

‘The Dangerous Edge’: The Welshness of William Emrys Williams¹

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William Emrys Williams (1896–1977), the writer, educator, arts administrator and publisher, was a human powerhouse in the field of cultural transmission. Notions of Welshness reverberated in the epicentre of British cultural life in the middle of the twentieth century; Williams emphasized his links with Wales, and others who knew him treated his Welshness as a factor in the way they constructed his identity. This essay takes as its focus a scholarly biography of Williams by Sander Meredeen, whose comprehensive treatment of Williams’s life includes his Welshness as a significant strand.²

Life-writing about cultural figures within Wales has frequently carried national resonances, supported by recognisable literary tropes. Readers of articles in the *Anglo-Welsh Review* often encountered attributions of remote birth-places, with fervent national sentiment around links to humble origins in rural Wales. The role of early education in encouraging self-expression is often emphasized, together with formative affiliations to Welsh non-conformity.³ It will be seen that these characteristic formations recur in relation to Williams. They are exploited positively by Williams and his friends – but they are also interpreted negatively by his critics. At a time when numbers of Welshmen figured at the heart of the British cultural establishment, Welshness could become a two-edged sword.

Sander Meredeen’s book is called *The Man Who Made Penguins*. This choice of title emphasizes Bill Williams’ role as the Editor-in-Chief of Penguin Books between 1936 and 1965. Williams was a major influence on Allen Lane, the firm’s founder. Lane, whose original intention had been to publish reprints of high quality books, turned to Williams for literary and intellectual support and for strategic advice.⁴ Then in his thirties, Williams had already built a reputation in the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), succeeding Barbara Wootton and R. S. Lambert as editor of the movement’s magazine *Highway* from 1930 and becoming Secretary to the British Institute of Adult Education in 1934. By this time, Williams had published several books on English literature, including a course on précis, a critical study (*Shakespeare to Hardy*) and a set of selections from George Borrow.

1 A longer version of this article has appeared in *Almanac*, 13 (2008/9), 81–108.

2 Sander Meredeen, *The Man Who Made Penguins: The Life of Sir William Emrys Williams* (Stroud: Darien-Jones, 2008). I should acknowledge my interest: the writer was a personal friend and I was involved in editing the final draft of the book, following his death in 2007.

3 Numerous examples of such biographical writing appear in the *Anglo-Welsh Review* through the late 1950s, 1960s and the early 1970s.

4 Meredeen, pp. 78–79.

From 1935, he ran the *Art for the People* project which for the first time took travelling exhibitions around Britain.⁵ He persuaded Lane to start the Pelican imprint alongside the Penguin logo, creating 'a parallel series of cheap books on a wide range of intellectual interests – philosophy, psychology, history, literature, science'.⁶ He brought to his role at Penguin Books a personal commitment to the concepts of adult education and cultural democracy. In Meredeen's words, 'Williams changed the reading habits and filled the bookshelves of a whole generation.'⁷

Alongside his commitment to Penguin, Bill Williams was also to perform other influential roles in the lives of working people in Britain. During the Second World War, he directed the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA), which ensured regular briefing and access to education for a largely conscript army. Williams had to contest deep-seated opposition among military commanders who feared that free discussion would provoke indiscipline. This expansion of the horizons of voters was credited by some (and blamed by others) for growing political awareness and consequent shifts of opinion among serving soldiers.⁸ Although Williams denied any party political intent, R. A. Butler asserted that the influence of the ABCA 'virtually won over' the serviceman's vote for Labour in 1945.⁹ Throughout the war, Williams wrote monthly columns as the radio critic of *The Listener*; after the war he performed a similar role for the *Observer*.

Williams led a drive for public funding of the arts. He worked alongside John Maynard Keynes in establishing the ground-breaking Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), working as its Director for Art from 1942–45. After the war he became Secretary-General of its influential successor, the Arts Council of Great Britain, for twelve critical years from 1951 to 1963, working alongside chairmen such as Kenneth Clarke. From 1963 to 1970 he was Secretary to the National Arts Collection Fund. Williams gained several conventional accolades: in 1946 he was made CBE and was awarded the American Medal of Freedom for his wartime contributions; he was knighted in 1955.

However, Williams was a controversial figure. He experienced and often generated tension between two contradictory philosophies of public involvement in artistic life. He was by instinct drawn to the concept he characterized as 'the grain of mustard seed' – promulgating artistic works widely throughout the community, especially outside the metropolis.¹⁰ The best examples of this process are in his contributions to Worker's Education, in the innovative *Art for the People* project and in his work for the ABCA. The 'mustard seeds' approach continued

5 Ibid., pp. 66–73

6 William Emrys Williams, *Allen Lane: A Personal Portrait* (London: Bodley Head, 1973), p. 48.

7 Meredeen, p. 78.

8 Ibid., p. 143.

9 Ibid., p. 444

10 Meredeen, p. 62, cites Williams's original use of this phrase in his 1938 essay, 'The Changing Map of Adult Education'.

under CEMA, alongside such initiatives as commissioning murals for the low-cost restaurant chain, British Restaurants. CEMA also financed regional performances of opera, ballet and live music.

On the other hand, during his period at the Arts Council, the exigencies of finance under various governments forced upon him a more selective approach, which he encapsulated in the phrase ‘Few but Roses’.¹¹ While Williams always tried to include ‘regional roses’ in this prescription, the bulk of the Arts Council’s efforts gave priority to supporting national institutions, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company or Covent Garden. He attracted accusations of elitism from some and suggestions of populist philistinism from others. Some saw him as cunning, ruthless and driving; others described him as far more relaxed.

Williams had a complicated personal life. His early, life-long marriage to the economist Gertrude Rosenblum was affectionate and mutually supportive. The private memoir of Williams’s career that Gertrude wrote after his death supports the view that this was an exemplary life-long union.¹² Matters were, however, complicated by Williams’s passionate relationship with Estrid Bannister – once identified in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* as ‘the naughtiest girl of the century.’ Meredeen devotes a chapter to ‘Bill and Estrid’, showing that ‘she remained Williams’s mistress, close friend and travelling companion for [...] twenty years.’ His wife knew about and tolerated this infidelity. She was, however, far less complaisant about her husband’s relationship with his secretary, Joy Lyons, to whom he had dedicated his selections from Hardy. In a dramatic gesture, Lyons destroyed the text of his autobiography on the night of Williams’s death, before killing herself. In tune with the conventions of the period, these entanglements never became the topic of press comment. However, they were known about within the circles surrounding the Arts Council.

These personal contradictions influenced the perception of Williams as an outsider, ‘on the edge’ perhaps, not always comfortable in the centres of metropolitan power. These perceptions are related to his Welshness, both by his friends and his critics. The ambivalence in his characterization of himself as a Welshman becomes instructive. Homi Bhabha argues that the “‘in between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood [...] that initiate new signs of identity’.¹³ It is time to explore the role of these more personal ‘in between spaces’ in the life of William Emrys Williams, the cultural mandarin, public servant of the arts and practitioner of cultural democracy.

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The first ‘in between space’ is that of his birth. Williams was born on October 5

11 Meredeen, p. 171. The phrase is first used in an Arts Council Report for 1950/51.

12 See Meredeen, pp. 49–50 and p. 114. See also Gertrude Williams, *W. E. Williams, Educator Extraordinary: A Memoir* (London: Penguin Collectors Society, 2000).

13 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

1896. His obituary in *The Times* eighty years later on April 1 1977 asserts that 'he was born at Capel Isaac, a village in Carmarthenshire. His father, Thomas Owen Williams was a carpenter; his mother a farmer's daughter from nearby Llandilo.'¹⁴ This account is confirmed by the entry for him in the *Dictionary of National Biography* which added the following comment: 'Living in Wales until his eighth year, he was brought up to speak Welsh and retained marked Welsh characteristics throughout his life.'¹⁵ So far, so typical: we can recognise another account of humble origins, along the lines of those stereotypical life-stories familiar from the *Anglo-Welsh Review*. In 1963, Professor Gwyn Jones gave this account of Williams's birth in his address to the University of Wales when awarding him an Honorary Degree: 'William Emrys Williams', he declared, 'was born in a Carmarthenshire village and is Welsh of the Welsh.'

Gertrude Williams's private memoir of her late husband provides an alternative story, however, supplied with equal conviction:

He was born in 1896 in a small farm in Morfa Bychen [Bychan], a neighbouring village to Cricceth [Criccieth], the village where Lloyd George was born, a few miles inland from Portmadoc.¹⁶

This preserves the account of Williams's rural Welsh authenticity but adds an intriguing connection with an even more famous Welshman, David Lloyd George. Meredeem assumes that Gertrude is recollecting early family sources, perhaps provided by Williams himself.¹⁷ The jolting fact, however, is that – according to a birth certificate obtained by Meredeem from the Family History Centre – Williams's mother, Annie, registered his birth on November 6 1896 at 'the Hulme sub-district of the Chorlton Registration District in the counties of Manchester and Lancaster'. The family address is given as '16 Raglan Street, South Manchester'.¹⁸ It is not unusual for people to romanticize the circumstances of their birth but the discrepancies do bring one up short when so much of Williams's proclaimed *persona* seems to have stemmed from the notion of being born as 'Welsh of the Welsh.'

However, these 'in between spaces' are not all dubious. Williams could trace his ancestry from his paternal grandfather, William Williams, a ship's carpenter, born in Beddgelert in 1815.¹⁹ According to the 1881 and 1891 censuses, this is where the family link with Morfa Bychan originated. The hamlet was the site of his grandfather's farm, Garreg Wen Bach, located near a larger establishment with a similar name, traditionally regarded as the birthplace of David of the White Rock. Williams's father, Thomas, was born here and acquired his trade as a joiner in a

14 Meredeem, p. 10.

15 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

16 Gertrude Williams, p. 16.

17 Meredeem, p. 10.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 15.

local apprenticeship. His mother Annie originally came from a Carmarthenshire farm near Llandeilo. Thomas and Annie Williams then became part of the diaspora that took many Welsh craftsmen to the centres of population in England, in search of work at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁰

William Emrys Williams had three sisters, two of whom died in infancy. Despite his Manchester birth registration, Williams attended the Welsh-speaking village school in Morfa Bychan for eight years before the family made its more permanent move to Manchester in 1904.²¹ A large part of the family's life there centred around the Congregational chapel and Thomas Williams conceived an ambition that his son should make a career in the ministry.²² His education up to the postgraduate stage (aged twenty-three) was conducted with this in mind.²³ The Sunday school and the visiting preacher were formative influences. Williams prided himself on his facility with language and associated this with his Welsh background. A schoolboy essay celebrated the way 'the Cymry have clung tenaciously to all their traditional lore and legend'.²⁴ In 1927, Williams published his *Selections from George Borrow*, the first of several similar anthologies that he was to produce over the next thirty years. In an article about D. H. Lawrence, written for *Highway* half a century later, William Emrys Williams recalled the character of much Welsh sermonizing:

Those who follow this passionate and volcanic writer through his poems or stories or essays will have no difficulty in discovering his 'message' – except perhaps on those not infrequent occasions when, carried away by fervour, he is inclined to lapse into the incoherence of a revivalist preacher. [...] I remember as a youth in Wales listening so often to some celebrated preacher who became rapt to such an extent that he temporarily abandoned his discourse in favour of passages of sheer incantation.²⁵

Kenneth Morgan has attributed some of the political effectiveness of those he terms 'fluid people', such as Dr. Thomas Jones – who was to be Williams' mentor – and Lloyd George, to the persuasive use of Welsh speech rhythms inculcated early in life.²⁶ Meredeen argues that much of Williams's own talent as a committee member and institutional manager stemmed from his early practice in debate. He quotes a conversation with the historian, Peter Stead, who suggested that the long affiliation of Welsh youngsters to the Congregational chapel 'served as a training ground for debate and argument on the widest range of issues, both theological and secular'.²⁷

20 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 6.

21 Meredeen, p. 17.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

25 *Highway*, June–September 1950.

26 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p. 474.

27 Peter Stead in conversation, quoted in Meredeen, p. 19.

These influences were soon to be reinforced (and also simultaneously undermined) in the course of further education at University and later in a theological college.

Commencing his undergraduate studies at the University of Manchester in 1914, Williams seems never to have contemplated volunteering for service during the First World War. Nor does this seem to have exposed him to any criticism. The institutional pacifism of Welsh non-conformity would have made that decision more likely. At Manchester, reading English, Williams came under the influence of Charles Herford, an inspiring teacher of English and a perceptive literary critic, who had previously taught Thomas Jones at Aberystwyth. Herford's influence on Williams's taste and intellectual development was decisive. Bill Williams wrote some fluent undergraduate poems to his future wife, Gertrude Rosenblum, published in the Manchester undergraduate magazine *The Serpent*:

They did not sing of you in Babylon:
They garnered gold and ivory and lace;
And fought: and loved a little and were gone;
O they have died who never saw your face.²⁸

These opening lines echo William Morris and Tennyson and his future publications were to feature selections from Wordsworth, Browning and Hardy. It is possible to detect here a stage in his intellectual development that begins to run against the grain of his non-conformist Welsh upbringing. Herford co-opted Williams (as he had Thomas Jones before him) into Arnoldian concepts of impartiality and objectivity. Williams began to see himself in membership of a cultural community with bases in class and education and a mission to achieve the amelioration of manners among both upper-class Philistines and industrial Barbarians (to use Arnold's terms). This grasp of the potency of cultural authority was to be a crucial element throughout his career. Writing about Arnold, Daniel G. Williams explores the importance of his conviction that, at that time, 'any major literary or historical work was likely to reach "a very large proportion of the governing elite"'.²⁹ This made the act of publication not merely a coterie activity, but rather a decisive missionary intervention. Daniel Williams has also recorded the conviction, developed during the nineteenth century, that Britishness could embrace 'a highly respectable Welsh identity that could nevertheless be contrasted to Englishness'. These cultural presumptions recur throughout the future intellectual history of William Emrys Williams.

At the same period, Williams was introduced to active Labour Party politics by his intellectually superior fiancée. His initially difficult involvement with Gertrude's orthodox Jewish family at once widened his horizons and complicated early career decisions.³⁰ Following graduation in 1918, with only a disappointing

28 'WEW', 'For G.', *Serpent*, Manchester University Union, 1918.

29 Daniel G. Williams, *Ethnicity and Cultural Authority: From Arnold to Dubois* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 17–19.

30 Meredeen, pp. 29, 36.

pass degree, he persisted in undertaking postgraduate work at a Congregationalist establishment: the Lancashire Independent College. However, within a year of starting this course, the clear path his father had set for him was to be abandoned. He was to proclaim growing doctrinal doubts and by mid-1919 he had resigned from the LIC and was working as a volunteer with the YMCA in London. In the same year he married Gertrude, who was by now exploiting her own first-class degree as a tutor in economics at Bedford College, and secured a teaching appointment as Senior English Master at Leytonstone High School for Boys. He was a successful teacher. Remarkably, considering the quality of his first degree, in six years at Leytonstone Williams produced half a dozen books on literary topics, all published by Methuen. *The Craft of Literature* (1925), *First Steps to Parnassus* (1926) and *A Progressive Course of Précis and Paraphrase* (1927) achieved some authority in English pedagogy, reinforced by a critical commentary (*Shakespeare to Hardy*) and by his selections from Borrow.³¹ *Plain Prose* (1928) completed a remarkably prolific output for a writer scarcely out of his twenties.

Williams was also working as an evening-class tutor for the Workers' Educational Association, and in 1928 he persuaded the Extramural Department of the University of London to appoint him as a full-time staff tutor in English Literature. A year later he became editor of *Highway*, the monthly journal of adult education. Williams emerges in this role as a substantial force, entering into the polemics of the adult education movement and recruiting a remarkable set of contributors. These included Virginia Woolf, R. H. Tawney, and G. D. H. Cole. At the same time, he became focused on a career which would give him a British national profile. His tenure as editor of *Highway* and his later role as Secretary of the Workers' Educational Association took place after the failure of the General Strike in 1926, and continued up to 1939. It encompassed controversies around the Spanish Civil War and served the 'intense and bitter resistance' the WEA put up to Marxist influences associated with the Plebs League and the Central Labour College after 1909.³² By the end of Williams's tenure, the WEA's approach, described as 'ameliorative and not revolutionary' and strongly influenced by *Highway's* contribution, became the dominant force.³³ Thomas Jones asserted that Williams's journalistic skills transformed *Highway* into 'the poor man's *New Statesman*'.³⁴

Working jointly with A. E. Heath, Professor of Philosophy at Swansea, Williams produced *Learn and Live* – his 1936 study of the educational formations of WEA students. This study consulted numbers of WEA students and explored the conflicted mix of cultural and political motivations among them, revealing the

31 Meredeen, pp. 47–49.

32 Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 272, pp. 302–4; Peter Stead, *Coleg Harlech: The First Fifty Years* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 12.

33 See Richard Lewis, *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenge of Labour in South Wales, 1906–1940* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), pp. 191–233.

34 E. L. Ellis, T. J.: *A Life of Dr Thomas Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 443.

insecurities of many participants.³⁵ These were themes which Williams ‘hammered away at’ in successive editorials in *Highway*.³⁶ Jonathan Rose, in his detailed account of the Williams-Heath survey, says:

One of the most commonly cited motives for pursuing adult education was very Arnoldian: ‘Disinterestedness.’ This involved not only the effort to overcome bias, though it certainly included that. It meant as well that education should be pursued with no thought of competitiveness or economic gain, that education must be acquired for its own sake in an environment where students helped each other.³⁷

Fears among WEA students about losing touch with their working-class roots figured prominently. These responses, reflecting as they did some of his own family history, must have produced plangent personal resonances for Williams.

At this stage in his career, Williams came increasingly under the influence of Thomas Jones (1870–1955). The one-time junior clerk in an ironworks store in Rhymney had become a career civil servant and was appointed Cabinet Secretary by Lloyd George in 1916. He subsequently worked as the trusted confidant of four prime ministers. Tom Jones (TJ) took part in negotiations over Irish independence, over the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War and during the appeasement controversies of the 1930s. By the time he came to play a part in Williams’s life, however, Jones had retired from the civil service. He was active in the benefactions of the American-financed Pilgrim Trust, in the artistic collections of the Davies sisters in Gregynog, in editing the journal *Welsh Outlook*, in the formation of CEMA and in the foundation and management of Coleg Harlech.³⁸ Both Welshmen had begun life with the intention of becoming ministers, but had been diverted into secular roles. TJ’s biographer, E. L. Ellis, claims that Jones’s influence, through the Pilgrim Trust, secured the promotion of Williams’s role in *Art for the People*.³⁹ One of the earliest exhibitions was at Coleg Harlech. Ellis describes TJ’s protégé as ‘a young man of Welsh working class origin clearly marked for greater things’ and asserts that TJ was the main advocate of Williams’s appointment as Director of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs.⁴⁰ Meredeen traces contacts and correspondence between these two Welshmen during the next twenty years, often over appointments and nominations in fields such as the ABCA, the foundation of CEMA and the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain.⁴¹

In the course of his career, Williams cultivated other expatriate Welshmen,

35 W. E. Williams and A. E. Heath, *Learn and Live: The Consumer’s View of Adult Education* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1937).

36 Meredeen, p. 60.

37 Rose, pp. 282–7 (p. 283).

38 Meredeen, p. 55; Ellis, pp. 335–58.

39 Ellis, p. 434.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 433–44.

41 Meredeen, pp. 134, 145, 172.

including Walford Davies, Gwyn Jones, B. Ifor Evans, Huw Weldon and Wyn Griffith.⁴² In his wartime reviews for *The Listener*, he explored Welsh themes through the broadcasting work of Wynford Vaughan Thomas. His ambivalence about the actor Emlyn Williams betrays contradictory feelings about Wales. In his article, 'A Couple of Winners', in *The Listener*, October 3 1940, he says:

So ardently and persuasively did he [Emlyn Williams] generalise from his own experience that one forgot for the moment how very few clever little Welsh boys ever get to college. The corn may be green all right but it does not always get a chance to ripen. [...] There were many points in his talk in which he spoke for all Welshmen. One was his account of his racial susceptibility to language – which he illustrated by absolutely vibrating examples. Another was the candid admission of the dexterity with which a Welshman can turn black to white.⁴³

'Clever little Welsh boys' meet here amid the ripening corn, demonstrating instinctive command of language. Just two weeks later, however, on October 17, in an article entitled 'The Celtic Touch', Williams has changed his mind about Emlyn Williams:

After his first postscript I cried him up to the skies. But after his last I like him less. Partly, perhaps, because, as his fellow countryman, I begin to discern that too-easy mastery [...] of the art of rhetoric. Is he becoming the equivalent in postscripteers of the notorious Welsh pulpiteers? [...] Is he going a bit *Wurlitzer*?⁴⁴

The mix of attraction and repulsion here surely reflects personal sensitivities and may also betray a canny insight on Williams's part about the way in which he himself may have been perceived by some non-Welshmen. In the second article, he has some observations about his mentor Dr. Thomas Jones:

His voice has the Welsh qualities of colour and vibration; it is decisive yet responsive to each turn of thought. It is what you might call a gesticulating voice. I do not mean to suggest that he waggles his spectacles or waves his arms at the microphone. I mean that he brandishes his sentences rather than delivers them. He has that rarest of microphone gifts, one which even such aces as Churchill lack, the gift of rhythm [...].⁴⁵

Williams elicited a sympathetic note here from Gunner Keidrych Rhys, the editor of the 'national magazine', *Wales*, who was then stationed in an anti-

42 Meredeen, p. 12.

43 *The Listener*, October 3 1940.

44 *The Listener*, October 17 1940.

45 Ibid.

aircraft station in the south of England. Rhys wrote to Williams, saying:

I think every true Welshman would appreciate your remarks [...] And that is something to be thankful for these days because most of our 'New Wales Society' feel that the Principality doesn't get her due share of 'attention' in papers and periodicals! That is not due to any lack of writers I assure you.⁴⁶

Williams passed Rhys's comments on to Jones, adding, significantly enough, 'Latterly I have felt a need to be a Welshman in more than blood and association: I'd like to help with the cultural movements in Wales.'⁴⁷ But Williams had by now already moved a long way, geographically and psychologically, from Wales and his involvement with Wales was never again much more than peripheral and nostalgic. He did get involved in fighting for the retention of Coleg Harlech during the war, but this was probably a workers' education issue rather than a national one.⁴⁸ It seems that Welshness had again become confined to 'in between spaces' in his life.

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The Welshness of William Emrys Williams belongs, however, not only to his projection of himself but also to the view of him taken by others. Consider Jack Morpurgo's ostensibly sympathetic account of Williams at age forty, at the outset of his work for Allen Lane and Penguin Books:

William Emrys Williams was a Welshman to every letter of his unmistakably Welsh name, even if he did come from Manchester. The rich rhythm of his Welsh voice, cunningly modulated by a controlled stammer, freed him from the suspicion that hung over so many of the Oxonian and metropolitan popular educators of that era. [...] He was mercurial, as eager to make friends as to make enemies, and his earnest political opinions, like his devout concern for public understanding, were tempered by commercial shrewdness.⁴⁹

The sense of the acceptability to working people of his provincial persona is seen as a determining factor in his success as a popular educator. But the key terms here are the invocation of his 'unmistakably Welsh name' and then of 'Manchester', 'cunningly modulated', 'mercurial', 'devout', 'shrewdness'. They are all unstable terms, especially given Morpurgo's emphasis on Williams's typical Welshness, registering at once as apparently positive but potentially negative. They suggest brilliance but they also imply unreliability. Perhaps there is too much Celtic

46 Letter, K. Rhys to W. E. Williams, October 25 1940, quoted in Meredeen, p. 205.

47 Letter, W. E. Williams to Thomas Jones, November 4 1940, quoted in Meredeen, p. 206.

48 Stead, p. 86.

49 J. E. Morpurgo, *Allen Lane: King Penguin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 116.

cleverness here and too little of that English virtue, 'bottom'. Morpurgo's account is probably not intended to be unflattering. But, maybe inadvertently, he sows seeds of doubt. Other personal attacks on Williams were more directly malicious.

There was an early controversy at the Arts Council when Williams was suspected by some, and accused openly by others, of 'devious and manipulative' behaviour, in 'bringing about the resignation of his predecessor as Secretary-General, Mary Cecilia Glasgow'.⁵⁰ Among a number of aspersions about Williams and Tom Jones, the journalist Norman Lebrecht, in his history of Covent Garden, asserts that Glasgow was replaced by 'W. E. Williams, one of Tom Jones's antediluvian Taffia'.⁵¹ A later account of the affair, written by an anonymous civil servant twenty years afterwards, is similarly disparaging: 'I have always had the impression that the process by which Sir William Emrys Williams supplanted Miss Mary Glasgow as Secretary-General would not bear too close scrutiny. There was a vast amount of intrigue.'⁵² In his waspish history of the Arts Council, Richard Witts, the irreverent musician and sociologist, adds the typically colourful accusation that Williams 'hated his predecessor, Mary Glasgow, and had her pushed out'.⁵³

Meredeen considers these allegations judiciously. He counters them by pointing out that Williams was aged fifty-five at the time (and so scarcely 'antediluvian') and that Mary Glasgow herself had supported Williams's nomination to the Arts Council. Consideration of him as her successor did not begin until five months after her resignation. He also cites contemporary accounts from the proceedings of a specially convened sub-committee of the Arts Council that began its considerations seriously divided but finished some five months later by unanimously recommending Williams's appointment.⁵⁴ It is not unprecedented for public appointments to be controversial or for there to be rumours about skulduggery in high places. The question here is to what extent the Welshness of William Emrys Williams affected this controversy.

Norman Lebrecht has other views about Welshmen in London, clearly illustrated in his account of the foundation of CEMA in 1940.⁵⁵ Thomas Jones is described as 'oleaginous', a producer of documents characterized by 'manipulative disingenuousness'. He works with his 'Welsh cronies, the composer and popular broadcaster, Sir Walford Davies, and the adult education propagator, William Emrys Williams'. After failing to secure the appointment he wanted, Jones 'trickled off to oblivion' (presumably in Wales). Later, William Emrys Williams is called 'the Taffia epoch general secretary' and it is reported that 'Taffia Bill Williams was now in sight of his pension'. The random scatter of these derogatory terms throughout

50 Meredith, p. 180.

51 Norman Lebrecht, *Covent Garden: The Untold Story. Dispatches from the English Culture Wars, 1945–2000*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 79.

52 Treasury Minute, July 23 1957, The National Archive (TNA), cited in Meredith, p. 180.

53 Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council* (London: Little Brown, 1998), p. 210.

54 Treasury Minutes, January 12 and 13 1951, TNA, cited in Meredith, pp. 169–70.

55 Lebrecht, pp. 22, 24, 166, 198.

Lebrecht's book has a cumulative effect, suggesting the existence of a corrupt, self-seeking group, sharing unpleasant national traits.

Richard Witts, who also displays a high degree of personal animus against Williams, invariably chooses to refer to him by his nickname, 'Pelican Bill', and describes him thus:

He was stocky, well built but not tall, his hair routinely Brylcreemed, and he wore double-breasted suits, 'a cross between a headmaster and a bank manager – standard professional wear of the fifties'. Pelican Bill had a stammer, which appeared at moments of tension. He wore tiny specs over which he would view you like a magistrate. In the CEMA days he was known as Bill or Billy and he cultivated that style. Williams was born into a working-class family from Carmarthenshire which moved to Manchester. His father was a journeyman joiner, his mother a farmer's daughter.

Fervently socialist in the thirties he drifted languidly to the centre and by degrees a certain snobbery pervaded his outlook. He had married Gertrude Rosenblum, who became professor of social economics at London University, and they lived a full, elevated society-parading life together.⁵⁶

Witts goes on to accuse Williams of deliberately fomenting the persecution of Tom Russell, the Communist managing director of the London Philharmonic, and of calculating that this manoeuvre would secure his knighthood. Witts's account radiates prejudice, partly class, partly racial, but also invoking cruel stereotypes of aspiration and provinciality. Williams's lower-class choice of hair dressing, his bourgeois suits, his affected spectacles are linked to his humble origins, his 'fervent beliefs' and 'languid' social drifting, with the final exaggeration of a *nouveau riche* 'society-parading' lifestyle. This strident *ad hominem* criticism by Witts was actuated by his own declared preferences for the 'cool' and the 'hip' and seems coloured by a frisson of sexual jealousy. But it cannot be separated from the image of Williams as a Welshman, presented here as pompous, self-indulgent, endemically self-seeking, unreliable, and ill at ease in the heart of the metropolitan establishment. Elsewhere in the book, Witts describes other eminent Welshmen in terms touched by a similar animosity:

[Thomas] Jones had his fidgety fingers in the arts as Hitler had fathomed. His musical crony was the composer Walford Davies, one of those fake Welshmen like Lloyd George who served the principality well.⁵⁷

It may, indeed, not be too fanciful to see some parallels between Williams's career and the earlier trajectory taken by Lloyd George as contributing added

56 Witts, pp. 353–4.

57 Ibid., p. 38.

colour to these rumours, encouraging among the enemies of these Welshmen a number of wish-fulfilling fantasies of misuse of power and moral ambiguity. Both men were from north Welsh stock, both brought up in Manchester, both raised in the ambience of Welsh nonconformity. They were driven hard by ambition, and they were noted for personal charm. Both were known to be serial adulterers (although this was treated with public discretion according to the practice of the time) and both had well-founded reputations for the cunning circumvention of opposition. The presence of numbers of influential Welshmen in government had the consequence that the key parameters of the debates around the imagined characteristics of Welshmen were rehearsed over thirty years. Thomas Jones's own article on 'Welsh Character' in *The Listener* in 1934 emphasized the intense local differences within Wales, and the great variety of Welsh manners. It identified the nonsensical nature of any Herderian claims to a homogeneous national culture or 'racial purity'. The key common factor that Jones eventually isolates is one that has by now become a commonplace in this study: 'a natural gift of ready speech and a delight in its exercise':

Much of a Welshman's talk is like the play of a kitten with a ball of wool, a tossing and twisting of ideas into a tangle of shapes by under- and over-statement, for the sheer fun of provoking slow and stolid listeners. [...] Lying is a sin which sticks between buying and selling. English horse and cattle dealers have bargained in Welsh fairs from time immemorial. 'It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer: but when he is gone on his way, then he boasteth.' Conquest and defeat breed lies. [...] The Welsh [...] are artists, deviously honest, and they give a finish and colour to their statements beyond what the occasion demands in the eyes of plain people.⁵⁸

In this article, Thomas Jones tackles head-on the reputation of the Welsh for dishonesty. This stems, he suggests, from the tortured history of Welsh relations with the English, from longstanding and sometimes misunderstood rural traditions about the techniques of bargaining over livestock. He identifies the psychological insight that 'conquest and defeat breed lies'.⁵⁹ In 1934, this appears as an unexpectedly early anticipation of postcolonial theory, identifying within the 'deviously honest' some of that characteristic 'sly civility' which is to be later diagnosed by Homi Bhabha as the voice of 'the litigious lying native' in a more obvious colonial setting. Similar characteristics have been perceived by Stephen Knight as operating in contemporary works of Gwyn Thomas, such as *Sorrow for My Sons*, published in 1937, or *Where Did I Put My Pity* (1946).⁶⁰ The tensions generated between Welshness and Britishness meet together in a recognisable syndrome. The ghost of this psychological state surely lurks behind the ascriptions of Welsh character in the case of William Emrys Williams who, throughout his life, sought satisfaction

58 *The Listener*, January 31 1934.

59 Ibid.

60 Bhabha, pp. 99–100; Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004).

and fulfilment in a British rather than a Welsh career scope.

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Given all his unquestionable achievements, there is a nagging residual question about why Williams should be so little known today, thirty years after his death, and why attempts to revive interest in him have met with difficulties. Bringing Williams in from the edge of Welsh consciousness has been an uphill task. When Sander Meredeen approached the existing management of Penguin Books to discuss the possibility of their publishing the story of their former Editor-in-Chief, he had difficulty in finding an editorial employee there who owned even to knowing who Williams was. Nor has it been possible to secure the publication of the book by a Welsh publishing house. This may well say something about the development of a resistance in the devolved Wales of today to the ambitions of those who make their lives in a British rather than primarily in a Welsh context. Those engaged with the grand narratives of Welsh identity and history can find it difficult to come to terms with the co-option of brilliant Welsh agents into a primarily British cultural scene. An anxious theme in biographical articles from the *Anglo-Welsh Review* centred on the kind of question posed about the painter, Will Roberts: 'How does a Welsh artist escape provinciality and yet remain Welsh?'⁶¹ One answer has been to secure a countervailing recognition outside Wales as well as within it. And those striving subjects who have worked to manage their own transition to a wider sphere of ambition may suspect Welsh devotion to myths of origin as redolent of the tribal or xenophobic aspects of a crude nationalism.

Robert Browning proclaimed 'the dangerous edge of things' as the primary focus of human interest.⁶² But 'the edge' may indeed be dangerous, a risky path away from the centre, the site of a road to oblivion. Thomas Jones recovered some of his standing within a Welsh pantheon by his later dedication to Welsh causes. Some of the cultural issues that have appeared to operate to associate William Emrys Williams with his Welshness in both positive and negative terms can also be seen to resonate in judgments about other public figures from Welsh backgrounds. Under this rubric it would be interesting to consider the career histories and personal legacies not only of Lloyd George, Thomas Jones and William Emrys Williams, but also of other prominent British Welshmen, such as Aneurin Bevan, Neil Kinnock or Alun Michael.

61 Philip Barlow, 'The Work of Will Roberts', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 12 (1962), 32–5 (p. 32).

62 'Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things. / The honest thief, the tender murderer / The superstitious atheist [...].' Robert Browning, 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', in *Men and Women and Other Poems*, ed. by J. W. Harper (London: J. M. Dent, 1988), pp. 80–104 (p. 89), ll. 396–8.