place than ever before. The history and geography of Wales have merited different degrees of separate treatment, as have music and art.

The 'Welshness' which these differences represent is interesting. Historical and cultural differences in the Welsh experience are obviously reflected. But some distinctions in music and art reflect something more subtle — a significantly greater degree of teacher influence in Wales and its encouragement by the Curriculum Council for Wales. The limits to this, on the other hand, have been vividly demonstrated by the fate of the controversial curriculum in English. Welsh wishes for more teacher autonomy and less prescription of content, finding approval in the Curriculum Council for Wales, have not been allowed to shape the nature of this core subject in the schools of Wales. Wales has to follow England. Nothing more vividly encapsulates the nature of Welsh autonomy.

The education story since 1945 illuminates themes crucial to the Welsh experience: the nature of democracy in Wales, the relationship between central and local government, cultural distinctiveness — in both languages — and its transmission, the fate of the Welsh language in an era of population mobility, chameleon communities and mixed employment prospects. The recent history of education in Wales, like the other histories which follow, is ample indication that the matter of Wales in the 1990s requires a response from us all.