

‘The Country of my Heart’: Lord Howard de Walden and Wales

Hazel Walford Davies

The subject of this lecture is the eighth Lord Howard de Walden, or Thomas Evelyn Scott-Ellis (1880–1946), dramatist, librettist, essayist, linguist, medievalist, actor, poet, and painter – a Renaissance man. He was also a billionaire, professional national fencing champion, owner of Haymarket Theatre, hunter of wild animals on his Kenyan estate, rally racing driver, and owner of race horses, yachts, and estates. Here was a very English lord who, in 1911, on the occasion of his engagement to Margherita von Raalte, was described as ‘England’s richest bachelor peer’, and his Marylebone estate as ‘a veritable Eldorado’. My aim will be to trace this deeply English aristocrat’s determined attempt from 1911 onwards to create a modern Welsh identity, not only for himself, but also for Wales, ‘the country of my heart’ – a phrase to which I shall return.

That this lecture is delivered at 11 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square, London, has a certain appropriateness, since the location forms part of the Lord Howard de Walden estate. And Lord Howard de Walden himself was of course for many years a major player and patron in the history and management of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion. At the Annual General Meeting of the Society on 30 January 1936, it was noted that ‘the Rt. Hon. Lord Howard de Walden has indicated his willingness to accept nomination for the Presidency’.¹ Members of the Council felt that ‘from the service Lord Howard de Walden has already rendered to cultural causes in Wales, and the pleasure with which he accepted the nomination [...] the Society could find no person who could better fill this high office’.²

On his death, ten years later, it was noted in the ‘Report of the Council of The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion’, that:

[The] Society had suffered a great loss in the passing of our President, Lord Howard de Walden. He was a many-sided man – a gentleman of most liberal mind and taste who held a deep interest for all Welsh culture and tradition [...] His reputation will stand as one of the great patrons of the Arts in the tradition of those great patrons whose praises our poets sang in times of old: in all likelihood he will be classed as the last of such great patrons. In consequence he filled the position of President of this Society with perhaps greater appropriateness than any of his predecessors; he was interested in all our activities and had generously supported our project of a Cymmrodorion Dictionary of Welsh Biography. In all things he was modest and retiring. *Yr oedd yn caru’r encilion*.³

1 ‘Report of the Council for the Year Ending 31st December, 1935’, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1933–34).

2 Ibid.

3 ‘Report of the Council for the Year Ending 31st December, 1946’, *THSC* (1946–47), p. 1.

To appreciate why Lord Howard de Walden chose Wales as his adopted country we need to know something of the man himself. To borrow Wordsworth's words (my italics):

if with this
 I mix more lowly matter; with the thing
 Contemplated, describe the Mind and Man
 Contemplating; and *who*, and *what* he was –
 The transitory Being that beheld
 This Vision; *when* and *where*, and *how* he lived –
 Be not this labour useless.

(from 'Preface' to *The Excursion*)

But before I proceed, it is as well to note that this eccentric, generous billionaire who did so much for Wales between 1911 and 1946, especially in the field of theatre and performance, was destined for nearly three quarters of a century to become a mere footnote or an 'aside' in the historical explorations of nationhood or identity in modern Wales. Think of studies such as *Rebirth of a Nation*, *When was Wales?*, *Wales! Wales?*, *The Welsh Question: Religion, Language and Nationality in Wales*, and *A History of Modern Wales*. In all these volumes our foremost historians have bypassed *performance* as a historical source, opting instead for the safety of the poem on the page or the clarity of the narrative novel. Lord Howard de Walden's major contribution, largely through the medium of theatre, in changing the face of the national identity debate in Wales has been largely ignored.

And yet, on the death of Lord Howard in November 1946, the arts in Wales lost an enlightened and generous patron. For over thirty years he had provided spontaneous and unflinching support to Welsh artists and writers, and to major Welsh institutions such as The National Museum, The National Library, The National Eisteddfod and the four Colleges comprising the then federal University of Wales. But it was theatre, above all the other arts, that truly engaged his interest, and between 1911 and 1940 he committed himself to funding and developing three particular aspects of the Welsh theatre scene, namely the drama competitions and performances at the National Eisteddfod, the Welsh branch of the British Drama League, and the movement to establish a Welsh National Theatre. To all these causes he gave as generously of his time as of his money. For thirty years Lord Howard de Walden was in effect a one-man Arts Council for Wales. He was a genuinely – and affectionately – respected figure at national and regional cultural events. Following his death, many cultural institutions, societies, and committees had to look elsewhere, not only for a patron in the funding sense, but also for a chairman, president, supporter and inspirer.

Who, therefore, was he? Himself the son of a billionaire, Thomas Scott-Ellis was born in 1880 and educated at Cheam, Eton, and Sandhurst. He chose not to proceed to Oxford or Cambridge, and throughout his life he deeply distrusted those he regarded as 'dry-as-dust' academics. In a letter to his friend, the Celtic scholar and professor at the University of Liverpool, J. Glyn Davies, he refers with

contempt to 'the cloven-hoof of the professor'.⁴ He also confided to the same friend that one of his dreams was to establish in Wales a major national institution 'from which pariahs like members of parliament and barristers were utterly and absolutely debarred'.⁵

Thomas Scott-Ellis, himself an eccentric, was born into a highly dysfunctional family. For a period, his father insisted on living the life of a recluse on a liner out at sea, and his mother Blanche abandoned the family to live an independent life in the south of France, when her son was still very small. His abandonment, coupled with his own retiring nature, made him a lonely, introspective child who welcomed escape from the reality of everyday life in the colour, romance, and action provided by his voracious reading of the tales of chivalry of the Middle Ages. When in London he was 'a great frequenter of theatres', in particular of historical plays and pageants. These attractions, however, had to be forgone at Sandhurst and during his period with the 10th Hussars in the Boer War. His service with his regiment in that war was cut short in 1901 to allow him to return to London to attend to the magnificent titles, wealth, and estates that he had inherited. In 1899, his enormously wealthy grandmother, Lady Lucy Cavendish-Bentinck (sister of the fourth Duke of Portland) had died, leaving her vast estate and fortune to Thomas, her nineteen-year-old grandson, and in the same year his father had also died. In 1899, therefore, the young man inherited the titles of 8th Lord Howard de Walden and 4th Lord Seaford, and became the owner of hugely valuable estates in Kilmarnock and in London's Marylebone.

So what prompted this super-rich, Eton-educated lord to seek a settled home in Wales? It was his love of theatre, his fascination for the Middle Ages, and his own Welsh ancestry. All three things prompted him in 1911 to lease Chirk Castle, near Wrexham in Denbighshire, from the Myddleton family, and to renew the lease in 1936 for a further ten years. Chirk village itself dates back to the late thirteenth century and the medieval castle had been owned by his ancestors, the Earls of Arundel in the fourteenth century. This, together with the fact that it was near the Welsh home area of his Ellis ancestors, made leasing the castle irresistible. In 1929, doubling his connection with that part of Wales, he bought the Old Hall, Croesnewydd, the old home of the Ellis family itself.

In 1910, a year before he took the lease on Chirk Castle, he had visited Wales in the company of Josef Holbrooke. What had prompted the journey then was his reading of Lady Charlotte Guest's 1846 translation of the Welsh medieval tales, *The Mabinogion*, and whilst driving through the Welsh countryside he and Holbrooke naturally paid homage to the places associated with the heroes of those seminal tales of chivalry, magic, and mythology. There is no record of his having visited Chirk Castle that time in 1910 but, had he seen it, even from a distance, one feels he would have recognized it as the place where he could realize his dream of re-enacting medieval tournaments, hunting with hawks, and wearing medieval costumes. Indeed, in her autobiography *Pages From My Life*, Lady Howard de Walden describes how she and her husband ('Tommy') used to appear at dinner

4 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, J. Glyn Davies Papers, 5222.

5 Ibid, 5208.

at the castle in elaborate costumes and how they used to keep up ‘ridiculous conversations throughout, which though it astonished the household, was very good fun’.⁶

She also describes the occasion when the artist Augustus John, on one of his many visits to Chirk, came downstairs one morning to find de Walden reclining in a comfortable chair in the billiard room in his bespoke suit of armour, reading *The Times*.⁷ It is a perfect example of the no-nonsense bohemian world of Augustus John encountering the higher-nonsense of the aristocratic world. It was this very same suit of armour, designed for him by Joubert, the expert in antique reproduction, that de Walden wore with panache during the medieval tournaments held annually at Chirk castle, where he played the role of King Arthur. The suit also made an appearance at the 1920 pageant held at Harlech Castle, with Lord Howard resplendent as the Earl of Pembroke.

De Walden’s pursuit of medievalism was crucial in his choice of Chirk as one of his family homes. But the castle also became a ‘Camelot’ in that other, metaphoric sense (*à la* President John F. Kennedy’s White House) to which major artistic figures are drawn because they are made welcome. Guests at Chirk were not just literal royalty, such as Queen Mary herself, but major poets, artists, dramatists, and composers such as W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, J. M. Barrie, George Moore, Augustus John, Josef Holbrooke, and Delius. On the Welsh front, the list included Saunders Lewis, Kate Roberts, T. Gwynn Jones, Thomas Taig and R. S. Thomas, amongst many others. And, no doubt, they were all given a taste of de Walden’s eccentricity.

It was this eccentricity that prompted him, during the First World War, to present all members of his regiment with ‘machette’ swords which he had paid to have made to the special pattern of those used by the Welsh soldiers at the battle of Crécy in 1346.⁸ How decisive the ‘machette’ swords could have been six centuries later is a different matter. At the same time, he gifted his stable of racehorses to the cause of the British army in Egypt without first assessing how such finely-bred creatures would cope with desert conditions. And, again, he gave his luxury yacht ‘The Rhiannon’ to the navy for use as a mine sweeper! On a slightly later, less nationally-fraught, occasion he totally financed the construction of an aeroplane that would, he hoped, help Britain rival the achievement of the American Wright brothers who had designed and (in 1903) flown the first powered aircraft. On an appointed morning a large crowd of invited guests gathered to witness the first flight of de Walden’s expensive plane but, despite all the razzamatazz, the plane failed to rise to a height of more than a few metres. In a sense, the fate of the costly aeroplane, constructed without sufficient expertise, know-how, and forward planning, is an advance emblem of de Walden’s generous and brave attempt to give Wales nothing less than her own national theatre.

Today, before embarking on such a venture, we would be proceeding cautiously

6 Margherita Howard de Walden, *Pages From My Life* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1965), p. 93.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–4.

along countless feasibility studies, business plans, public consultations, and accountability studies – all honourable procedures. In de Walden's time, it was a different world. He demanded no guarantees from those to whom he gifted his money, and was not balked by difficulties along the way. He was from the start absolutely convinced of the real need, at that particular moment in history, for a national theatre for Wales. In all his ventures, what shines through is his cultural goodwill and enlightened generosity. In Ben Jonson's words in *Volpone*, de Walden could really claim, 'I know the *use* of riches!'

Of course, the establishment of a Welsh national theatre was an enterprise involving something very different from making a gift of swords or backing a brand-new concept of powered flight. And yet they were all metaphors of immediate national need, metaphors of heroism, speed, and flight. Lord Howard de Walden was not a natural soldier or engineer in any literal sense, but in the context of his dream of a national theatre for Wales, we must remember that he was himself an imaginative writer, as a dramatist. Under the name of T. E. Ellis, he published privately in 1922 *The Cauldron of Annwn*. In that trilogy (*The Children of Don*, *Bronwen*, and *Dylan, Son of the Waves*) he made use of the material he had discovered in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion*. He was himself, however, fully aware of the limited appeal of his own works, including the Byzantine plays, *Heraclius*, *Constantine*, and *Justinian*.⁹ But his delight extended just as joyously to the pantomimes that he scripted and directed for annual performance by members of his own family at Chirk Castle and Seaford House. The high point of each performance was the appearance of the author himself, regaled in a splendid dragon suit, costumed specially for himself by the well-known dress designer Bruce Winston. From all accounts, de Walden played the draconian part with zest. The dragon suit was one that could make him appear now as the 'Red Dragon of Wales' and on another occasion as any other kind of dragon deemed to be necessary. Whichever way, we have evidence that de Walden delighted his invited audience with an always fierce representation of 'The Welsh dragon of Chirk'. But how did others see the lord of Chirk?

In Gerald Cumberland's volume *Written in Friendship* there is a most interesting assessment of Howard de Walden's character. During the early 1920s he financed a tour to the south Wales valleys by the London Symphony Orchestra, prompted by his belief that classical music would be a balm to the souls of the deprived miners. On the evening of the concert, in the Pavilion at Mountain Ash, Lord Aberdare was to be seen ensconced, at a distance from his workers, in his ostentatious private box. Lord Aberdare comes in for criticism by Cumberland: 'He was [...] noticeable only for his arrogance [...] The hard, unsympathetic aristocrat is not a lovely figure.'¹⁰ Then he hastens to provide a contrasting cameo of de Walden:

But of course, there are lords and lords. Lord Howard de Walden also came to Mountain Ash. A clever, whimsical, good-natured man, this. He hung about for many hours ready to undertake any little job

9 T. E. Ellis, *The Byzantine Plays*, ed. Thomas Seymour (Windsor: Wilton 65, 2006).

10 Gerald Cumberland, *Written in Friendship* (London: Grant Richards, 1923), p. 197.

[...] an affable lord. A lord who spends money freely on music and literature [...] who writes rugged poetry not always obedient to the laws of syntax.¹¹

Cumberland's contagious enthusiasm for the man is like a speech in a Shakespeare comedy. The same is true even when he is making the shrewd point that de Walden 'is destroyed by his own versatility, foiled and defeated by his clever adaptability. In consequence, he has a dim but very widespread reputation; it is generally felt that he "does things", but no one quite knows what the things are that he does. I feel he would have it so.'¹²

Even with its genuine admiration, Cumberland's assessment is not adequate. In 1911, when de Walden settled at Chirk Castle, it was widely known that his major aim was to revive the world of drama in Wales, and specifically to create a national theatre. He was encouraged to set out on the venture by two friends – the novelist George Moore and the poet and dramatist W. B. Yeats. The two Irishmen, during their regular visits to de Walden's London home, Seaford House, urged him to shoulder the responsibility of funding the revival of theatre in his adopted home country. He was further urged to follow the example of the patrons of theatre in Ireland, such as Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and Annie Horniman. Yeats and Moore also emphasized the cognate importance of supporting a new enthusiasm for the Welsh language through the medium of theatre so as to boost at source a sense of Welsh identity. This reflected what was already de Walden's own view, as one who himself learned the Welsh language to the degree of being able to write as well as read it, and to speak it formally on public occasions as well as in private conversation. In his *Confessions of a Young Man*, Moore records in the essay 'Epistle to the Cymry' ('Letter to the Welsh People') that:

I used to confide in Lord Howard all my plans for the revival of the Irish language, and one of my plans was a travelling theatre; my plan had come down from Goethe, who, when he was consulted as to the best means whereby the German language might be established in Poland, answered, 'The best way to interest a people in a language is through the theatre.'¹³

Taking pride like this in Lord Howard's campaign for a national theatre in Wales at the start of the 1920s, George Moore rejoiced that 'Goethe's idea has come to birth in Wales'.

With a view to providing plays suitable for performance by a national theatre company, de Walden offered in a piece in the *Western Mail* of 24 February 1911 a prize of £100 for a new, original play in Welsh or in English. A requirement was that it should deal with 'things Welsh', even though it could be set in any period at all. Competitors were given complete freedom to encompass 'drama, facts or

11 Ibid., p. 201.

12 Ibid.

13 George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1939), p. 272.

fantasies, history, Ireland or grimmest realities'. Delivering his adjudication in the *Western Mail* of 30 November 1911, de Walden explained that his purpose in establishing the competition was 'to elicit plays "that ought to be performed". Yearly there are many plays staged which are "actable" but which should certainly never be performed [...] My hopes were based a little on the history of the Abbey Theatre.'

In the 1912 competition, however, a play was submitted that decisively won the full prize – a play called *Change* by J. O. Francis. Even so, in his adjudication in *The Western Mail* in January 1913, de Walden announced that he would not thereafter give the prize to so 'English' a play: 'I feel a certain grudge against the author of "Change" in that his work might well have been submitted to the horde of hungry managers in London with a good chance of success [...] Henceforward any contribution founded too obviously upon an English model will be viewed with a baleful eye. Steal as much from the English but don't copy them.' So it must have been to his personal delight that in the 1913 competition it was two Welsh-language playwrights who came to the top. On 1 January 1914, announcing his verdict in the *Western Mail*, he said, 'As the competition and the award is more for the purpose of stimulating authors, than making a definite decision as to merit, I think it will be well if the prize is divided between these two authors. I am very glad the old tongue has it this year.' The two prize-winners were R. G. Berry under the pseudonym 'Peredur' for *Ar y Groesffordd*, and D. R. Davies ('Ap Mwnwr') for *Ble Ma Fa?*, *Ephraim Harris* and *Y Dieithryn*. In the adjudication, de Walden states clearly his support for the Welsh language. He was convinced that 'the worthiest things would come from the land's own language' and declared his determination to give an opportunity to let 'a very living tongue have its full play and find as large an audience as it could'.

What exactly prompted de Walden to fund such a prize and what kind of Wales awaited him on his arrival at Chirk in 1911? The painting by Christopher Williams (Maesteg) entitled *Wales Awakening/Deffroad Cymru*, commissioned by George V to commemorate the investiture of Edward, Prince of Wales at Caernarfon in 1911, tells us a great deal. Its iconography celebrates the new sense of national pride, the new confidence and the new optimism that characterized the Wales of the period. The country was experiencing an economic boom, the National Library of Wales and the National Museum of Wales were built, having been granted a royal charter in 1907, thus guaranteeing the preservation of Welsh art and culture. Major cultural figures, through their publications, most notably O. M. Edwards, were establishing a strong sense of pride and patriotism, and Welsh-speaking Liberals, most notably Lloyd George, were speaking and acting in the political arena for the working people of Wales. And on the football field there was the amazing Billy Meredith, born in Chirk within a short walk of Chirk Castle. In 1911, J. E. Lloyd had published his two-volume *A History of Wales from Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, O. M. Edwards's *Wales* had appeared, and so had Captain Arthur Owen Vaughan's *Flame-Bearers of Welsh History*.¹⁴ And all this optimism

14 See Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 227–33.

flourished against a background of tremendous social unrest. There had been in 1910 violence and force on the streets of Tonypandy; in 1911 there was a serious seamen's strike in the port of Cardiff; and during the railwaymen strike at Llanelli in the same year there were fatalities. In 1912 Noah Ablett's *The Miners' Next Step* called on miners to unite and engage in strikes and class conflict.

It was against this dual background therefore of optimism and discontent that Lord Howard de Walden prepared for his theatrical enterprise in Wales. I mentioned just now the volume *Flame-Bearers of Welsh History*. The author was Captain Arthur Owen Vaughan alias Robert Scourfield Mills, alias 'the Kid', alias Owen Rhoscomyl. He was one of de Walden's closest Welsh friends, and long before 1911 was the one who had commanded this English lord to stand up and declare his nationality. Lord Howard did so, declaring his allegiance to Wales. Rhoscomyl was a fierce believer in the power of performance to awaken a nation's patriotism. It was he who master-minded the National Pageant of Wales at Cardiff in 1909 and who had no difficulty in 1911 in persuading de Walden to provide substantial funding and support for the ceremony of the investiture of the Prince of Wales that year in Caernarfon. According to Rhoscomyl, 'the blaze of pageantry' and performance at Caernarfon would declare to the world that Wales was 'a land to which the Empire may look for help and strength in the hour of temptation and in the day of danger. Cymru am byth!'¹⁵ De Walden fully agreed with these sentiments and contributed to the financing of Beriah Gwynfe Evans's script for the investiture which featured a super-tame Prince Llywelyn and a pathetically tame Glyndŵr. As Hywel Teifi Edwards put it:

Quite simply, it would never do for Llywelyn and Glyndŵr, as native warrior Princes of Wales, to act in a manner likely to provoke in any of the onlookers feelings of resentment, or shame, or anger at the thought of conquest or subjugation.¹⁶

But, interestingly, within a year of the investiture, de Walden had redressed the balance and had written *Pont Orewyn*, his own Prince Llywelyn play.¹⁷ Here was the warrior Prince of Wales and his pitiless butchery depicted with extraordinary theatrical pyrotechnics at the National Theatre Company's performances in 1914. Even before the Great War it seems that de Walden had begun to question the concept of empire, because in this play he was actually trying to arouse in the onlooker 'feelings of resentment, or shame, or anger at the thought of conquest or subjugation.' In terms of performance, Welsh audiences had never seen the like before, because de Walden, himself as technician, used – for the first time in Wales – cinema techniques for the Wild Fowl scenes, techniques he had used before in the performance of 'Dylan, Son of the Wave' in Drury Lane in 1913. As he explained in a booklet on *The Cauldron of Annwn*, the scenes were taken 'after much trouble, from the great flock of seagulls at the Bass Rock, Scotland.' Here therefore was

15 Hywel Teifi Edwards, *The National Pageant of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2009), p. 179.

16 Ibid.

17 T. E. Ellis, *Pont Orewyn* (Cardiff: Cardiff Educational Publishing Co. Ltd., 1914).

a consummate innovator in the art of theatre. But I shall leave a discussion of de Walden's first National Theatre Movement for later.

On 11 September 1914, after a long, complacent Edwardian summer, de Walden left Chirk for Egypt to join the Westminster Dragoons. On his return to England in 1916 he joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in the trenches of Passchendaele. As Lady Howard de Walden put it, with a blitheness that would have positively detonated a poem by Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon:

He liked being with the Welsh Regiment and was able to practise [his] Welsh. He asked for a photograph of his children, for his books and band music, for his little Welsh dictionary. 'Please ask the tailor,' he said, 'to send me another pair of breeches. I like these, but have spilt the marmalade over them.'¹⁸

Even so, being in a theatre of war crystallized a deep, private vision of his essentially dramatic relationship with Wales. In 1915 he had been attached to the 29th Division for the Gallipoli expedition, first as Military Landing Officer at Imbros and at Sulva Bay and then as Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Y.M.G. Taking part in the evacuation of Sulva in December 1915, he was himself one of the very last to be brought out at the end of that tragic campaign. A few weeks earlier, in the midst of the fighting, he wrote a very long (unpublished) letter to his son John.¹⁹ For junior officers, the expectation of survival was a matter of weeks: 'I am afraid,' he wrote, 'I must go landless to the end, and likely enough leave my carcass out here upon this undesired cape.' That word 'landless' is a poignant pun, suggesting 'without a country', not just *terra infirma*. This is more than a letter – it is a personal testament in the face of likely death, in which Wales – indeed, the 'Matter of Wales' in the David Jones sense – is involved, to most memorable effect. Naturally, the powerful physical beauty of the very land of Wales is there:

I often walk in imagination as it is up the hill behind Chirk, round through the Warren and down to Tynant and I think I can make sure of every yard of ground. And often, too, I go and sit beside the little pool of the Ceiriog [river] under the Gelli wood [...] I am sitting now in my room in Adams tower looking up the valley and the wind is driving the wet leaves against the panes and the fierce wind all warm and misty is booming up through those wonderful tall oaks straight from the Berwyns.

This is every bit as powerful as D. H. Lawrence's description of the landscape seen from one of his childhood Nottinghamshire homes as 'the country of my heart' – the source from which I have taken my title.

In the midst of war, de Walden's letter poignantly dwells more on Wales's

18 M. Howard de Walden, *Pages From My Life*, p. 144.

19 This letter, from the which the following quotations are taken, is in the archives of Howard de Walden Management Ltd.

culture than on its topography. 'I have felt something always drawing me towards this people,' he continues. 'It may be the passion I have always felt for the *Mabinogion*.' Most tellingly, this eccentric aristocrat and brave soldier urges his son to stand up and be counted wherever the life of the mind is in question, or under threat. 'Don't let the fools persuade you,' he says, 'that there is anything peculiarly manly in being a pudding-head ignoramus.' Even then, in 1915, he was asking his son to imagine a world in which 'a real aristocracy of very able men might be allowed to administer small areas with absolute powers'. Any totalitarian dangers in that term 'absolute powers' would not have occurred to a person of such obvious goodwill. Indeed, it is striking how *anti-imperialist* the tone of the whole document is. The cultural stand it makes is in the cause of what we now have in Wales – devolution. But de Walden's strength lay in seeing so early that the only *real* devolution is devolution of the mind:

I have grown to love the idea of the small state more and more as I grow older. I have steadily lost interest in empires and, if I have not come down absolutely to the parish pump, I now regard my own country as merely one of a very loose confederacy of small states, some of which will in the course of time develop upon other lines than our own and possibly break away to form other ties and alliances. For this reason I have fallen into great sympathy with Wales, liking its sturdy clinging to its old tongue and tradition. I do not love the state in which I find it. I am far from admiring the results that the pawnbroker ideals of the last century have achieved. In fact the country and its people are in a [parlous ?] condition due, as usual, largely to fermented religion. But it is a country so beautiful in itself, so full of bad poets (a most desirable quality) that I do still believe it might achieve some sort of individual life. I was trying, before our lives broke up, to work out a sort of dream of it in a modernized version of Rhonabwy: if God spares me I should like to try and finish it, but I am writing all this in case I should not return to my ordinary work again and then it will matter very little what I tried to do. I do not suppose that you or anyone else will care to take the work up.

After the Great War, Lord Howard de Walden and his family settled once again in Chirk. But, apart from immediately funding a drama-writing competition in 1919, he could not quickly address himself to re-establishing the National Theatre Company. The horrors of the war had deeply disturbed him, and indeed for several years he lost his appetite for life. In a letter to his son John in 1921 he says, 'The one that writes to you now is no more than the husk living out a life that he finds infinitely wearisome.'²⁰ He spent long periods in the Congo and in his fine house in Kenya. Back home in Wales, while Lady Howard de Walden would be involved in riding to hounds with the Wynnstay Hunt or in welcoming members of the royal family to Chirk Castle, de Walden himself would often retreat to his room in Adams

20 Lord Howard de Walden [9th], *Earls Have Peacocks* (London: Haggerston Press, 1992), p. 36.

Tower to read or write or paint. He started taking an interest in psychic phenomena and frequenting *séances*. In the words of his son, 'There is no doubt that it was a different man that came back after the War.'²¹ And yet he clung to his interest in theatre, clinging for example to his annual role as producer of pantomimes in the Long Gallery at Chirk, for the entertainment of his family and friends – that ultimate devolution you might say! His own favourite pantomime was *The Reluctant Dragon*, in which two of his children, the twins John and Branwen, took the stage in the company of 'Y Ddraig Gyndyn' – Lord Howard de Walden himself, of course.

It was this 'different man' who responded most generously in 1920 to a request from the Irishman, Perceval Graves, to fund a proposed Harlech Castle pageant. This, of course, was a period when rich Englishmen of independent means congregated at Harlech for the summer months and built for themselves handsome summer villas. One of these villas belonged to Perceval Graves, and he named it Erinfa ('Ireland Place'), a house name bilingually linking Ireland and Wales. It was a mark of very different times that even the National Eisteddfod's *Gorsedd* of Bards were more than eager to welcome these summer visitors to their midst. Overnight, Graves became, with due pomp, performance, and ceremony a member of the *Gorsedd*. He chose the name 'Canwr Cilarni', the 'Singer of Killarney' – again bilingually linking Ireland and Wales. The Harlech Pageant of 1920 was Perceval Graves's brainchild, but he immediately crossed the border to invite the English Shakespearean actor Patrick Kirwan to be the producer. Together they drew up a programme of 'token' Welshness – composed of scenes from *Cymbeline*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

This then was to be the Harlech pageant – that is, until de Walden came more fully on the scene. He agreed to be the major patron – but with non-negotiable conditions – conditions which the 'Singer of Killarney' could not afford to ignore. Graves had appealed, in vain, for financial support from other landowners and lords. One obvious patron, William Ormsby-Gore, son of Lord Harlech, sent a brusque reply:

I doubt whether I can be of much assistance as with an English constituency and an Irish property on my hands I cannot undertake responsibilities, financial or otherwise, in Wales as well.²²

What meaning, then, one would like to ask, does a title like 'Lord Harlech' have? Graves had instead to rely on de Walden's patronage, and with no choice but to accept his wishes. They were as follows:

- 1 The pageant's script had to be firmly rooted in the history of Harlech Castle itself. He suggested scenes illustrating the story of *Cantre'r Gwaelod*, the story of Branwen, the Glyndŵr Harlech episodes, and the story of Queen Margaret of Anjou's stay at the Castle.

21 Ibid.

22 NLW, The Harlech Pageant Papers, 3264D.

- 2 Lord and Lady Howard de Walden would have major roles to play, as would the hawks of Chirk Castle.
- 3 Lord Howard's rare collection of suits of armour would be deployed throughout the performance.
- 4 The ceremonies of the *Gorsedd* of the National Eisteddfod of Wales would be celebrated at the opening and the close of the pageant.

De Walden also requested that there should be at least one Welsh-language scene, and on this he received the wholehearted support of Sir Ernest Rhys, one of the script writers. This was the only request that the 'Singer of Killarney' and his committee could not accommodate.

Why in 1920 was de Walden so insistent on the inclusion of the pageantry of the *Gorsedd* in the Harlech performance? It was because in the National Eisteddfod at Corwen in 1919 he himself had been received as one of the main actors into the Stone Circle, and after that ceremony he declared that his identity as a Welshman had now been finally celebrated. He adopted the modest bardic name of 'Ellis o'r Waun', Ellis of Chirk, while Lady Howard de Walden, less modestly, chose the name 'Perl y Waun', the Pearl of Chirk. In her autobiography, she says that she received her bardic honour from the Welsh because she 'sang to them their songs in Welsh'. For Lady Howard de Walden, it was 'them' and 'us'. There had been no assimilation, no adoption.

And now to her performance at Harlech. The pageant allowed her to be exactly where she wanted to be – centre stage. In the *Cambrian News* of August 1919 her performance is described, in a wonderful oxymoron, as 'the height of histrionic perfection', and singled out for further ironic praise is her 'dramatic exit', accompanied by numerous troubadours singing 'Ffarwel i ti Peggy Ban'. The Chirk hawks failed to appear – they had escaped their keeper.

De Walden's wish to have the Welsh language featured in the pageant reflected the fact that he was himself by now a competent Welsh speaker. He had taken pains to learn the language because he was convinced that a true sense of identity and nationhood could only be realized by mastering 'the old tongue' and 'reading first-hand, its literature'. It was R. S. Thomas, Lord Howard's curate at Chirk in the late 1930s, who spoke of knowing from experience how difficult any language is to master so as to be able to hold controversy in it. Howard de Walden could and did hold controversy in it. A letter in Welsh of 1927, inviting members of Plaid Cymru's Summer School to Chirk Castle, testifies that he could also *write* the language with panache.²³

As we saw earlier, it was partly as an attempt to foster the Welsh language that de Walden established his Welsh National Theatre Movement in 1914. In reality, however, apart from some of the plays in the repertoire, there was little that was Welsh-language orientated about the Company itself. The programmes were in English, as were the publicity notices. J. Tywi Jones, the influential editor of *Tarian y Gweithiwr* ('The Shield of the Worker'), censured a lack of respect for the Welsh language in the Company's administration: 'A young girl came by,' he wrote, 'and

23 NLW, E. T. John Papers, 4816.

we asked her in Welsh for a programme, but she couldn't understand us, so we had to ask her in English. And then again there was not a word of Welsh on the printed programme itself, apart from the titles of two of the plays and their actors. And here again "Lager Beer" is what faced us on the first page, and whisky on the second.²⁴ It was, to say the least, totally insensitive to publish a printed programme that was as good as being English-only, especially if we recall that one of the declared aims of the movement was to promote and safeguard the Welsh language. It seemed that, in the face of market forces and ticket sales, de Walden lost sight of Goethe's advice to use theatre 'as a means of interesting people in a language'.

De Walden chose south Wales to launch his new theatre company precisely because two-thirds of the population of Wales in 1914 lived in the Monmouthshire and Glamorganshire valleys. He was particularly anxious to engage the interest of the articulate working-class of the valleys in theatre as a potent art form. At least his concern was not focused on the growing middle classes of Wales. He saw performances of plays such as *Change*, *Ble Ma Fa?*, *Ar y Groesffordd*, and indeed *The Poacher* as initiators, essentially, of *debate*, class-wide and nation-wide. He hoped that – against large, essentially bureaucratic, pettifogging opposition – 'these plays will encourage debate, self-discovery, self-awareness and self-criticism amongst my fellow-Welshmen'. I am reminded of John Donne's lines:

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go;
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.
(‘Satyre III’)

There is no doubt that de Walden's uphill climb in establishing a national theatre company greatly helped 'theatre' itself to be seen in early twentieth-century Wales as a form – via performance – of self-realization, identity, and nationhood.

The catalyst in the Company's repertoire was J. O. Francis's *Change* – a play based on the 1911 Llanelli railway strike. But it could be argued that all the plays in the National Company's tour gave voice, in Saunders Lewis's words, against 'the unseemliness of our time'. As a result, the Company (in a sense, 'theatre' itself) became a platform of revolt. De Walden was convinced that his 1914 tour helped clarify for the Welsh 'their new Welsh identity'. It was a sentiment echoed by Lloyd George, in his address as Chancellor of the Exchequer to the audience at the New Theatre in Cardiff on 16 May 1914, after the performance of *Change*:

It has been a dramatic presentation of the great transformation that has taken place in Welsh life, and the new problems which are confronting Wales. It is well we should understand them, and that they should be brought home to us by the brilliant play which we have witnessed. We in the North are a more stolid and slower race than you in the South, but it is coming our way.

24 See 'Nodiadau'r Golygydd', *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 28 May, 1914.

It is well we should understand it, because understanding means tolerance and indulgence. These changes in the life of a nation don't come without much searching of heart and bitterness, and the more we understand what they mean, and that they are essential to the new life and vital to a progressive nation, the more tolerance will be shown.²⁵

Another report on *Change* performed at the Grand Theatre in Swansea in June 1914 argues robustly for the power of performance:

'Change' portrays a stage of Welsh life [...] a change in outlook and sentiment which is destined to leave lasting marks on the nation. And it could have been portrayed in no other way. We had to have it visualised.²⁶

So why exactly did this visualization initiate a lively, and sometimes fierce, debate? Llywelyn Williams MP, writing in the *South Wales Daily News* on 18 May 1914 believed it was because the play 'held a mirror to life. Now, for the first time [the Welsh] are going to be shown themselves as they appear to be. They have never had self-criticism.' He adds, 'The national life of Wales will never be the same after this.' This point of view is similar to that expressed by H. Idris Bell in *The Welsh Outlook* (August 1914): 'The greatest need in modern Wales is that of self-criticism.' According to Bell, that was the only discipline capable of saving Wales from complacency, and he adds that he would personally be an advocate of drama should it prove to be a means of enacting that self-criticism on the stage. Idris Bell was echoing the view expressed by the editor of *The Welsh Outlook* in its previous number: 'There is nothing we need more in Wales than criticism [...] We want criticism of ourselves in Wales, and that the drama will give us.' It was in effect the same point as that raised by W. J. Gruffydd in *Y Beirniad* in 1911: 'In countries that display as much vanity and foolishness as is seen in Wales today, there comes to birth from time to time the drama of *satire* to scourge the nation's sins. Why do we not have this kind of drama in Wales?' It is of course a question that is still relevant today.

But in Cardiff, during the National Theatre Company's tour, it became clear that the power of performance was not confined to the New Theatre stage. In preparation for the performance on the night of Saturday 6 May 1914, Owen Rhoscomyl, Lord Howard, and Lloyd George had planned 'a play within a play'. The main actor was to be John Williams, Brynsiencyn, who would, they hoped, undermine the chapels' opposition to the new company. His was an unexpected presence, and on that Saturday evening what drew the attention of the press were not just the front rows occupied by zealous members of chapels and churches. The electric moment was the appearance – 'on stage', as it were – of the head of the Calvinistic Methodists in Wales, the Reverend John Williams, Brynsiencyn, walking into Lloyd George's

25 *South Wales Daily News*, 16 May 1914.

26 *The Cambria Daily Leader*, 30 June 1914.

box at the theatre. When the Chancellor and his daughter Olwen, along with eight carefully chosen guests, had taken their seats in the box, and when the audience had settled, John Williams, Brynsiencyn walked slowly, not into a pulpit this time, but still into the midst of the selected few. Lloyd George got up and led him to the empty seat on his right. With not a single word uttered, it was the delivery of the seal of approval of the President of the General Body of the Calvinistic Methodists in Wales on drama as such, and on Howard de Walden's movement towards a national theatre.

The *Western Mail* of 18 May carried a flowery piece declaring triumphantly that 'Pulpit as well as people have been caught in the net of drama.' The writer proceeds to claim that ministers of the gospel would now be preparing their flocks 'for a foretaste of what will inevitably come in the history of a dramatic and emotional as well as an intellectual people'. A piece every bit as celebratory could be found in 'Nodiadau'r Mis' ('Notes for the Month') in *The Welsh Outlook* of June 1914, which claimed that the presence of John Williams, Brynsiencyn in the Chancellor's box in the New Theatre that evening was bound to change the attitude of the Welsh towards drama: 'Knowing his broad outlook we are not surprised. Knowing his country we believe his example will strip the last rag of hypocrisy from those for whom the theatre is a taboo at home and legitimate in London and Liverpool.'

On the previous evening, there had been yet another dramatic performance – and that in the auditorium itself. 'As the curtain came down at the end of the solemn play *Ble Ma Fa?*, a suffragette leaped from her seat in the front row of the circle. She pointed an accusing finger at the Chancellor's box and shouted boldly, "Lloyd George! Is it right for you to come and see a play when women are suffering in prison?" [. . .] There was a howl from the audience of "Chuck her out". She was seized by two stalwart stewards and hustled out with scant ceremony, a strong force of detectives guarding the doors to prevent the audience rushing to the corridors.'²⁷ The audience was persuaded to settle down, and the curtain rose again for the performance of *The Poacher*. But the suffragettes were not totally silenced:

When the curtain rose on the second play, 'The Poacher', the lights having been switched off and the theatre being in darkness, another suffragette got up in the dress circle and in a solemn voice cried out, 'The villain of the piece is in that box there.'

The angry crowd stopped the play, and howled their disgust. She was promptly hustled out by two detectives after the lights had again been switched on, and a few others who had called 'Bravo' were also unceremoniously bundled into the cloakroom. The final interruption came immediately the lights were turned down for T. E. Ellis's historical episode, 'Pont Orewyn'. A woman got up in the front row of the dress circle, but her remarks were soon cut short and, like the previous interrupters, she was ejected through the swing

27 *South Wales Daily News*, 16 May 1914.

doors by three police officers.²⁸

Of course, the police would have known from the start that the presence of Lloyd George at the New Theatre offered the suffragettes a golden opportunity for protest. Indeed, a foretaste of what followed happened the very moment Lloyd George entered his box at the theatre. Everyone got up to welcome the Chancellor, but, above the applause of the audience, the shout was heard – ‘Votes for Women!’ In 1914, the suffragette movement was particularly strong in Cardiff – second only to their strength in London. The movement had been given leadership and impulse by Margaret Haig Mackworth (later Lady Rhondda), a woman punished for jumping on Prime Minister Asquith’s car during his visit to Newport and jailed in 1913 for placing an explosive device in a post-box in Cardiff.²⁹ There is no doubt, though, that an event a few days previously in London had set a pattern for Cardiff’s suffragettes as to how to make their voice heard. During a gala performance in the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, a suffragette had directed a fervent protest at George V in his royal box. *The Western Mail* on 12 May said stuffily that ‘A storm of hissing stopped her further observations’ and that George V simply ignored the protest. And of course, Lloyd George in Cardiff was long acquainted with the suffragette demonstrations in London against his government’s policies. Even so, here in Wales, a VIP box had been made a stage for democratic attention – miniature proscenium arch and curtains and all!

When the Company moved on to Swansea in June 1914, de Walden called on the services of his friends Granville Barker and George Bernard Shaw. Barker, at a dazzling reception hosted by the Mayor of Swansea, sought to convince the Welsh that the development of theatre was a thing of vital necessity to their national life, and Shaw in the *South Wales Daily Post* of 13 June 1914 argued that there were:

two things that may as well be said at the outset somewhat firmly about the proposed Welsh national theatre. If it succeeds it will not be a place for ebullition of patriotic sentiment and flattery of local self-sufficiency. On the contrary, it will be rather a place of humiliation and penitence, relieved by laughter and tears.

Everything that is narrow and ignorant and ridiculous and dishonest in Wales will be castigated ruthlessly by the Welsh national theatre; and the process will not be popular with the narrow, the ignorant, the bigoted, and the ridiculous.

Such a state of things is no longer possible. If Wales will not have the best that Wales can produce she will get the worst that the capitals of Europe can produce; and it will serve her right.

In addition to the impressive brio of this Shavian intervention, de Walden had realized that a local rallying document was also called for. So a public manifesto was issued ‘by well-known citizens calling upon the Swansea people [...] to

28 Ibid.

29 See Angela V. John, *Turning the Tide* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), p. 7, pp. 99–111.

march abreast of the times by supporting Welsh Drama'.³⁰ Titled 'An Appeal to the Patriotic', it was signed by prominent people in Swansea – amongst others, the High Sheriff of Glamorgan, the Chairman of the local branch of the Cymmrodorion, the editors of the *Daily Post* and the *Daily Leader*, D. Clydach Thomas, and D. Vaughan Thomas, the distinguished Welsh composer and father of the broadcaster Wynford Vaughan-Thomas. More interesting, though, is the signature of another Thomas. This was D. J. Thomas, Senior English Master at Swansea Grammar School and father of Dylan Thomas. The poet's father was obviously very much aware of Howard de Walden and of his dramatic interest in the *Mabinogion*. A month after signing the appeal, Dylan Thomas's father would have read the reviews in the local press of de Walden's opera *Dylan, Son of the Wave*. Some three months later his son was born, and christened 'Dylan'. And, by a pleasing coincidence, almost like a grace note in history, thirty years later the already famous Dylan Thomas lived for a short while next door to Plas Llanina, Lord Howard's mansion in Wales on the Cardiganshire coast, and received his patronage and support. There is a fine unpublished letter of December 1944 in which Thomas – at a new productive stage in his career – thanks de Walden for his kindness in letting him use 'the empty cottage the cliff side of the garden wall: a really excellent workroom'.³¹ From the same time, there is also a volume of his poetry that Thomas sent in thanks, inscribed 'to Lord Howard de Walden'.

From Swansea, the Company moved on to Aberystwyth. De Walden did not follow them there, because on Sunday 5 July he was himself an actor in an 'extravaganza' designed by J. M. Barrie and Granville Barker – financed again, of course, by Lord Howard himself. This 'extravaganza' was in fact a mini cowboy film – if, that is, it was possible in 1914 to have a mini version of what was itself still minimalist. There is a description of the film in G. K. Chesterton's autobiography, and also in Peter Whitebrook's biography of William Archer. But far and away the best description of it is that in Lady Howard de Walden's autobiography. It was of course the age of silent film, and the only thing required of 'actors' in that medium was to gesticulate and grimace, as wildly and exaggeratedly as possible. In the J. M. Barrie/ Granville Barker 'extravaganza', all this was done in excitable scenes in deepest Hertfordshire. It was all, of course, a 'sport' – yet all the more sporting because among the 'actors' involved there was not a single nincompoop. They were: George Bernard Shaw, Granville Barker, William Archer, Lord Howard de Walden, and 'dear, enormously fat G. K. Chesterton', with J. M. Barrie in charge of filming. Lady Howard de Walden's description captures the incongruous undertow of it all:

We were instructed to be in a certain field on a certain Sunday, and previously to have stopped at the local pub, where Tommy was to array himself in cowboy chaps over old trousers, with a belt and revolver and hat to match. Now Archer, who wore a long moustachio and who was both good-looking and conscious of it got there first

30 *South Wales Daily Post*, 16 May 1914.

31 Letter in the archives of Howard de Walden Management Ltd.

and chose the best suit. When G. K. Chesterton arrived, none would fit him and there was some anxious reorganising [...] Then the mad scenario began. Tommy and G. K. Chesterton crossed a 'roaring river' in a canal; they inadvertently fell out, Tommy on to his feet and G.K. on his back ... he just lay there prepared to die with his face under ten inches of water, the rest of him very visible. They all had to lower themselves down from a 'perilous cliff' on a rope. In reality it was only ten feet high, and Bernard Shaw remained at the top and orated. He used his arms and declaimed, while we below shouted back, 'You can't be heard on this movie camera, so save your breath G.B.S., and for goodness sake come down, and don't waste so much film' [...] Now at the end of it, the scheme was that I was to catch G.B.S. in a butterfly net – Yes, I agree with you, it makes no sense.³²

The film was anything but a classic of early cinema. But it was still given a première at the Savoy Theatre in London. What saved it from embarrassment was again a play within a play, because the première itself was made to incorporate a silly surprise. Over again to Lady Howard de Walden:

At a given moment Tommy, Archer, and Chesterton arose from their stall seats, and with a roar drew long swords and rushed up on to the stage and the curtains came down. Then the invited audience had supper on the stage and I was at a table with Mr Asquith, Gladys Cooper, Irene Vanburgh and others.³³

But, amid such selfless good humour and so much cavorting and leg-pulling, a certain irony remains. In financing this filmic 'break from reality', de Walden was using the very medium that was the threat to theatre. In that summer of 1914, film of any kind was an ominous threat to things acted live on a stage. And a threat, certainly, to a national theatre in Wales, especially only a travelling one. In fact, 'film', in any form at all, however private, jokey, or 'one-off', was the thing that, in his *South Wales Daily Post* statement (see above), George Bernard Shaw had named as the enemy of theatre.

Of course, in the summer of 1914 de Walden had the dark clouds of more serious drama on his mind than just the state of theatre and performance in Wales. But he never, to use his friend W. B. Yeats's words, 'turned aside to brood', helped no doubt by his selfless willingness occasionally – in Yeats's words again – 'to appear for the song's sake a fool'. The basic fact is that Lord Howard de Walden created a national theatre for Wales by sheer dint of purpose. I cannot think of a better tribute than words in a letter by Gerard Manley Hopkins, that other generous lover of Wales, which ask – and answer – a profound question:

32 M. Howard de Walden, *Pages From My Life*, pp. 97–8.

33 Ibid.

What are works of art for? To educate, to be standards. Education is meant for the many, standards are for public use. To produce them is of little use unless what we produce is known, if known then widely known, the wider known the better. For it is by being known it works, it influences, it does its duty, it does good. We must then try to be known, aim at it, take means to it!³⁴

34 *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. by C. C. Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, new edn., 1955), p. 231.