

A CARDIFF CYMRO AT WAR: WELSH AND BRITISH IDENTITY IN THE NEAR EAST THEATRE OF WORLD WAR I

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Abstract

Wales was a melting pot at the start of World War I and some soldiers from Wales had a foot in both of the prevailing cultures, Welsh and English. This article uses evidence drawn from the wartime letters of Dewi David from Cardiff to reflect on the experiences of the Welsh in the British Army during World War I and Welsh attitudes to language, identity, their homeland, and the values of Empire.

For the first seventeen years of his life, leading up to World War I, Dewi David's Sunday routine in the Cardiff suburb of Splott will have been the same: chapel with his parents and Sunday School at Eglwys Jerusalem Methodistiaid Calfnaidd in Walker Road, followed probably by a visit for tea or supper to one of his family's many relatives in the area.¹

In 1917, however, Dewi's Christmas was spent in another Jerusalem as one of the Welsh soldiers who had entered the Holy City two weeks before. The Turks had been forced to surrender their four-centuries-old control of Palestine in the face of advancing British Empire forces under the command of General Sir Edmund – later Lord – Allenby. By this time Dewi had been in other ancient settlements that would have been familiar to a chapel-attending Welsh young person from stories he had been taught – Matarieh, where Mary rested on the flight to Egypt; Khan Yunus, where Delilah was born; Gaza, where Samson brought the temple down; Beersheba, where Abraham and Isaac spent time; Hebron, where Sarah died; and Bethlehem, where Christ was born. Sitting in chapel in his early teens, Dewi could hardly have dreamt that he would be camped before Christmas 1917 near Calvary and would spend the day itself on the Mount of Olives in a German religious settlement hastily abandoned by retreating German units that had been supporting Ottoman forces.²

Our image of Wales in World War I has largely been formed by the heroism of the 38th (Welsh) Division in France and their sufferings in the assault in July 1916 on Mametz Wood near the town of Albert on the Somme. We also know about the

- 1 Demolished in 1920, Jerusalem M.C. Church was one of three Welsh-language chapels in Splott, serving a local Welsh-speaking community attracted to the area after 1888 when Merthyr Tydfil's Dowlais Ironworks (later Guest, Keen & Co.) invested in a new coastal plant in Cardiff docks, the arrival point for the shipments of Spanish iron ore that had begun to replace exhausted local reserves inland. Many of its workers – a significant number of whom had Welsh as their first language – moved to Cardiff to live nearby.
- 2 Sanatorium Kaiserin Augusta Viktoria, a guest house built by the architect Robert Leibnitz for Protestant German pilgrims, one of several religious sites constructed by the Germans and others in the Holy Land in the preceding century.

horrors of the trenches, particularly once wet weather and consequent mud had set in.³ Dewi, however, was among thousands of Welshmen who served in other theatres, notably the Middle East – or Near East, as the territories closest to Europe were then called. They served in the only other Welsh-designated division, the 53rd, or in other divisions or support units such as the Royal Army Medical Corps.

The 53rd, a Territorial unit that pre-dated its earlier-numbered confrère, was from August 1915 part of the British army that tried to seize the Gallipoli peninsula during the Dardanelles Campaign, a conflict that cost more than 100,000 British, French, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, Turkish, German, and other lives. The Division went on to defend the Suez Canal against attack by the Central Powers from both east and west,⁴ moving later into an offensive phase that took it, fighting its way across the Sinai Desert, past the stronghold of Gaza and through the Judaeen Hills to Jerusalem. Its capture at a difficult time in the war in France was memorably and evocatively described in Parliament by Prime Minister David Lloyd George as a ‘Christmas present to the British people’.

Gallipoli, where action was first seen, was trench warfare as brutal as that encountered in France and Belgium but in even more difficult, precipitous terrain where the enemy occupied the heights and could rain down fire on the men below.⁵ The 53rd's later campaigns in 1916 and 1917 were, by contrast, highly mobile desert warfare, accompanied by searing heat, never-ending sand, and constant flies, made worse by severe shortages of food and water. No less difficult scrambles through the Judaeen hills followed as the army advanced in the latter half of 1917 deep into Ottoman territory. Many, like Dewi, who joined up as a volunteer on his seventeenth birthday, St. David's Day 1915, would spend the entire war away from home, not returning until April 1919.

In October 1918, at Megiddo, the ancient Armageddon of the Bible, on a plain that had been the scene over the course of millennia of mighty battles between great empires, the Turks and their Central Powers allies were defeated, shortly before the November armistice in Europe. They were forced out of the war and made to quit their Ottoman territories outside the motherland in a campaign that made Allenby a national hero in Britain and gave him his title, Viscount Allenby of Megiddo. In Wales it was celebrated as a victory in which Welsh units had played a powerful role.⁶

Two issues particularly have interested historians of Welsh involvement in World War I. How great a degree of enthusiasm did Welsh people exhibit for the war,

- 3 Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931); Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz and Beyond*, ed. by Jonathon Riley (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010).
- 4 For an account of the war in this theatre, see Stuart Hadaway, *Pyramids and Fleshpots: The Egyptian, Senussi and Eastern Mediterranean Campaigns 1914–1916* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014).
- 5 John Masefield, *Gallipoli* (London: William Heinemann, 1916). One of the earliest accounts of the horrors of this campaign was written by the Poet Laureate, shortly after the withdrawal of British and Empire forces.
- 6 Welsh soldiers were first through the gates of Jerusalem, a source of pride to Welsh families, some of whom like Dewi's parents saw Allenby's entry captured on newsreels in local cinemas. Dewi's father wrote to say they had viewed the footage at the Gaiety Theatre in Cardiff's City Road but had failed to pick him out.

how did this differ across the social and linguistic divides, and how did this square with the pacifist tradition that had developed with the growth of Nonconformity across Wales in the two previous centuries? Secondly, how Welsh were the Welsh-named units that fought in the various theatres and how Welsh did they feel? Which Welsh customs and characteristics did they take with them into war? Did men from different parts of the United Kingdom – and beyond – meld together to form part of a wider British identity?

On the attitude of Welsh people to World War I, different lines of evidence have been enlisted to justify often modern beliefs and prejudices. Robin Barlow has argued persuasively that a range of reactions can be discerned in the Welsh response to the war and the call to arms, reflecting significant differences in a then fast-changing society.⁷ Attitudes also evolved as the war proceeded, after it had become obvious the quick adventure many had expected was a fantasy. Contrary to previous assertions, Barlow has demonstrated that there was in Wales a slightly lower propensity to enlist than there was in either England or Scotland. Rural and industrial areas felt differently, as did Welsh and non-Welsh-speaking areas, the former in both cases showing less enthusiasm for the cause.

One of the special factors in Wales was undoubtedly the magnetic appeal of Lloyd George, without whom any Welsh reluctance might have been greater. No doubter himself of the rectitude of a war against German militarism, the one-time Crickieth solicitor skilfully mobilized large swathes of Welsh opinion on the side of the little nations of the world – in this case Belgium, Serbia, and Montenegro – who could be presented as being bullied by the bigger boys, the Germany of the unbalanced Kaiser Willem II and Franz Josef's Austro-Hungarian Empire. For Welsh people, although umbilically attached to a benevolent neighbour to their east, the comparison was meaningful.

Already quasi-canonized in Wales for his work as Chancellor of the Exchequer in introducing welfare benefits and for his earlier stand as a young solicitor against malign church practices in Welsh parishes, Lloyd George helped to make pacifism unpatriotic, to the extent that even prominent intellectuals were quick in 1914 to take up the war cause. The Welsh scholar, Sir John Morris-Jones, entered the fray, attacking in bellicose terms 'Germany's new religion, the nationalistic creed of Nietzsche',⁸ and collecting with fellow Welsh academic, Professor Lewis Jones, tales of Welsh heroism and derring-do for an anthology on Wales's martial past.⁹

Gentry women, many of whom had sons who served and were to die in the war, also rallied around. Profits from the sale of Morris-Jones's 2/6d book were donated to the National Fund for Welsh Troops, which sought to provide additional comforts for Welsh regiments at home and abroad. Joining Mrs. Lloyd George on the fund committee were, among others, Lady Ninian Crichton-Stuart, Lady Glanusk, Lady Edwards, Lady Beatrice Ormsby-Gore, Lady Herbert, and the Hon.

7 Robin Barlow, *Wales and World War One* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2014), chaps. 1 and 2.

8 Morris-Jones was writing in the Welsh-language publication, *Beirniad* in 1915.

9 Sir John Morris-Jones, *Gwlad fy Nhadau: Rhodd Cymru i'w Byddin* ['Land of My Fathers: Wales's Gift to its Army'] (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915).

Violet Douglas-Pennant.¹⁰ Even in the avowedly radical south Wales coalfields, Charles Stanton, a firebrand syndicalist and miners' agent, became a dedicated supporter of the war as did the even better-remembered former miners' leader and MP, William Abraham ('Mabon').

Statistics can tell us much about the keenness of different socio-economic groups and ethnicities to join up, and we can also glean much from contemporary utterances by politicians and other opinion-formers, such as churchmen and union leaders, and from newspapers and speeches. We need the testimony of individual soldiers, however, to know more clearly what they thought and felt. This is where the fifty surviving letters that Dewi sent home can help.¹¹ Starting with short, cautious missives confirming he was in good health and spirits, they grew in length under the weight of his experiences to offer in response to his father's and sister's letters a wide range of views, on Wales and Welshness, his native city of Cardiff, conscientious objectors, suffragism, and other contemporary issues, as well as the usual soldier's complaints – poor supplies of food and water, inexplicable orders, out-of-touch commanders, and favoured treatment of men in other theatres.

As a soldier, Dewi is not typical of any one group but crosses several social divides. His family being native Welsh-speakers and chapel-going – his father, Thomas, was a Jerusalem deacon – he came from a tradition that might have been expected to be somewhat more sceptical about the war. He was, however, an urban dweller, living in a significantly 'English' Welsh city – Cardiff – which had grown as rapidly as anywhere on earth in the preceding twenty-five years, drawing in people from all over the United Kingdom.¹² These, it can be inferred, were more likely than the homogeneous rural Welsh to have been fired up to support an Empire war and it was their lead that Dewi seems to have followed.

Unusually, the Davids were effectively autochthonous to the region. Dewi's parents were from the still largely Welsh-speaking areas of Pentyrch and Gwaelody-Garth, then outside the city but now incorporated, and spoke the distinctive Glamorgan Welsh dialect. Their neighbours in recently-built Moorland Road, however, were almost entirely incomers, employed in the largely artisanal jobs that had been created by the city's coal/steel/shipping economy – railway porter, coal trimmer, engineer, carpenter, boilermaker's labourer, engine driver, tailor, flannel merchant, general shop assistant, chef, labourer, goods clerk. Many of them would have had no deep roots in the area and little of the cultural attachment to Wales that Dewi and Welsh soldiers from deeper in Wales would have had.

Dewi had joined because his slightly older friends had also enlisted but virtually all of these were what might be termed Cardiff English, the sons of migrants drawn

- 10 Lord Ninian Crichton-Stuart, second son of the Marquess of Bute and Liberal MP for Cardiff, Cowbridge and Llantrisant, was killed aged thirty-five on 2 October 1915 at the Battle of Loos, provoking an outpouring of feeling in Wales. His statue by William Goscombe John stands in Gorsedd Gardens, Cathays Park. Ninian Park, former home of Cardiff City F.C., and Ninian Road in Cardiff are named after him.
- 11 Extensive extracts from the letters are included in Rhys David, *Tell Mum Not to Worry: A Welsh Soldier's War in the Near East 1915–1919* (Cardiff: Deffro, 2014). The letters in full are published in a companion volume *Tell Mum Not to Worry: The Letters* (Cardiff: Deffro, 2014).
- 12 Cardiff's population had grown from 6,342 in 1801 to 26,630 in 1851 but in the last census before the start of the war in 1911 it had reached 209,804.

into the city in the previous two or three decades. Their names were Mills, Phippen, Somers, Ropke, Hansford, London, Hardcastle, and Milner, and not Williams, Davies, Evans, or Jones. After elementary education several of these young men had gone on to Cardiff's first 'grammar' school, the Municipal Secondary School (the MSS) in Howard Gardens.¹³ And, like several of his friends, Dewi had joined the General Post Office (GPO) as a messenger boy at fifteen.¹⁴ As such, these Cardiff men will have had much in common with the wider nature of the 53rd Welsh, which included men from Herefordshire, Cheshire, and elsewhere as well as Wales, and would fight in the Near East alongside divisions from London, East Anglia, and other parts of Britain as well as Australians, New Zealanders, Newfoundlanders, and Indians.

Dewi's letters, 120,000 words in total and now part of the Imperial War Museum's national collection in London, offer evidence of the duality engendered by his having a foot in both camps, Welsh-Welsh and English-Welsh, proud of Wales and his Welshness but growing up in an environment in which the dominance of English ideas and attitudes was even more prevalent than today. In Cardiff, as in many other cities that had grown with the industrial revolution of the previous century, pro-Empire, anglocentric views of the world prevailed and will have been shared by most of the population.¹⁵ The Army, where he would have met men from other parts of Britain for the first time, was a melting-pot that would only intensify this common sentiment, creating bonds that overrode national identities within the United Kingdom.

This anglocentric, Empire-oriented view is reflected both in Dewi's choice of language and the expressions he uses. He writes exclusively in English, though he does pepper his writing with Welsh – and the odd French – expressions. Censorship may account in part for this but his English-only education in the MSS is probably more responsible. This was a time when Welsh was being lost and many Welsh speakers, perhaps particularly those who had moved to the big cities – though not the Davids – were abandoning Welsh for their children as a hindrance to advance in an English-speaking world.¹⁶ The age-old Welsh dread of the threat to the language – a fear expressed in the last line of the chorus to the Welsh national anthem, written in 1856, 'o bydded i'r heniaith barhau' ('may the old language live on') – occupies his thoughts in one of his letters. After describing how he had been

- 13 Cardiff's first 'grammar' school, the MSS, was founded to bridge the gap identified in learning between the pre-existing school system and the new University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire. Its buildings were destroyed by German bombing in World War II and it was later rebuilt on another site as Howardian High School – now closed.
- 14 In 1913 Dewi achieved the highest marks in the United Kingdom in the civil service examinations for entry into a career in the then Government department.
- 15 In the preceding two decades the city named new streets in its Roath suburb after great British triumphs – Waterloo, Blenheim, Marlborough, Kimberley, Ladysmith, Mafeking, Harrismith, Trafalgar, Crecy, among them. Kitchener had already had a school named after him in Canton in the late nineteenth century. This martial pride continued after World War I with the naming of streets near Roath Park Lake after naval commanders – Cunningham, Jellicoe, and Beatty.
- 16 The only letter in Welsh Dewi is known to have written was to his Sunday School to thank them for a parcel they had sent. He asked a Bangor man to check his Welsh and was told much to his satisfaction that it was faultless.

mixing with good Welshmen in the 158th Infantry Brigade, he writes:

You know full well that I'll never lose yr hen iaith ['the old language'] – leave it to me, I hope I am a genuine Cymro – and, well that's one of his chief duties, isn't it? – 'Fy Nuw, f'anwylyd, a'm iaith' ['my God, my loved one, and my language'].¹⁷

Even though he was a Welshman, however, 'England' is used in Dewi's letters as a synonym for 'Great Britain and Ireland', a solecism that was probably then widespread – and perhaps offers a partial elucidation of the notorious encyclopaedia definition ('for Wales, see England'). At no point does he use the word Britain, preferring instead the then widespread nickname, 'Blighty'.

Thus, from Fayoum, in Egypt, he wrote to complain about exorbitant local traders:

A quid here lasts about as long as five Bob in England.¹⁸

And later, while on the trek through Sinai to Gaza, musing on his job polishing the equipment of the two horses he was looking after at the time, Cuthbert and Araminta, he writes:

I am sure my manicurist would weep to see these hands after that sticky duty dubbing but I console myself by thinking that we are but cleaning harness for 'England, Home and Beauty' as they say in the Brasso advertisement.¹⁹

There are other examples, too. In an elliptical reference to George Bernard Shaw's satirical play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), he observes how women in Egypt usually trail unwearily on foot behind a man on an ass:

It wouldn't do for Miss Warren to preach the new belief of the 'women's rights' creed out here. The men wouldn't take it so calmly as in England.²⁰

Dewi's reading at the time was drawn from the English popular literary classics, his requests to his parents being for books by Charles Dickens, Edgar Wallace, Mark Twain, Sir Walter Scott, and the now largely forgotten Ian Hay, along with two contemporary periodicals, *London Opinions* and the *Weekly Telegraph*. His local and Welsh news came through the long-since defunct *Cardiff Times*. On one occasion he does ask his parents to find him something suitable in Welsh but whether in response they sent him a work by the Welsh Dickens, Daniel Owen, is

17 All excerpts from Dewi's letters are taken from *Tell Mum Not to Worry: The Letters*. Letter dated 28 May 1918.

18 Letter dated 13 April 1916. 'Bob' was slang for 'a shilling' in pre-decimal currency.

19 Letter dated 8 September 1916.

20 Ibid.

not known.

His own writing style was humorous and highly literate, and full of references to the Bible, nature, music, history, and geography. Yet, for all his serious reading, in speech he grew to be more and more strongly influenced by his companions. As the war proceeded and his tour of duty lengthened, Dewi – and no doubt his brothers-in-arms – filled their conversation and writing with slang phrases such as ‘absoblooming-lutely’, ‘s’welp me’, ‘kybosh’, ‘ole chulip’, ‘fakamajig’, and others, and routinely cut words, such as ‘them’, or ‘him’ back to a basic understandable ‘em’ and ‘im’. Dewi, too, gradually slips, like many of his contemporaries into the use of Eye Dialect as he becomes more of the old soldier and less the raw and nervous recruit.²¹

It has, indeed, been observed that by the end of the war the default language that many British soldiers spoke was Cockney. Londoners were disproportionately represented in the forces, and their form of slick, urban conversation clearly appealed to the mood of the men and to the camaraderie which long periods of service together engendered and hence quickly spread, even to units such as the 53rd.

Dewi, with a good grammar school education behind him, even if of only short duration, was able to add his own compelling metaphor and imagery. In apologizing for his failure to find his sister a Christmas present in Jerusalem, he tells her ‘the miserable paltry specimens of the Birmingham jeweller’s art (overseas department, remember)’ that he inspected were ‘a gross insult to the average man’s intelligence’ and ‘would not have deceived even the dullest member of a West African missionary’s flock’; in recounting his pleasure after eating the contents of a parcel he says he ‘felt as contented and benevolent as the fattest old alderman who ever sat down to the weightiest table at the Lord Mayor’s spread,’ and he ‘wouldn’t have changed places with a diner at the Carlton’; in thanking them for some glasses he had received, that the ‘goggles’ were ‘Bond St. fit’ and hung on his ‘nasal promontory’ a treat; and that some unwelcome remarks he had heard were ‘enuff to make a crocodile weep champagne’. For Dewi a camel is his ‘long-faced chum’, being sea-sick is ‘feeding the fishes’, a brush is his ‘trusty desert sweeping instrument’, conversation is ‘chin music’ and ‘between you and me’ is ‘ongtre-noose’.

Yet, while he quickly adopted Army parlance, Dewi found many of the men he met somewhat exotic on first encounter in 1915 and 1916. With gaps sometimes needing to be filled he spent very brief periods with a London Division, where he might have picked up some of his Cockney, and with the 54th (East Anglian) Division, ‘very decent people’. He found some of his fellow Welshmen different to himself, too. He is sent ‘back up the line’ in Palestine, he reports in one letter, to the 158th Brigade, not his usual 159th, and finds himself with a ‘north Wales crush’.

21 ‘Betcher’ is just one example of Eye Dialect where a conventional or colloquial pronunciation is transferred into written language. It is so called because it is seen on paper as well as heard. ‘Ses’, ‘not ‘arf’, ‘nuff’ are other examples.

‘The Fusies, you know, “rwan” like,’ he tells his parents.²² British soldiers named their surroundings after familiar places back home. The North Wales soldiers had followed Army practice in naming areas after similar and familiar places at home. ‘The Vale of Clwyd is close at hand and we are somewhere near Bettws-y-Coed,’ he reports of the areas being occupied by the 158th in the hills.

He also tells his parents what he considers to be an entertaining story about a visit from a north Wales preacher at the YMCA while he was with the Royal Welch Fusiliers (RWF), which again emphasizes the differences he observed:

I went over to finish the letter and take advantage of their tables, but I failed to write a word. There was a service on, conducted by a Welsh chaplain from Aberdaron, look you. I quite enjoyed it, and he captivated the hearts of his congregation, especially those who had never heard a ‘pregethwr’ [‘preacher’] [...] He could hardly speak English properly [...] and the Cymraeg style he had was amusing [...] It brought back memories to me of Sundays in the past when I listened to the ‘old school’. Tonight, he gives a humorous lecture at the same place and I’ll be there. So, you’re not the only ones who are privileged with those entertainments, although I’d sooner listen to yr hynod [‘the remarkable’] Kilsby Jones at Jerusalem any day to a lecture on the desert.²³

The language used by this preacher is not clear, but one can guess it was perhaps a mixture of Welsh and English to meet the needs of his congregation.

Unlike fellow soldiers from more rural areas or smaller towns, Dewi would have met people from overseas in his first job as a fifteen-year-old messenger boy working out of the GPO in James Street in Cardiff’s docklands. His day would have been spent taking telegrams to boarding houses calling seamen to their ships or to men on board the many ships thronging the docks. This would have brought him into contact with the many Arabs from the Gulf who joined Cardiff-bound vessels at the Royal Navy coaling station in Aden, many of whom settled in Wales. Whatever the impression he had formed through these no doubt fleeting encounters, once abroad the attitudes that shine through his letters are those of the contemporary Briton, and not favourable.

The Greeks, camp followers who set up canteens to serve soldiers at their bases in Egypt, are represented as venal, never losing an opportunity to cheat their powerless victims. He thanks his parents for a Postal Order:²⁴

22 Letter dated 28 May 1918. North Wales Welsh speakers use ‘rwan’ (abbreviation of ‘yr awr hon’) for English ‘now’, whereas in south Wales ‘nawr’ (‘yn awr’) is preferred. ‘Fusies’ are the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

23 John Rhys Jones was a leading nineteenth-century Congregationalist minister appointed to churches in England as well as Wales. He became known as Kilsby Jones after serving in the village of that name in Northamptonshire.

24 As a seventeen-year old volunteer – claiming at the recruiting office to be nineteen – Dewi had voted his Army pay to his mother at home but after several months depending solely on Army supplies and what he could buy with Postal Orders from his parents he rescinded this instruction.

You can't imagine what it is like to have nixes. It will come in jolly handy for such luxuries as are obtainable from the canteen, although it goes against the grain, you bet, to fork out to Greek proprietors. Naturally, or purposely, they don't forget to shove on the prices. I suspect the latter.²⁵

The Arabs, too, he believes, are only too willing to do them down in the bazaars, with their 'rotten old piastres, worth tuppence ha'penny'. Moreover, he doubts their sincerity:

The Moslems are very pious if taking a praying carpet out in the street and kneeling down bumping your forehead against the pavement has anything to do with it, but I doubt whether they're always so devoted. They seem to like English fags because they always pester us for 'Cigaretta baksheesh Engleezi' which translated from the Ancient Greek means, 'Give us a fag, gratis.'²⁶

Nor does he approve of their treatment of women:

The inhabitants of the outlying villages pass along the road by our camp to market in the town and it's always the donkey or the woman who carries the load. The man, her husband, rides on another donk, doing and carrying nothing. Lazy blighters, what?²⁷

On occasion they could be a source of amusement as when he tries to cash a Money Order in a Post Office in Ismailia and encounters a bureaucratic Egyptian counter clerk, who nevertheless knows of Cardiff. He describes how he approached the official and handed over his document:

'Hi matey, Where's my five quid.' He says, 'Are you Sapper David.' Says I, 'Be'old 'im in the flesh.'²⁸

He is sent back twice to get different signatures from the Provost Marshal's office before he receives his money and has the following exchange:

'Do you leeve in Cardeef.' 'Yes,' I said, 'near the biscuit factory on the mud. Can I go now, or do you want to know whether I was born in Upper Zinc Street, or Lower Zinc Street? Come and have a drink with me, will you?' He says: 'I tank you no, I do not drink ze beera' and all the clerks seemed to think it was a huge joke.

25 Letter from Egypt, dated 23 June 1916.

26 Letter dated 13 April 1916.

27 Ibid.

28 Letter dated 4 November 1916.

Despite in this case finding someone who had heard of his home city, his advice to anyone coming to Egypt, is:

Bring plenty of ‘tin’ [money], go to Shepherd’s Hotel and stick there.²⁹ You’ll only spoil a holiday coming up the line as far as we are to study the peculiar customs and manners of John Cherry Blossom.³⁰

These sentiments – of an eighteen-year old – would not be appreciated – or openly expressed – nowadays but were no doubt authentic of their times and of soldiers from across Britain.

Nor are the Turks, the main enemy, any more highly regarded, though he praises them when back in the hills after the capture of Jerusalem for maintaining a humanitarian approach when it came to water supplies:

Gosh! I’ve thanked the Koran many times for giving old Johnny 10 commandments, one of which forbids him to poison water – he sticks to it, too, fair does [do’s], which is a jolly lucky job for us. Water. Gosh! D’you know what happened yesterday. There was one biscuit tin of water, three men washed, two men bathed, (one was myself), and then I washed a shirt, towel and socks in it.³¹

The French, as civilized fellow-Europeans and co-combatants are less harshly treated, though there is a hint he saw a certain dandiness in their character. On a rare break in Cairo he decided to visit a French barber, one of the many foreigners then living and trading in Cairo’s big European quarter:³²

In goes this child to a swell ‘coiffeurs and shavers’ establishment, where there were about umpteen pier glasses [mirrors] hanging around the walls. Sat down and a Frenchman worked the oracle on me – a proper high-faluted style – Parisian style, you know. ‘You want ze moustache to keep, m’sieur,’ he said, serious as a judge, and, of course, not wishing to insult the poor feller, I kept as straight a face as poss and said polite-like, ‘Non, m’sieur, shave the blighter off, he get too much in the way, comprenez?’ [...] Lathered and shaved me OK, with never a pull or a scratch like my old Army pattern [razor] plays on me, and he was as dainty as a blessed girl, s’welp me Bob.

29 Shepherd’s Hotel, established in 1841 by Englishman Samuel Shepherd, became Cairo’s leading hotel until destroyed by fire in 1952. It was the headquarters of the British Army in World War I and a meeting place for Allied officers, politicians, and spies in World War II.

30 Letter dated 13 April 1916.

31 Letter dated 8 June 1918.

32 Many Britons who lived in the city will have patronized Welsh-named businesses that appeared in advertisements in programmes: sporting goods retailers Roberts, Hughes, which also boasted branches in Alexandria and Mansourah, and Davies, Bryan – slogan, ‘Everything for Kit Renewal’ – with branches in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Khartoum.

Then the blooming ceremony started, which fair startled me – first, he rubbed a block of ice over me dial [face], and then he sprayed about five scents over me and then shampooed me and sprayed some more till I didn't know if I wasn't in for an aquatic gala. For sure, I was some swell by the time I finished in that place, I tell you, cos he brushed my hair and put a blooming fine parting in it – straight as a die and looked the real goods. I don't know how the deuce he managed it, cos blowed if I could ever get one there before. I was so pleased that I gave him 2 piastres for himself and told him on the QT that he was a blooming marvel, only he couldn't comprunny simple language like that. Then he had a bloke there who brushed your togs and chapeau when you left [...] Well that little lot cost me 6 piastres but it was worth it every inch. You can judge for yourself how swell it was – I was actually having a shave next chair to a major on the staff – absolutely (Lummy, where's my swagger cane – Swish! Haw! Bar Jove!), and the manager bowed me out too and fairly beamed when I told him it was a très bon little shanty of his.³³

Yet, while this Welsh-speaking Welshman could under peer pressure very easily become the archetypal World War I Tommy, acting, thinking, sounding, and speaking like his fellow-soldiers from other parts of Britain, a feeling of being distinctively different and Welsh also permeates his letters. In Egypt he describes how he and a few of his Cardiff colleagues share a tent with a postman from Tonyrefail

who is my champion when we have good-natured arguments about Wales and Lloyd George and I may tell you that we are able to hold our own.³⁴

Dewi himself may well have differed from his colleagues in believing, like many Welsh people, that David Lloyd George, the 'Welsh Wizard', was the key to victory. And he evidently followed current developments in the war avidly:

I have just read Dafydd's speech at the Eisteddfod [in 1916] and really can't find words to express myself. He is a marvel and I think the country need have no doubts as to his ability in the capacity of Secretary for War. Why a man with that spirit – the Welsh yspryd – could overcome any obstacle likely to crop up. I'd back him up against any sausage-eating Bethmann Earwig they like to put up.³⁵ You can tell he's a Cymro alright by his speech and by Gum! I'm prouder than ever that I am also a Cymro and that the same blood runs in my veins. A Welshman in the field myself, I can only say

33 Letter dated 25 August 1917.

34 Letter dated 4 November 1916.

35 Dewi's name for Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the German Chancellor.

‘Cariwch ymlaen, Dafydd bach, cewch i mewn a ennill i ni’ [‘carry on, David old son, get in there and win it for us’].³⁶

Dewi was in no doubt either that Welsh soldiers – carrying on the traditions outlined in the Morris-Jones anthology, *Gwlad fy Nhadau* – were among the most martial of Empire troops. When it came to battle, the Germans fighting with the Ottomans were, as they would have been to most British Empire soldiers, ‘vile Huns’, but in Dewi’s view they were no match for and indeed in mortal fear of the brave Welsh. Dewi, whose main role was as a Royal Engineers signaller, sending and receiving Morse code messages and laying out cable to forward positions and retrieving it, describes one action in Palestine on the march towards Jerusalem. This to his mind encapsulates the respective fighting qualities of the Welsh and their German and Turkish enemies:

When the Welsh got to business they were greeted with shouts of ‘Come on you Welsh so and so’s, not Turks this time, you got Germans.’ And, so it was, too, there was a plentiful sprinkling of those vermin in front of us but that only made those mad, reckless, splendid Welsh madder than ever and those Huns ran faster than old Johnny [the Turks]. Y’see they can’t skulk in concrete dug-outs here [as in France] – it’s all plain fair and above-board hill-scrapping and they *don’t* like that – not they. When they see the Welsh coming up over the hills like cats from stone to stone, with the sun playing on those shining little things [presumably their weapons], it’s either ‘Kamarad’, ‘Allah!’, ‘Allah!’, or a sprint towards Constantinople. I simply have to tell you this because the glorious old 53rd gave ‘em of their best and you know what that’s like – bless ‘em. Proud of ‘em? Why there’s nobody to touch ‘em.

Anyhow, they’re wonderful, they’re marvels, they’re Welsh! If I had my way I’d give ‘em all a V.C. and a 1,000 piastre’s worth in the canteen. However, directly after the dirty work was done we were relieved and I have been terribly busy, engaged in that pleasant pastime of picking up all our cable. Blooming hard work and worst of all the blessed weather broke again and it simply poured down. When it pours here you can betcher life it does pour some, and there we were washed out of house and home – or rather bivvy – out on some blessed hills trying to pick up blooming cable thro seas of mud and lakes of rainwater.³⁷

There is more praise later for his unit after they had been sent down to the plains

36 Letter dated 8 September 1916. At Aberystwyth Lloyd George had been mobbed by an adoring crowd as he got out of his car to attend the annual festival. In October the same year Lloyd George had been in Cardiff to unveil statues – among them Boudicca, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, Owain Glyndŵr, and Sir Thomas Picton – in the newly-built City Hall, re-establishing in patriotic Welsh minds the connection between Wales and past military glory.

37 Letter dated 23 March 1918.

at Ludd after several months in the hills, only to be told after a two-day trek – ‘downhill all the way with all brakes on for hours at a stretch’ – to turn around and return immediately. The men were left only to speculate on this reversal of fortune but Dewi sees it as evidence of their irreplaceability:

What benefit can it possibly afford anyone, I would like to know, by heaping ridicule on the heads of us poor innocents. Anyhow, it just goes to prove there’s no other boys like our little rascals to scrap in those blamed hills – simply can’t do without the old ‘Fighting 53rd’ – the flower of the British Army – second to none.³⁸

Some exaggerated pride is evident here but Allenby himself was full of praise for his Welsh troops. On their role in the decisive breakthrough at Gaza he wrote:

When time was ripe, the Welsh Division brilliantly consummated the victory, storming the rocky slopes of Khuweilfeh, and stubbornly maintaining that position against repeated counter-strokes, fiercely pressed all through the first week of November [1917] [...] On 9th December 1917 the 53rd and 60th Divisions joined hands to the south and west of Jerusalem. In co-operation, these two Divisions swept the enemy from Jerusalem’s precincts, and they share the honour and the joy of having been the immediate agents in setting free the Holy City after continuous bondage. In the battles which scattered her armies and drove out of the War the Turkish Empire, the achievements of the young and inexperienced troops – who formed the majority of the 53rd Division – rivalled the exploits of those veterans who had already set an example which won, and will for ever retain, the Empire’s admiration.³⁹

But while Welsh soldiers in the Near East, such as Dewi, reflected in most respects the attitudes and even the forms of speech of their fellow-combatants from other parts of Britain, were there other characteristics specific to Wales that survived four years away from home? On the Western Front the authors Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, both officers in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, noted appreciatively the men’s love of singing. Graves observed that Welsh soldiers sang hymns, often in Welsh, whereas other regiments were more likely to sing popular music hall numbers of the day.

Though they would have sung Welsh hymns at the services Dewi attended, the more open, desert, and hill country spaces in which the 53rd Division operated may have been less conducive to communal hymn-singing than the trenches of the Western Front, where death was an ever-present danger and spirituality probably closer to men’s thoughts. The hymns Dewi mentions are Victorian and not popular

38 Letter dated 14 April 1918.

39 C. H. Dudley Ward, *History of the 53rd (Welsh) Division. T.F. 1914–1918* (Cardiff: Western Mail, 1927).

Welsh favourites – notably ‘Rocked in the Cradle’, ‘Here We Suffer Grief and Pain’, ‘When He Cometh’, and ‘Art Thou Weary’ – and his references are chiefly intended to raise an ironic point about their experiences out east.

The Welsh love of singing – hymns and airs – could come more easily to the fore once a year, however, on St. David’s Day, Dewi’s birthday. In 1916 in Egypt he reports that some of his colleagues had been for a ride and had brought back a plant that looked like a leek. In 1918, writing to his sister, he tells her he has a lump in his throat from hearing the Divisional Band strike up ‘Men of Harlech’:

Now it’s *Deryn Pur*, and here she comes, *Rhys ap Thomas*, I’m nearly blubbering.⁴⁰

He wishes he had been at home to join them at a concert for St. David’s Day but says their band had given them a treat ‘with a long programme of those beautiful airs, second to none’.

Even if there is little evidence that men in the East routinely sang hymns, music was still important and soldiers in the Near East probably had more opportunity to create entertainment for themselves than men in France and Belgium. Dewi himself recalls performing songs himself – notably the now largely forgotten but then well-known ‘Tosti’s Farewell’ – at an American woman’s house in Cairo to which he and some of his fellow-soldiers had been invited. More importantly, the men of his unit formed themselves into the ‘Palestine Pops’, a cross-dressing Pierrot troupe that specialized in musical numbers of the day and in sketches:

The funny man comes from our company and he is a genuine card [...] As for the pierotte, she looks fine, painted up with rosy cheeks and pencilled eyebrows, and long dark tresses. She brings tears to our eyes (tears of mirth, however) when she sings the poignantly-emotional ballad, ‘If You Were the Only Boy’ etc. with her partner. The appealing way in which she stretches her arms out and presses her hand on her heart in the song is quite the last word in melodrama. She’s got the mezzo soprano falsetto voice absolutely taped off, too. Sometimes it cracks at the critical moment and either goes up or bumps down about two octaves. (In ordinary life this prima donna is a Sapper of R.E.s.)⁴¹

His favourites, however, were the ‘Welsh Rarebits’, a troupe of experienced musicians formed in late summer 1916, pre-dating the official World War II Entertainments National Services Association (ENSA) by some twenty-three years. Divisional Headquarters decided that the 53rd, during their long trek across the Sinai Desert, should have an official concert party, perhaps recognizing the extent of musical ability available and the efforts the men were already making to keep their own morale up. Wally Bishop, member of a Cardiff musical family serving in

40 Letter dated 27 February 1918. The letter was completed after 1 March.

41 Letter dated 10 October 1917.

the RAMC, was asked by his Commanding Officer in Egypt if he knew any other musicians who could help to form a band. He volunteered a pianist, a violinist, and a piccolo player, and suggested a choir be formed too. The eleven founding members met under the shadow of a quince tree at Der el Belah and continued to entertain their fellow-soldiers for the rest of the campaign.⁴² The première took place in Sinai's Wadi Ghuzze, a wide dried-up river bed flanked on either side by steep hills. The 5,000 strong soldier audience sat in terraces, watching a stage lit by acetylene floodlights, their cigarettes pinpointing the darkness.⁴³

Dewi explains to his sister:

The Welsh Rarebits were the only demoiselles we've got, barring the charming Buddoo [Bedouin] damsels who are now millionairesses on the 15 tomatoes for 5 piastre touch, and of course it's only natural that a fellow likes to be deceived and feels like straightening his tie and parting his hair before he goes to a concert. Best thing a fellow can do in the EEF where leave is almost as extinct as a rest, eh?⁴⁴

Given the ubiquity of the piano in Victorian and Edwardian households, and the absence of many of the forms of entertainment that are now available through mass media, it is perhaps not surprising that Bishop was able to put together a concert party that would prove so entertaining. In a distinctively Welsh touch, the war's end was celebrated with a concert by the one-hundred strong 53rd Division Welsh Male Voice Choir at a celebratory dinner at the Metropole Hotel in Alexandria in January 1919. The programme offered several great Welsh favourites: 'The Sailors' Chorus' by the poet, Mynyddog, set to music by Dr. Joseph Parry, 'Myfanwy', 'Men of Harlech', and 'Martyrs of the Arena'. Supporting acts included vocal, piano and violin solos by serving men.

Dewi, his letters reveal, came from a more Welsh background than many of those with whom he signed up, but he was nevertheless much closer to these fellow Cardiff citizens than to the rural Welsh soldiers he met from other less populated areas of Wales, especially those belonging to the RWF regiments of the 158th Brigade. His attitudes were those of many young British men brought up on stories

42 Wallace 'Wally' Bishop (1894–1966) describes in his autobiography, how the newly formed party agreed on the need to have a 'female' member and bought women's clothing – stays, shimmy, petticoat, stockings, gaiters, a low-cut dress in gold and black trimmings, and blonde wig. Another item, bloomers, apparently had to be explained to twenty-two year old Bishop by one of his married colleagues. Waldini [Wallace 'Wally' Bishop], *Front Line Theatre* (Cardiff: Private Publication, 1947).

43 Son of a piccolo player, Wally Bishop went on to make music his life. Employed as a cinema organist after the war, he lost his job with the advent of the 'talkies' and spent several years appearing with unemployed musicians as Waldini and his Gypsy Band in Cardiff's Roath Park. During World War II he was invited by impresario, Jack Hylton, to entertain British and Commonwealth Forces at home and abroad. After the war the group appeared during the summer months at holiday resorts throughout the UK, most notably Llandudno in north Wales and Ilfracombe in Devon. For the last two years of his life he toured with his all-girl band The Fabs, entertaining troops again.

44 Letter dated 28 June 1918.

of 'England's' imperial mission. Like his fellow-soldiers, he had no problem with Empire, accepting without question the British place at the top of the international order and the superiority of Englishmen, Welshmen, and Scotsmen over other races. As one midshipman on being posted to H.M.S. *Defence* in 1914 observed: 'I knew little or nothing about foreign policy beyond the fact that the Mediterranean belonged to us.'⁴⁵ Indeed, though conscription was never introduced in Ireland, tens of thousands of young Irishmen joined up with the same dedication to the cause. Many of their brothers, however, too young in 1914 and 1915 to join up, made their way into the Republican ranks that took Britain on in 1916.

Dewi remained throughout his service a proud and patriotic Welshman, stressing the importance of this identity in letters to his parents. He was a fully engaged and unquestioning Briton as well, however, in a society that was less complex and more homogeneous than today. For many men of military age like him, buying into the British view was completely natural and once enlisted they were not willing to harbour doubts, nor were their parents. Indeed, Dewi reserves some of the few bitter comments he expresses in his letters for those who had not joined up as he did at the first opportunity, and for those with relatively soft jobs in the Army or outside.

Opinions were to change during the war as losses mounted and the impact on families grew. In the post-war world, Wales became a centre for peace activities, playing a significant part in the establishment of the League of Nations. Plaid Cymru's formation in 1925 would also create a platform for national sentiments and aspirations to be expressed in a different and more political form. A war intended to re-establish the status quo was destined to leave in its wake a very different world.

These were developments that would follow in the troubled twenties. It is only from the contemporary war letters, such as Dewi's, however, that we can learn why young Welshmen enlisted, their views on their homeland and its place in the world, how they felt about service in the different theatres, and about their fellow-soldiers and foes. Dewi David, through his innocent and cheerful but copious correspondence, offers insights into all these questions.

45 Hadaway, *Pyramids and Fleshpots*, p. 32.