‘WHERE *CYMRY* UNITED, DELIGHTED APPEAR’: THE SOCIETY OF ANCIENT BRITONS AND THE CELEBRATION OF ST DAVID’S DAY IN LONDON, 1715–1815

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Abstract

The Honourable and Loyal Society of Ancient Britons (f. 1715) are credited with inaugurating a tradition of Welsh associational life in London. However, their lasting significance has tended to be downplayed when compared to that of later London-Welsh groups. Using a wide range of literary and historical evidence – particularly the under-used reports of the society’s activities in the metropolitan and Welsh press – this article reassesses their position in the history of Welsh patriotic identity. Drawing attention to their visibility on London’s streets, their creation of an imagined role for Wales in the British public sphere, and their eventual influence on the celebration of St David’s Day in Wales itself, the article argues that their metropolitan location and increasing anglicization did not prevent them from remaining a major part of the much-discussed ‘Eighteenth Century Renaissance’.

Welsh identity in the early eighteenth century is generally believed to have had rather a low profile. Prys Morgan has argued influentially that many distinctive aspects of Welsh culture were changing or disappearing by the end of the seventeenth century, and would require an ‘Eighteenth Century Renaissance’ – largely associated with the latter half of that century – in order to reinvent and reaffirm themselves.[1] However, for anyone on the streets of central London on 1 March 1725, it would have been difficult to miss the distinctly un-reticent form of Welsh identity being promoted by the Loyal and Honourable Society of Ancient Britons (f. 1715): the capital’s newspapers report that they processed across the city ‘with great Pomp and Magnificence, having Trumpets and Kettle-Drums playing before them’, and were followed by carriages belonging to the ‘Gentlemen of the Best Fortune and Figure in Wales’.[2] On other occasions, we know that the society’s stewards marched with green or white staves of office and ‘plumes of feathers in their hats’, and were accompanied by pupils from the London Welsh charity school that was funded by their philanthropy.[3] We can get some idea of how arresting this annual event was for Londoners by noting how often pickpockets preyed on those ‘standing to see the Welsh-Society pass by’: in 1778, for instance, the *St.*

1 Prys Morgan, *The Eighteenth Century Renaissance* (Llandybïe: Christopher Davies, 1981), passim.

2 *Daily Courant,* 4 March 1725; *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 6 March 1725.

3 *Morning Herald,* 4 March 1793.

James's Chronicle noted that 'near thirty' people were relieved of their watches as the Ancient Britons marched into the Strand.[4]

Compared to later and better researched London Welsh societies like the Cymmrodorion (f. 1751) and Gwyneddigion (f. 1770), the Ancient Britons have tended to be somewhat overlooked by Welsh scholars. Until recently, the original London Welsh society has been presented as a relatively unimportant forerunner to the more significant associations that followed it, its legacy damaged by justified imputations of social exclusivity and anglicization, and a less justified reputation for inactivity and irrelevance.[5] However, for much of the eighteenth century the Britons' St David's Day celebration was the most prominent and spectacular example of Welsh-inflected patriotism anywhere in the world.[6] Their festivities on 1 March were on a much larger scale than anything arranged by other Welsh societies in eighteenth-century London: according to Richard Morris, their 1728 feast was attended by 'about a thousand people', in addition to those who merely attended the earlier church service, or who watched the procession go past.[7] Their activities led to the creation of similar societies in Bristol (f. 1725) and Philadelphia (c. 1729), they inspired a great deal of patriotic and satirical literature, and they appear to have had a considerable influence on the way in which St David's Day was celebrated in Wales itself.[8] Both the first society of Cymmrodorion and (to a lesser extent) the Gwyneddigion joined in the Britons' annual celebrations and helped to support their charitable activities,[9] and despite the latter societies' undoubtedly greater importance in the history of Welsh-language literary revivalism, the Ancient Britons outlived them both, surviving continuously (though in much reduced form) into the twentieth century and beyond.[10] The recent tercentenary of the society in March 2015, which was

4 'April 1731, trial of Valentine Seveer (t17310428-16)', in *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, <www.oldbaileyonline.org> [accessed 14 April 2017]; *St James's Chronicle*, 28 February–3 March 1778.

5 See R.T. Jenkins and Helen Ramage, *The History of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion 1751–1951* (London: Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1951), pp. 13–15; Morgan, *Eighteenth Century Renaissance,* pp. 56–58; Geraint H. Jenkins, *The Foundations of Modern Wales: Wales 1640*–1780 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 390; John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 295.

6 For important recent work on the of the Ancient Britons and the authors associated with them, see *The Welsh in London: 1500–2000*, ed. by Emyr Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001); Sarah Prescott, *Eighteenth Century Writing from Wales: Bards and Britons* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2008), pp. 1–56; Ian Atherton, 'Commemorating Conflict and the Ancient British Past in Augustan Britain', *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 36 (2013), 377–93.

7 *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris, of Anglesey*, ed. by John H. Davies, 2 vols (Aberystwyth: published privately, 1907–09), I (1907), 3.

8 *Daily Post*, 9 March 1725; Richard C. Allen, 'The Origins and Development of Welsh Associational Life in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia', *THSC*, 15 (2008), 105–26. For their influence on St David's Day celebrations in Wales, see below.

9 For the thorough overlap between the Cymmrodorion and the Ancient Britons, see *The Welsh in London,* ed. Jones, pp. 69–70; for the Gwyneddigion's willingness to celebrate with the Ancient Britons, see Jenkins and Ramage, *Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, p. 114.

10 See, for example, the *Carmarthen Journal*, 13 March 1914, p. 3. The society's name is still recorded as that of a registered charity (no. 312091), <www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission> [accessed 28 April 2017].

celebrated by a church service in St Paul's Covent Garden, seems an appropriate occasion to reassess the position of this society in eighteenth-century Welsh history, drawing attention to its inspirational – though problematic – significance in both London and Wales.

Organization and accessibility

The society first met in 1715, holding an Anglican church-service and sermon in Welsh at St Paul's Covent Garden, before 'proceeding from thence in decent Order, to Haberdasher's Hall to dinner'. There they gave numerous toasts, listened to a specially commissioned patriotic song, and elected a group of stewards to preside over the society for the ensuing year – a programme broadly adhered to throughout the organization's first century.[11] As the historian Peter Clark has pointed out, this structure was modelled on that of the London-based county feast societies, which had organized sermons, charitable fundraising, and dinners on a similar pattern since the first half of the seventeenth century.[12] Drawn from the Welsh aristocracy and gentry, the clergy, some higher ranks of the armed forces, and from the more well-heeled sections of London Welsh society, the Britons' officers and stewards were responsible for presiding over a similar feast each year, and for collecting and disposing of charitable donations 'for the benefit of the *Welch* nation in general'.[13] These stewards – who resolved to meet on a monthly basis from 1716 – were the core members of the Society of Ancient Britons, properly so called. This group was certainly an exclusive one, and as their membership changed completely from year to year, they cannot quite be called a society in the same sense as the Cymmrodorion and Gwyneddigion. However, from 1721 the Ancient Britons were given a more stable basis when they were united with the trustees of the London Welsh Charity School (f. 1718), an institution that became the primary focus of the society's philanthropy.

This network of London Welshmen was organizationally rather complex, and it is sometimes difficult to gather which body exactly is being referred to under the title of 'the Society of Ancient Britons' or 'the Welsh Society'. According to the terms of the 1721 union, the Ancient Britons' stewards were meant to become school trustees and join them at their meetings,[14] but the two groups do not seem to have merged completely, despite an overlap in membership and a considerable degree of collaboration. The trustees met around once a month to transact business relating to the school, held larger general meetings with subscribers to the charity, and organized at least some aspects of the annual St David's Day celebrations. What the stewards' routine was after 1721 is less clear, as we have no record of their

11 See Thomas Jones, *Rise and Progress of the Most Honourable and Loyal Society of Antient Britons* (London: W. Wilkins, 1717), pp. 15–25.

12 Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 274–308.

13 Jones, *Rise and Progress*, p. 21.

14 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Welsh School, Ashford, Middlesex, Papers: Minutes of the Board of Governors and Trustees, vol. 1.

gatherings other than occasional newspaper reports and glancing references in the trustees' minutes. However, there is evidence from the second half of the century suggesting that they met frequently,[15] and arranged independent celebrations for themselves: in May 1772, for instance, the outgoing stewards ('According to annual custom') gave a supper and ball in the London Tavern for their newly elected replacements,[16] and we know that they would also meet with the school authorities in this period to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Wales.[17] Therefore, although the Britons' St David's Day celebration was their most prominent annual activity, it is not the case that the stewards were inactive for the rest of the year.

Despite the importance of Anglican worship to the Britons' official St David's Day programme, it is clear that dissenters were also welcome at their feast: in 1731, while the Britons were in church at Covent Garden, a simultaneous St David's Day sermon was preached 'before a great Congregation of Ancient Britons, of the Dissenting persuasion', who then 'joined the other Body, and dined with them'.[18] Englishmen were also welcome at the feast,[19] which may have influenced the increasing anglicization of the Ancient Britons as the century wore on. The role of women in the society was more limited: there were female subscribers to the Welsh charity school who were entitled to be Governors,[20] women were present at the stewards' balls,[21] and they could presumably have attended the St David's Day church service. The Ancient Britons' officers and stewards, on the other hand, were invariably male, as were the school's trustees, and I have found no mention of women at the St David's Day feast despite its initially strong focus on the Princess of Wales. The Society of Ancient Britons and their annual celebrations therefore appear to have been overwhelmingly masculine affairs, though this was very much in keeping with the majority of eighteenth-century clubs and associations.[22]

The church service on this day was originally open to all, but a charge of one shilling was introduced in 1744 to raise money for the charity,[23] and the subsequent feast was always ticketed: entry sometimes cost as much as half a guinea,[24] but at other times was set at a (still fairly expensive) five shillings,[25] the latter being around the price of a box seat at a London theatre.[26] There is also evidence that the society were keen to ensure that only gentlemen were offered tickets in the first place (see below). Becoming a steward involved an even greater level of expense,

15 See *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 3 May 1775; the treasurers, trustees, and governors thank the 1775–76 stewards for the generosity of their contributions at 'their second meeting after they entered their offices' in March 1775.
16 *Kentish Gazette*, 12 May 1772.
17 *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 16 August 1775.
18 *Grub Street Journal*, 4 March 1731.
19 *Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris, of Anglesey*, I, 3.
20 *Public Advertiser*, 15 June 1778.
21 *Kentish Gazette*, 12 May 1772.
22 Clark, *British Clubs*, p. 84.
23 *Daily Advertiser*, 27 February 1744.
24 *Post Boy*, 19–21 February 1717.
25 *Daily Courant*, 6 February 1718.
26 For the affordability of non-essential purchases, see Robert D. Hume, 'The Value of Money in Eighteenth-Century England: Incomes, Prices, Buying Power – and Some Problems in Cultural Economics', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 77 (2014), 373–415.

presumably because charitable donations were expected: Richard Morris, later founder of the Cymmrodorion Society, refused to dine with the Britons in 1728 when he heard that they had 'prick'd me down for a steward […] being unwilling to be about £10 out of pocket'.[27] There was, therefore, a sliding scale of accessibility to the Britons' celebrations based on rank and wealth, with the poorest members of the London Welsh community effectively excluded from a good deal of their activities.

However, the public character of some aspects of the celebrations meant that they could form a kind of spectacular centrepiece to wider London Welsh festivities on St David's Day; this was certainly true in the case of Richard Morris, who attended the Britons' church service in 1728 before escaping 'with about 12 countrymen into a private house, where we din'd and drank all the healths we could think on'.[28] The organizers were also not always successful in keeping out the *hoi polloi*, and when the feast became more indecorous than its politer attendees were comfortable with, this was repeatedly blamed on lower-class interlopers: in 1770, for instance, the stewards assured prospective attendees that they had 'taken particular care that no improper persons shall have any tickets' so as to avoid 'the irregularity complained of in former years', and stipulated that 'no gentleman will give their tickets to servants, or any other persons whose behaviour shall be otherwise than a gentleman'.[29] The Britons' 1 March gathering was therefore intended to be polite and exclusive, and could be strictly policed, but it was also clearly visible (and to an extent penetrable) for those lower down the social scale.

Imagining Welshness in Britain: Principality, politics, and poetry

When the Ancient Britons were formed in 1715, there were next to no significant Welsh institutions: the society was, therefore, an important medium through which a sense of Welsh identity could be expressed, in the British capital and on the British national stage. Although the society chose to officially dub themselves 'Ancient Britons' rather than 'Welshmen', which could suggest a greater commitment to the post-1707 British state than to Wales, descent from the Britons was a central aspect of both Welsh national and expatriate identity in this period, and could provide rhetorical tools for asserting both incorporated Britishness and Welsh distinctiveness. This was also true of another important focus for the Ancient Britons' patriotism, the Hanoverian Princes and Princesses of Wales (although London Welshmen also expressed forms of Ancient Britishness rhetorically opposed to the court and the crown). The Cambro-British identity promulgated by the society, though by no means nationalistically Welsh in the modern sense, was therefore mobilized politically and patriotically in a relatively wide range of contexts, and provided authors with a rare opportunity to explore Welshness in the British public sphere.

27 *Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris, of Anglesey*, I, 3.
28 *Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris, of Anglesey*, I, 3.
29 *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 28 February 1770.

In a description of the Ancient Britons' foundation, their first secretary and treasurer Thomas Jones claimed that they were formed in 1715 'In Honour to Her Royal Highness's Birth-Day, and the Principality of Wales'.[30] The 'Royal Highness' in question was Caroline of Ansbach, the newly arrived Princess of Wales, and as her birthday happened to fall on 1 March, the society made use of this fortuitous coincidence to imagine the Ancient Britons as an identifiable and staunchly pro-Hanoverian people:

> The Antient *Britons* […] being animated with an uncommon Zeal *upon this extraordinary Occasion*, joyfully embraced that favourable Opportunity which the approaching month of March offered, of forming themselves into a *Regular Society*, which they resolved to *establish*, both in Honour of the Day which gave Birth to that most Excellent Princess […] and also by appropriating it to the Memory of St. *David*, the Tutelar Saint of their *Antient Country*.[31]

The society maintained this strong focus on the Princes and Princesses of Wales throughout their first century, and often visited their royal patrons on St David's Day to deliver obsequiously loyal address.[32] But whilst this was clearly a pledge of commitment to the British monarchy and state, it was also the means of asserting a form of Welsh identity within that state, and of emphasizing one of the few British institutions that (if in name only) gave Wales symbolic significance.

In 1715, furthermore, this focus on the Prince and Princess was not merely banal royalism, but rather a calculated political statement: sections of the Welsh population had a decided reputation for Jacobitism,[33] an impression that the Whiggish and pro-Hanoverian Welshmen who originally formed the Ancient Britons were working hard to dispel. A good deal of the society's activities in its early years were polemically political in this regard, as was much of the literature associated with them. Nehemiah Griffith's poem *The Leek* (1717), for instance – which was inscribed to the Society – used a narrative of St David fighting the Saxons as a triumphant allegory for the failed Jacobite rising in 1715,[34] and a song written by a 'merry Bard of the Society of Ancient Britons' in 1728 threatened that '*Perkin*'s Friends' (i.e. Jacobites) would be strung up on trees if the Welsh had anything to do with it.[35] This attempt to rebrand the Principality as a Hanoverian stronghold did not go without rebuttal, and a Jacobite broadside from around this period cast the Ancient Britons as craven turncoats who had betrayed their rightful monarchs:

30 Jones, *Rise and Progress*, tp.
31 Jones, *Rise and Progress*, p. 11.
32 See *Independent Chronicle*, 28 February–2 March 1770.
33 See Philip Jenkins, *The Making of a Ruling Class: The Glamorgan Gentry 1640–1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 152–72.
34 Nehemiah Griffith, *The Leek: a Poem on St. David's Day* (London: W. Wilkins, 1717).
35 *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 2 March 1728.

> But Taffy what's come to you,
> That now you change your Story,
> To drop your note and turn your Coat,
> Eclipses all your Glory […]
>
> Such is your new Protector
> The Beast you bow your Necks to
> The German Boar and his fat Whore
> Will root up all your leeks to[o][36]

The Ancient Britons therefore succeeded in making a form of Welsh identity part of the political battleground of early eighteenth-century culture, and although political posturing eventually faded into the background of the Britons' activities, it could still rear its head when occasion demanded. One notable recurrence took place during the heyday of Wilkesite radicalism in London, a movement in which many Welshmen associated with the Britons were enthusiastic participants. When the society was prohibited from paying its respects to the Prince of Wales in 1773, this resulted in a storm of Welsh-focused protest in the radical and opposition-supporting press, and the Pembrokeshire-born Richard Fenton wrote a poem implying that the Earl of Bute (a favourite Wilkesite scapegoat) had perpetrated a national insult to Wales.[37]

The formation of the Ancient Britons patently did not lead to the creation of a separatist Welsh national politics, or the development of a wholly distinct Welsh political sphere: a Welsh identity was generally being mobilized via the society within wider British or local City of London debates, and they continued to loudly proclaim their loyalty to prince, monarch, and state. The institutional framework and regular programme of sociability associated with the society may have helped the Welsh political class to cooperate effectively when it suited them, and to occasionally act under the banner of a collective Welshness, but this happened only rarely.[38] However, the prominence of the society and its proximity to the centre of British power meant that it could be used to construct a public and intermittently politicized Welsh identity, during a period when this was comparatively unusual: an intriguing sign of this symbolic significance is that a group of Welsh MPs and Peers meeting in the early 1780s referred to themselves as 'The Society of Antient Britons, of either House of Parliament'.[39]

As should already be clear, the Ancient Britons inspired a good deal of anglophone poetry during their first century of existence. A large amount of it was ephemeral

36 Anon., 'A Song to the Old Britons, on St Taffy's Day [*c*. 1715]', *Broadside Ballads Online*, <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/edition/517> [accessed 22 April 2017].

37 See Rhys Kaminski-Jones, 'True Britons: Ancient British Identity in Wales and Britain, 1680–1815' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales, 2017), pp. 111–38.

38 For the foremost eighteenth-century example of this, see Peter D.G. Thomas, 'A Welsh Political Storm: The Treasury Warrant of 1778 Concerning Crown Lands in Wales', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru/Welsh History Review*, 18 (1997), 430–49.

39 *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 25 April 1783. The meetings also included representatives of border areas like Chester and Shropshire.

and anonymous, like the newspaper poems and broadsides quoted above, and much of it was satirical: a notable example of the latter tendency was the long mock-epic *Taffydeis* (1746), recounting street battles between "Saxon" Londoners and Ancient Britons on St David's Day.[40] There were also, however, substantial texts by named Welsh authors that used the society to explore Welsh themes, including Griffith's aforementioned *The Leek* (1717) and Fenton's *Tears of Cambria* (1773) and 'On The First Day of March, 1772' (1773).[41] The Flintshire-born poet Jane Brereton also had strong connections to the society, writing commendatory verses to Griffith's *The Leek* in 1718,[42] and portraying her *Merlin: A Poem* (1735) as a kind of response to it.[43] When considered alongside the many English sermons to the society that were published during the century, writings associated with the Ancient Britons emerge as a significant corpus in the history of anglophone Welsh writing and English writing about Wales. Welsh-language writing directly inspired by the Ancient Britons is more rare: Richard Morris's elegiac *cywydd* on the death of Caroline of Ansbach makes an extended allusion to them,[44] and some of the Welsh-language sermons preached to the society in its early years were published, but it was not until after the formation of the Cymmrodorion in 1751 that a Welsh poem was written to be presented to the Prince on St David's Day, under the auspices of both societies.[45] The Ancient Britons (despite their name) also lacked the antiquarian focus of both the Cymmrodorion and Gwyneddigion, with charity and ceremony taking greater precedence. They were, however, associated with one of the most important Welsh antiquaries of the period, Moses Williams, and with the Welsh-speaking English scholar William Wotton, who together produced the first printed edition of the laws of Hywel Dda in 1730.[46] The Ancient Britons therefore cannot be entirely omitted from the history of either Welsh-language literature or the Welsh antiquarian revival, even if their contribution to both was comparatively minor.

The versions of Welshness that emerged from texts linked to the Britons varied greatly. Whereas Griffith focused on the historical Ancient Britons' bloody struggles for 'True Religion, Liberty, and Laws' against the Saxons, Brereton connected Merlin's druidic wisdom to that of the enlightened Queen Caroline, and Fenton stressed the 'more refin'd' politeness of modern Britons compared to their rough (though admirable) ancestors.[47] Whilst Fenton tended to contrast a London-based public life with private rural retirement in Wales, Moses Williams

40 Hywgi ap Englyn Morgonwc [pseud.], *The Taffydeis, an Heroic Poem* (London: M. Cooper, 1746).

41 Richard Fenton, *The Tears of Cambria* (London: G. Kearsly, 1773); Richard Fenton, *Poems* (London: G. Kearsly, 1773), pp. 10–23.

42 Nehemiah Griffith, *The Leek: A Poem on St. David's Day*, 2nd edn (London: W. Wilkins, 1718), n. pag. Brereton writes under her pseudonym 'Melissa'.

43 Jane Brereton, *Merlin: A Poem* (London: Edward Cave, 1735).

44 *Diddanwch Teuluaidd*, ed. by Huw Jones (London: William Roberts, 1763), pp. 264–65.

45 Ibid., pp. 25–27.

46 Williams gave the Ancient Britons sermon in 1718 and 1722, Wotton did the same in 1723. Their work on the laws of Hywel Dda was published as *Cyfreithjeu Hywel Dda ac Eraill, seu Leges Wallicae*, ed. by William Clarke (London: William Bowyer, 1730).

47 Griffith, *The Leek* (1717), p 25; Fenton, *Poems*, p. 13.

believed that trajectory needed to be reversed somewhat, bidding 'yr Uchelwyr sy'n tramwy yn ol ac ymlaen i Loegr' ("the Gentlemen who process back and forth to England") to set about patriotically improving the economy of their native land.[48] And whilst Griffith was glad that there were 'Nations distinct no more' within Britain's borders, Williams put a great deal of stress on Wales as a distinct country inhabited by a distinguished nation, and warned that English descendants of the Saxons might soon 'ddwyn Cymru hefyd […] ac felly […] ddifetha'n henw ni oddi dan y Nefoedd' ("steal Wales too […] and so […] banish our name from under the Heavens").[49] The society was clearly a useful canvas upon which forms of "Ancient British" Welshness could be projected: how far these reflected and influenced behavior in Wales itself, however, is a question worth considering.

An example to Wales?: innovation, anglicization, and influence

In his 1718 sermon to the Ancient Britons, Moses Williams warned that they should be careful how they behaved – compatriots in Wales might soon 'ddilyn eich Angraifft chi' ("follow your example"), especially when it came to the Welsh language.[50] This was certainly wished for by the Shrewsbury-based publisher Siôn Rydderch, who used a preface in his 1722 almanac to contrast the 'mawr Garedigrwydd Gorchestol' ("great Splendid Kindness") of the Ancient Britons towards their culture and countrymen with his native Welsh readers, who were 'mor Lygoer Fursenaidd ac Anniwyd' ("so Tepidly Fickle and Lazy") in regard to their native tongue.[51] This belief of Rhydderch's, however, points to the somewhat paradoxical nature of the London-based society: the almanacer praised them for representing Wales in Britain's capital, and used them to provide the native Welsh with a model of properly Welsh behaviour, but the Britons' patriotism also struck him as being notably different from what existed in his home country. There were indeed aspects of the society's activities that differed considerably from what was usual throughout Wales, and on St David's Day, they could be both more self-consciously Welsh and less typically Welsh than the Welsh themselves. Furthermore, although the Britons would eventually have considerable influence in Wales, the nature of that influence may not have pleased either Williams or Rhydderch: as the society's proceedings became increasingly well-known and imitated, they also set themselves further apart from the main body of contemporary Welsh people by becoming increasingly anglophone.

The Society of Ancient Britons was keen to portray itself as representing collective Welsh opinion and native Welsh customs, something that was particularly

48 Moses Williams, *Pregeth a Barablwyd yn Eglwys Grist yn Llundain* (London: The King's Printers, 1718), p. 16.
49 Griffith, *The Leek* (1717), p. 27; Williams, *Pregeth* (1718), p. 15.
50 Williams, *Pregeth* (1718), p. 15.
51 Siôn Rhydderch, *Newyddion oddi wrth y Sêr, neu almanac am y flwyddyn o oed Crist 1722* (Shrewsbury: Siôn Rhydderch, 1721), n. pag.

stressed in regard to their marking of St David's feast. As their first secretary and treasurer put it:

> The Antient *Britons* have, Time out of Mind […] celebrated his Anniversary on the First of *March* […] In Honour thereof, with a sensible pleasure and a becoming Pride, they distinguish themselves and their dear Country, by wearing a *Leek*, wherever they reside in any Part of the World.[52]

Any part of the world, that is, except apparently Wales itself. Although there is evidence of St David's Day celebrations in Wales during the early-eighteenth century, they were by no means ubiquitous in the period when the Britons were founded, and those that did take place did not necessarily resemble those of the London Welsh. A poem by the clergyman Ellis ab Ellis, for instance, portrayed the wearing of leeks on St David's Day as a tradition of the 'Brytaniaid llawen yn Lloegr a Llundain' ("Joyful Britons in England and London"), making no mention of Wales.[53] The Meirionydd-born antiquarian William Owen Pughe (1759–1835) – who left Wales to go to London in 1776 – went so far as to deny that the saint was mentioned, let alone celebrated, in northwest Wales during his youth:

> St. David has been dignified with the title Patron Saint of Wales; but this rank however is hardly known among the people of the principality, being a title diffused among them from England, in modern times: The writer of this account never heard of such a patron saint; nor of the Leek as his symbol, until he came acquainted therewith in London.[54]

The Ancient Britons' ceremonial (and self-consciously "national") celebration of St David's day therefore seems to have been something of an invented tradition. They adapted the customs and symbolism of an expatriate Welsh community – which had marked the occasion since at least the late-fifteenth century – into a patriotic extravaganza that purported to represent the '*Welch* nation' as a whole.[55] In this, they are a classic iteration of Lord Acton's principle (later picked up by Benedict Anderson) that 'exile is the nursery of nationality'.[56]

But although the Britons' exile in England may have been conducive to the development of a performative national self-consciousness, it was clearly less favourable to the day-to-day maintenance of the Welsh language, still the only

52 Jones, *Rise and Progress*, pp. 12–13.

53 E. Elis, *Hanes y Cymru: yn gywirach ac yn helaethach nag y printiwyd hwy gynt yn Llundain* (Shrewsbury: Siôn Rhydderch, 17--?), p. 4. This poem was probably written in the late-seventeenth century; see Thomas Jones, [*Almanac*] (London: Thomas Jones, 1686), n. pag.

54 William Owen Pughe, *The Cambrian Biography* (London: E. Williams, 1803), p. 86.

55 For St David's Day celebrations under Henry VII, see Glanmor Williams, *Religion, Language, and Nationality in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1979), p. 117.

56 Benedict Anderson, *Long Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, 1992), pp. 1–3.

tongue spoken by a substantial majority in Wales.[57] In its early years, the society did promote the language more than might be expected: their annual church services and prayers were usually read in Welsh, they helped to organize weekly Welsh-language sermons in London, and their charity school initially appears to have taught reading in Welsh (though writing was English-only).[58] However, they never seem to have instituted language-based rules for themselves like the Cymmrodorion and Gwyneddigion, and the pressure to anglicize was obviously strong. A prominent marker of this process was the language in which the Britons' annual sermon was given. It was first preached in English as early as 1717 – 'wrth arch ryw adyn neu gilydd' ("at the request of some wretch or other"),[59] as Moses Williams scornfully observed – and went from Welsh to English and back again until *c*. 1750.[60] Records in the London newspapers are incomplete, but in the second half of the century the sermon appears to remain resolutely anglophone, and by 1783 a humorous article in *Parker's General Advertiser* was implying that guests at the Ancient Britons' feasts could no longer tell the difference between Welsh and German.[61] Though this is clearly an exaggeration, it is indicative of the society's increasingly anglophone public image; rather than a metropolitan bastion of Welsh-speaking Welshness, the oldest and most illustrious London-Welsh society had instead become a prominent example of linguistic assimilation.

Initially, and despite Moses Williams' fears in 1718, this is unlikely to have had much of an impact in Wales: though they were well covered in the English press (both metropolitan and regional), information about the Britons was much less accessible in the largely monoglot Principality. This situation began to change, however, around the turn of the nineteenth century, a period when the Britons started to play a significant part in the spread of London-style St David's Day celebrations in Wales. In the border-town newspapers that served Wales in the second half of the eighteenth century, reports about St David's Day in London were now increasingly accompanied by notices of similar gatherings in the Principality.[62] This continued to be the case when Wales-based newspapers emerged in the early-nineteenth century, with the celebrations of the Ancient Britons often advertised or detailed in lengthy reports along with notices of their native counterparts.[63] Imitation of the Britons was now an obvious possibility, and although a number of St David's Day

57 See Geraint H. Jenkins, *The Welsh Language Before the Industrial Revolution* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997).

58 For reference to the weekly sermon and the teaching of Welsh reading, see Moses Williams, *Pregeth a Barablwyd yn Eglwys Grisd yn Llundain* (London: William Bowyer, 1722), p. 22–23.

59 Williams, *Pregeth* (1722), p. 21. Date given as 1716 [O.S.].

60 The latest record I have found for a Welsh-language sermon given to the society can be found in the *Daily Advertiser*, 27 February 1744.

61 *Parker's General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, 5 March 1783.

62 For the influence of border-town newspapers in Wales, see Marion Löffler, *Welsh Responses to the French Revolution: Press and Public Discourse* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), pp. 8–12. For reports of the London Ancient Britons in such papers, see *Shrewsbury Chronicle,* 4 March 1775; *Chester Courant*, 15 March 1796; *Hereford Journal*, 10 March 1785. For reports of St David's Day celebrations in Wales in these papers, see *Chester Chronicle*, 20 February 1789 (Denbigh); *Chester Courant*, 25 February 1794 (Flint).

63 *The Cambrian*, 28 February 1807; *Camarthen Journal*, 9 March 1811.

meetings in Wales were low-key, tavern based gatherings, some clearly demonstrate the influence of the Most Loyal and Honourable Society. In Carmarthen in 1815, for instance, *Seren Gomer* reported a dedicated church service, a dinner for 'amryw Foneddigion' ("various Gentry"), and a parade by Sunday school children 'trwy'r prif heolydd, gan wisgo cennin yn eu hetiau' ("through the main streets, wearing leeks in their hats") – a programme that included three main elements of the Ancient Britons' celebrations, and with the same mix of publicly accessible ceremony and exclusive sociability.[64] It may not be a coincidence that this event took place the year after 1814, when the (mistakenly early) centenary celebrations of the Ancient Britons were given particularly prominent coverage in the domestic Welsh press.

A long report of the 1814 centenary in the Welsh-language weekly *Seren Gomer*, though positive about the Britons' philanthropic ideals and their Welsh patriotism, nevertheless drew attention to linguistically mixed aspects of the proceedings, with hymns and a song sung in English, linguistic misunderstandings between English speakers and Welsh speakers, and jubilant (though faintly ironic) cries of '*Yr Iaith Gymraeg* for ever'.[65] The same was true of a song composed for the occasion by the harpist John Parry – the lyrics are written largely in English, but with substantial (though helpfully translated) Welsh additions:

> Oh let the kind minstrel attune his soft lay,
> And welcome with rapture this thrice happy day;
> Let nought but sweet harmony strike on the ear,
> Where *Cymry* (a) united, delighted appear
> Contented or wretched, imprisoned or free,
> Still Cambria to Cambrians most *anwyl* (b) must be,
> *Mewn awen fwyn lawen, byw byth y bo hi*. (c)[66]

How this bilingual song of the Ancient Britons would have been interpreted by Welsh readers when it was printed in the Swansea-based *Cambrian* is open to question. To some, it would have demonstrated that there was a place for the Welsh language even in the English capital, and that its maintenance at home was therefore wholly compatible with wider British identity. Another valid interpretation, however, was that whilst the "Ancient British" tongue still had undoubted symbolic value, it no longer needed to be the principal linguistic vehicle for modern forms of Welsh patriotism. Given the increased prominence of the Ancient Britons in the early-nineteenth century, and their clear influence on the Welsh celebration of St David's Day, the question of which interpretation was given precedence in Wales is one that is undoubtedly worth asking.

The Society of Ancient Britons was neither inactive nor unimportant during its first century of existence. Busier and more visible than they have often been given credit for, the Britons influenced not only the London-Welsh societies that

64 *Seren Gomer*, 8 March 1815.
65 *Seren Gomer*, 12 March 1814.
66 *The Cambrian,* 12 March 1814. The Welsh sections are glossed as '*(a)* Welshmen', '*(b)* dear', and '*(c)* In joyful harmony may she ever live'.

followed them, but also the developing culture of public patriotism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Wales. A major reason for the relative lack of attention given to the society has always been the difficulty of fitting this increasingly anglophone group into the history of the eighteenth-century Welsh cultural revival: acknowledging their importance as promoters of a royal-focused, London-oriented, and symbolically bilingual Welsh patriotism is perhaps one way in which their problematic significance can be reaffirmed.