

## THE HISTORY OF A WELSH PAINTING: 'POOR TAFF' AND THE WELSH SCHOOL IN LONDON

*Peter Lord*

### *Abstract*

This article gives a brief account of the history of a painting owned by the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion. One of four paintings of the same figure, a Welshman known as 'Poor Taff' riding a goat, the portrait dates from the eighteenth century and forms part of a popular genre of nationalist satire with parallels in other art forms and in other countries of Europe. The article describes the restoration of the painting undertaken in 2016–17 and its significance as an adopted symbol of identity by the London Welsh in the nineteenth century.

In 2016, the new school that inherited the site of the former Girls' School at Ashford – linear descendant of the Welsh Charity School in London – decided no longer to host the remaining archive that documented, among other things, its links to the London Cymmrodorion Society. The documents joined other Welsh School archives at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, leaving only a residue of artefacts, including several paintings.

The most important of these were the distinguished portraits painted in 1778 by William Parry of two of the Cymmrodorion members who were closely associated with the school in the eighteenth century, Richard Jones, the vice-treasurer, and Thomas Lewis, architect of the school's new building on Gray's Inn Road. These portraits have been retained by the present owners, but one other eighteenth-century work, a portrait of a gentleman riding on a goat and wielding a sword, grandly inscribed 'Sir Jeffery Morgan, Welch Ambassador', was transferred to the Cymmrodorion Society.

Unfortunately, the picture was in dire condition – dirty, rubbed and the canvas recently torn. However, the Cymmrodorion Society decided to restore the picture, and that work is now complete. Sir Jeffery is for the time being in the care of Oriol Môn in Llangefni – an appropriate resting place, given the Anglesey origins of the Society.

The Cymmrodorion picture is one of four extant oil-painted versions of an image known generically as 'Poor Taff', with a convoluted but fascinating history. I have recently written a more detailed account of that history but, in brief, the story begins shortly after 1747 with the fusion of two earlier images, in the form of a striking pair of large popular woodcut prints.<sup>1</sup> They were published in London by the Dicey family business, the largest producer in England of prints for the lower

1 For the full account of the history of the image see Peter Lord, 'Riding back to Goatlandshire', in *Wired to the Dynamo: Poetry & Prose in Honour of John Barnie*, ed. by Matthew Jarvis (Tanygrisiau: Cinnamon Press, 2018).

end of the market. The portraits of 'Shon-ap-Morgan, Shentleman of Wales' on his journey to London, and of his wife, 'Unnafred', accompanied by 'Wenglish' texts, crystallized an association between Welsh people and the unpleasant-smelling billy goat that in the London popular press reached back to the Civil Wars. Various story lines had been attached to the image, ranging from the mildly satirical to the straight-forwardly racist, but in general it seems that 'Shon' had come to London to avenge the insult regularly dished out to the Welsh in town on St David's Day 'by the Rabbles hanging out a Bundle of Rags in representation of a Welshman'. Shon travelled variously in a wheelbarrow pushed by his wife, on foot, or on goat-back, with his conventional attributes of toasted cheese, red herrings, and, of course, leeks.

However, the association of goats and individuals who, for one reason or another, were held up as objects of derision, was not confined to London. In Saxony, the Meissen factory had produced a cheery little ceramic at the expense of the tailor of one of its directors, Heinrich von Brühl. It was modelled by the celebrated sculptor Johann Joachim Kändler, and rapidly became a best seller, with the result that it was copied by English factories. The Dicey family of printers, based at Bow, combined the English and German satires and found that they too had hit upon a winner. The image would be reconstituted in print, painted, and ceramic forms into the nineteenth century.

A peculiarity of the first Dicey print of Shon was that it included among the texts printed with the picture a stout defence of the Welsh nation, written by an indignant author who had the temerity to ask the reader:

From what Cause arises that insolence of Men, that Superiority of Opinion, and that almost Disaffection of Soul, which *Englishmen* generally assume over the rest of their Fellow Subjects, if born the other Side of the *Tweed* or the *Severn*, or if pointed at for drawing their first Breath in a neighbouring Sister Island?

To cut a long story short, this protest marked the curious evolution of the image which apparently resulted in its co-option by some Welsh people in London as an affectionate national self-portrait – hence the production of at least three of the four oil-painted versions sometime before the end of the eighteenth century.

Two of the pictures were painted by a relatively sophisticated hand or hands, perhaps even by an art-trained painter like William Parry. I suspect that these may be associated with one or other of the London Welsh societies, who are known to have commissioned not only portraits but pictures symbolic of Welsh identity. A third, more naïve version, may have its origins outside London, since it includes a unique element of iconography. In this version, Shon is still some way from his destination, since a milestone records that he is 97 miles from the city (Fig. 2).

The fourth version, with its Welsh School provenance, is the one under discussion here (Fig. 1) and the most difficult to interpret, because it was the victim of a substantial repainting, probably in the mid-nineteenth century. After its transfer to the Cymmrodorion Society in 2016, the picture was taken to Pembrokeshire for restoration by Howard Macro, whose work revealed that substantial parts of the original painter's

work survived, especially in the background and the goat. The manner in which the animal was painted suggests strongly the hand of a competent artisan-trained painter of the kind whose day-to-day work would have included the painting of coats of arms, signs for taverns and shops and the like. Sadly, whoever it was that decided to overpaint the figure of Shon himself, taking the opportunity at the same time to change his leek into a sword and rename him Jeffery Morgan, was considerably less competent. The problem for the restorer was that there was no certainty that the original paint surface remained intact under the overpaint. There was a danger, therefore, that if the overpaint was removed he would be left with no image at all, or insufficient amounts of the original paint as a basis upon which accurately to restore the original appearance. It was decided, therefore, only to remove overpainting where it was clear that the original work survived, hidden underneath. Despite the fact that the location of the goat and rider, well to the left of the composition, suggested that the space occupied by the present inscription was previously occupied by an earlier inscription contemporary with the original work, nothing seemed to have survived. The decision, therefore, was to retain the existing inscription, even though it appears to date from the nineteenth-century restoration. Admittedly, the result is a compromise – though one that is not without interest in itself.

On the back of the canvas was attached a label recording the St David's Day celebrations on the 130th anniversary of the Welsh School, when after a 'substantial dinner' the party concluded with the pupils being marched to St James's Church in Piccadilly for 'a service in Welsh' and an edifying sermon. The inscription on the back is also of interest for its account of the legend that links the wearing of the leek so firmly to Welsh identity. The version given (and so presumably that taught at the Welsh School) was not the Black Prince story, but the less familiar account, first recorded in 1686, which associated the custom with a Welsh victory over the Saxons at which St David himself turned up and awarded everyone a leek for their efforts on behalf of the old country. This inscription, and the association it makes with the 130th anniversary of the school, may well date the overpainting of the picture, though there can be no certainty about this.

However, the re-identification of Shon-ap-Morgan as Jeffery Morgan is a complete mystery. Jeffer[e]y does appear in an early redaction of the general story line (1683), but his transformation into a knight wielding a sword is inexplicable. The 'Welch Ambassador' puts in an isolated later appearance in a Gillray print of 1791 that satirizes Lady Cecilia Johnston, a society hostess of the period who was greatly detested by the cartoonist. On this occasion he depicted her in unflattering profile kissing an obese goat – usually a symbol in the visual satires of the period of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn. However, that gentleman had died two years earlier, and although one of his sons, Sir Henry, would later briefly serve as an ambassador of sorts in Berlin, the truth is that the whole thing is a fascinating muddle. Variants of the image continue to emerge, notably an early but simplified version of the Dicey woodcut, that appeared on the art market in 2017. Perhaps another previously unrecorded print or painting will appear in the next few years to resolve the mystery surrounding the Cymmrodorion Sir Jeffery.<sup>2</sup>

2 The Cymmrodorion painting, along with the three other oil-painted versions, the popular prints, and the ceramics, feature in a special exhibition at Oriol Môn during the summer of 2018.



[Fig. 1] *The Cymmrodorion portrait, 'Sir Jeffery Morgan, Welch Ambassador'*



[Fig. 2] *The third version of the portrait*