

ON BECOMING A WELSH LANDOWNER¹

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I want to focus on some contentious aspects of Welsh history, and how understandings of past events continue to resonate in the present – perhaps even with implications for Wales’s future. My particular lense is a personal one: the experience over the past two decades of becoming a Welsh landowner. I want to reflect on some distinctive historiographical and even political discomforts encountered in the course of that process. In the year 2000, I inherited the rump of an old – indeed an ancient – family estate, in the north of Anglesey on the edge of Llanfechell. It had come down through the line of my father’s mother, whose family had always been rooted on the island.

But before getting into that... In a recent lively book,² a group of authors have offered their very diverse takes on contemporary Welsh identity. How generously defined should this be? There are powerful pleas for catholicity, for the inclusion of multiple previously marginalised groups – people of colour, LGBT minorities, non-Welsh speaking residents of Rhyl and Wrexham, recent immigrants from afar, as well as from England – in the wonderful jumble that is increasingly Wales.

In one contribution, Daniel Evans highlights two dominant twentieth-century stories of what might be called ‘essential Welshness’, which have been thrown up by historians over the past 150 years. One is the story of the rural, Nonconformist, Welsh-speaking *gwerin* in contrast to an allegedly negligent – some even suggested *treacherous* – land-owning class of English-speaking Anglicans. (I’ll return to that one in a moment.) And the second, says Evans, has been an equally powerful trope, developed historiographically in part-response to the rural emphasis of the first, namely the story of the industrialised working class of south Wales, collectivist and unionised. As it happens, says Evans, the social and economic phenomena which underpin these two stories (respectively, Nonconformism and coal-based heavy industry) were both in serious decline by the time political moves towards Welsh Devolution took serious political shape in the 1980s and 90s. But more than that, says Evans, these two contrasting accounts of Welshness were always only parts of the story. They are best understood as having been ‘causes’, albeit very *potent* and important causes, rather than descriptions that could embrace the entire population of Wales. There were, and now are, in fact, *multiple* ways in which community has been, and is being built, and rebuilt, in Wales. And discussions of Wales’s future which don’t embrace this reality will always be inadequate.

In another impressive essay in the same volume, the Swansea historian Martin Johnes argues that a pre-requisite for a more coherent sense of Welsh unity in today’s world is a franker shared understanding of how we have got to this point *historically*.

¹ This is a version of a lecture presented to the Bangor Branch of the Guild of Welsh Graduates, 11th November 2022.

² D. Chetty, G. Muse, H. Issa, & I. Tyne (eds.), *Welsh [Plural]: Essays on the Future of Wales* (London: Repeater, 2022).

Against that contemporary background, let's get down to cases. As I've already mentioned, in November 2000, on my father's death, I inherited the remains of the Brynddu-Plas Coch estate on Anglesey, which had come down the line through many generations of my grandmother's family. The surviving assets consisted of a 400-year-old house, Brynddu in Llanfechell (a mile south of Cemaes Bay), and several farms. This was the 800-acre rump of what, at its nineteenth-century peak, had been an estate of more than 5000 acres – at the time, one of the larger estates on the island. Certainly, it is one of the oldest, some of it having been in continuous family ownership since as far back as the fourteenth century.

Up to that point, I had had a busy working life of my own in the media and the environmental movement in various guises – a largely metropolitan life in England and north America. Of course, I had known in the back of my mind that this particular parcel would be passed to me at some point. But it wasn't until a year or so after it had actually happened that the implications could really start to sink in.

Coming to terms with taking on the Brynddu estate brought me into a new kind of active relationship with history and place – specifically in relation to Llanfechell and Cemaes, but also more widely to Anglesey overall. 'A new kind of active relationship with history and place': that possibly sounds a little pompous. It just means that, to make sense of this new situation, I and my wife Helen had to become sensitive to the dense web of historical connections in which Brynddu and its estate were embedded – with land abutting onto two lively villages, and local people, some with antecedents who had been tenants in the past, and with whom the family had been intertwined over generations. It was impossible not to be aware of the continuing reverberations of past tensions and controversies. Of course, my father had attuned me to some of this over the years. But I quickly discovered for myself that people have long memories.

For example, there was the goodwill I encountered from elderly Welsh intellectuals as a direct reflection of their respect for an ancestor of two centuries ago, William Bulkeley the eighteenth-century diarist³ – the fact that I was the latest in his family line to take my turn living in the house about which he had written so much. Or again, less comfortably, there were residents in the neighbouring seaside village of Cemaes who still carried memories (and resentments) arising from controversies triggered by my great-grandmother three generations earlier, concerning visitors pressing for access to Brynddu-owned lands close to the beach (which she also controlled at the time, as also Lord of the Manor of Cemaes). 'Trespassing' as it used to be called.

All of which is a way of saying that the past repeatedly started to come alive in the present in new ways. Sometimes it was like stepping into a different map of Anglesey, becoming sharply aware of the other estates and landowners across the island, people and places who had barely registered in my life up to that point. What is more, there were literally thousands of Brynddu and Plas Coch papers resting neatly catalogued in the University's archives, along with those of many other of

³ The *William Bulkeley Diaries* are held in the Bangor University Archive collections – transcriptions accessible at <http://bulkeleydiaries.bangor.ac.uk/>.

the former Anglesey and Caernarfonshire estates. All of these took on new meaning for me. And as this awareness rippled outwards, and I started to read around, I was confronted with the reality that over the past two centuries Welsh landowners as a class have come to occupy a particularly tangled space in Welsh consciousness and society. In addition to this, not only are some of the tensions associated with this still alive and kicking, but certain of my own antecedents have been archetypal examples of what much of the fuss has been – and perhaps continues to be – all about.

Language is an important part of it, of course. Though my younger siblings are fluently bilingual, having gone to local schools, I was already locked into the English boarding-school system by the time I arrived at the age of ten. (We had been living near Manchester before that.) Belatedly, on returning to Anglesey in 2003, I started to learn Welsh through the Wlpan system, persisting with classes in Bangor for three years, until realising, with great regret, that I would never become fluent. It was humbling to have to acknowledge this setback. But the experience of *trying* to master the *iaith y nefoedd* deepened my appreciation of and respect for the richness and depth of Welsh culture, and its continuing vigour.

Of course, the issue of the language and the historic landowning class in Wales is itself a highly charged one. A prominent theme of the Welsh historiography of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was ‘*Brad yr Uchelwyr*’ (the ‘Betrayal of the Gentry’) – the argument that from the moment of the Acts of Union (back in Elizabeth I’s time), the native gentry pursued a process of forsaking their distinctive Welsh heritage for a mess of pottage, neglecting Welsh culture, and abandoning their loyalty to the language, in exchange for the beguiling materialism of the Sais. Though historians of Wales nowadays are less censorious, it’s a trope still routinely reproduced in everyday discourse, as well as in popular communications through TV and social media.

My own first encounters with the *uchelwyr* emerged through a direct ancestor, William Bulkeley the diarist, who had lived his entire life at Brynddu between 1691 and 1760. William Bulkeley was very much a presence in the Brynddu household when I was growing up – the household spirit, our *ysbryd aelwyd*, you might say – intimately present because of the daily diary he had written in and about the house itself, between 1735 and 1760 throughout the second half of his life. The 400 pages of the two surviving volumes, written in English, document vividly much of Bulkeley’s Anglesey daily life in the mid-eighteenth century, at home in and around Brynddu: as a farmer and local landowner; an opinionated local squire; a canny intriguer in the vestry politics of Llanfechell parish church; as well as an active middling-gentry figure in the county establishment; a local Justice of the Peace and member of the Great Sessions Grand Jury; and a respected friend of the celebrated Morris brothers; and also of course as a bewildered widower with two rather wayward children (one of whom married the Wallasey privateer Fortunatus Wright, with consequences recounted in a charming pre-war book).⁴

⁴ D. Roberts, *Mr Bulkeley and the Pirate* (Oxford: OUP, 1936).

William Bulkeley was fluently bilingual, though descended from the originally English Bulkeley family of Beaumaris. As a young man, encouraged by the redoubtable Lewis Morris, he had published an early personal collection of Welsh poetry, *Llyfr Gwyn Mechell*.⁵ And even today, he is remembered for his tolerance towards early Anglesey Methodism, shown by the fact that he deliberately chose to lease a farm, Clwchdyrnog near Llanddeusant, to William Pritchard, one of the pioneers of that connection, when many of his fellow-landowners would not.

He had lived in the middle of that long period between 1550 and 1900 which often gets dubbed ‘the age of the Welsh gentry’. I wanted to know more. There have been several impressive studies of eighteenth-century Anglesey by remarkable local antiquarians, the late Nesta Evans⁶ and Helen Ramage⁷ for example. But turning to leading mid-twentieth century Welsh *academic* historians of the period was a disappointing experience. I found a largely unilluminating picture, presenting the gentry class, of which William Bulkeley was a member, overwhelmingly as agents of the growing so-called ‘anglicisation’ of Wales. Take for example Professor Frank Price Jones, in 1969: ‘...the single most significant and crucial single development in the history of Wales...[was] the gentry turning their backs on Welshness and the Welsh language and deserting the rest of the nation – the *gwerin* – leaving them to get on as well as they could, deprived of their natural and traditional leaders’.⁸

Where did we as a family – and specifically William Bulkeley – fit into such a picture, I wondered? How fair was this? The analysis, whilst powerful, seemed to lack discrimination – particularly when set against the complex and engaged biculturalism of Bulkeley himself in his daily life, as revealed in the diaries. After all, his Dictionary of National Biography entry concludes with the words ‘there was not a squire who was more of a Welshman than he’.

Because of my new situation as custodian of Brynnddu, questions like these became deeply personal. How was one to understand the past of people like us? Everything, it seemed, led back to the step-change in Wales’s relationship with the English following the advent of Henry Tudor to the English throne back in 1485, after his victory at Bosworth, and Henry VIII’s subsequent so-called Acts of Union in 1536 and 1543. And that was the reason I then researched and finally produced a book, *A Prism For His Times*,⁹ just two years ago. It had involved a late-in-life PhD a few years earlier in the Welsh History Department at Bangor University, encouraged by Nia Powell and the work of Dr Wil Griffith,¹⁰ both of them now retired.

⁵ W. Bulkeley (ed.), *Llyfr Gwyn Mechell* (National Library of Wales, MS 832F – c. 1730).

⁶ N. Evans, *Social Life in Mid-eighteenth Century Anglesey* (Cardiff: UWP, 1936); *Religion and Politics in Mid-eighteenth Century Anglesey* (Cardiff: UWP, 1953).

⁷ H. Ramage, *Portraits of an Island* (Llangefni: Anglesey Antiquarian Society, 1987).

⁸ F. P. Jones, ‘The Gwerin of Wales’, in G. H. Jenkins (ed.), *Studies in Folk Life: Essays in Honour of Iorwerth C. Peate* (London: Routledge, 1969).

⁹ R Grove-White, *A Prism for his Times: Late-Tudor Anglesey and Hugh Hughes of Plas Coch* (Llangefni: Anglesey Antiquarian Society, 2020)

¹⁰ See for example W. P. Griffith, *Learning Law and Religion: Higher Education and Welsh Society c.1540–1640* (Cardiff: UWP, 1996).

There were enough family papers in the Bangor University Archives to make it possible to investigate a still earlier ancestor from another branch of the family, a century and a half before William Bulkeley. This was Hugh Hughes of Plas Coch, who had lived in the sixteenth century, with a lineage going directly back to Llywarch ap Bran, who in turn had been a key counsellor to Owain Gwynedd, the twelfth-century ruler of this corner of Wales long before the English Conquest. This Hugh Hughes was born in what was then Porthamel in 1547, during the short reign of Edward VI, and then lived most of his life on the Anglesey side of the Straits at Plas Coch, next door to what is now Plas Newydd, until not long after Elizabeth I's death. This meant he was of the first generation of Welshman able to take advantage of the 'rights and privileges' arising from the new Acts of Union ten years earlier. These acts introduced a new system of law and administration, incorporating elements that were distinctive to Wales. And it is here we come to controversy. For centuries after the enactment of the Acts of Union, they were well-regarded in Wales, seen as bringing multiple benefits – law and order, individual opportunity, equal rights as Crown subjects. But from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, attitudes took a different turn. Reflecting the Nonconformist tides of the second half of the nineteenth century, historians began to suggest that the acts were when the rot set in – and the slow sell-out to the English by a self-centred *uchelwyr* class really began. At its most extreme, the two Acts were claimed to have colonised Wales and suppressed Welsh culture and language. Indeed, in 2000, Gwynfor Evans, former lion of Plaid Cymru, was claiming: '...the fundamental purpose of the [Acts of Union] was to merge Wales with England, to assimilate the Welsh, to destroy their separate national identity...[such that] every aspect of the menial status of the Welsh nation demonstrated Wales to be a colony'.¹¹

Hugh Hughes' life, I argue in the book, offers a rather different kind of prism for helping understand what may really have been going on at the time.¹² Though as Anglesey Welsh as can be, Hugh gained a fully European humanist education at Trinity College, Cambridge, in the 1560s, and then qualified for the bar at Lincoln's Inn in London. After that he rose to the very top, as a bencher and then Treasurer (the head) of Lincoln's Inn in London – all this, while still living most of his life in Anglesey. Oxbridge was already a destination of choice for bright native-Welsh boys like Hugh. Two of his exact contemporaries at Cambridge, in the next-door college of St John's, were William Morgan, later the translator of the first 1588 Welsh Bible; and Edmund Prys, the noted bard, who went on to translate the Psalms. And across that same period, Jesus College Oxford was being founded and endowed by Welshmen with other young Welshmen in mind.

The late sixteenth century was a singularly creative time not only in the development of the law, but also in the constitutional consolidation of a distinctive new entity, not simply England-with-Wales-attached, but 'Britain'. And far from Welshmen like Hugh being on the periphery of these developments, or the victims

¹¹ G. Evans, *The Fight for Welsh Freedom* (Talybont: Y Lolfa Cyf, 2000), pp. 99–100.

¹² R. Grove-White, 'On a Tudor Welsh Lawyer and the Future of Britain', *THSC* 26 (2020), pp. 139–142.

of them – toadying under an English hegemony, as some have implied – it became obvious they were in fact full partners. In this period, to be a lawyer was to be at the centre of things. And many other native Welshmen from north-west Wales matched Hugh's connection with the Inns of Court – Sir William Jones of Castellmarch, in Caernarfonshire and Sir Peter Mutton of Llanerch, Denbighshire, to name just a couple. And all this was being accomplished without detriment to their Welsh identities. Individuals like these were genuinely bicultural: Welshmen with homes and growing responsibilities and estates in North-West Wales, whilst also important actors in the emergent federated 'monarchical republic' of Britain, under statute and common law.

What is more, law was at that time the routine idiom of not only justice but also of everyday public administration, which meant that expertise in the law and legal concepts was central to local and regional government. So Hugh, like the others just mentioned, was also active at every level of North Wales governance in the late sixteenth century: as a local justice on the island; as Anglesey's Sheriff, three times; as Attorney General for the North Wales Courts of Great Session; and also as one of the first Welsh members of the Council in the Marches, which was effectively Wales's Privy Council.

The significance of these years – the half-century or so immediately following the Acts of Union – seems to me to be still poorly appreciated here in Wales. For example, contrary to the tale I still hear from Welsh friends, modern scholarship¹³ has shown beyond reasonable doubt that there was no deliberate English plan to extinguish the Welsh language, so much as a bureaucratic determination to ensure a consistent idiom of future public administration across most of an island fearful of the very real prospect of foreign invasion through much of the century. Indeed, against this background, the publication and dissemination of the first Welsh-language Bible, in 1588, just a few decades after the Acts of Union, reflected recognition of, and respect for the language and Wales's distinctiveness at the time. It can also be argued (as I do in the book) that, rather than undermining Welsh distinctiveness and language, the Elizabethan settlement for Wales (the Acts of Union and the Welsh-language Bible and Protestantism, and Welsh integration into British political and legal systems) actually made them more secure. After all, Welsh has continued to thrive as a living language into the twenty-first century, whereas Irish and Scottish Gaelic became endangered, before recent signs of revival. On the other hand, Hugh Hughes did marry an Englishwoman: Elizabeth Montagu, from a high-achieving Northamptonshire family of lawyer-landowners. And in the way of these things, this almost certainly meant that their four children were raised speaking English quite as much as Welsh, if not more so. But there is nothing to show that this lessened the family's pride in or identification with the family's long Welsh heritage.

¹³ P. R. Roberts, 'The Welsh Language, English Law and Tudor Legislation', *THSC* (1989), pp. 19–75; 'Tudor Legislation and the Political Status of "the British tongue"', in G. H. Jenkins, *The Welsh Language before the Industrial Revolution* (Cardiff: UWP, 1995), pp. 123–152.

So what do I, as a descendant, conclude about Hugh Hughes's life and career? That yes, he was an archetypal enterprising Welshman of his time, who took advantage of opportunities opened up by the Acts of Union. But also that, crucially, he used these opportunities to play an active hands-on professional role in the engine room of a political, legal and administrative settlement ('Britain'), which over the centuries had beneficial consequences for Wales, mostly strikingly the survival of Welsh culture and language.

Does this suggestion sound strange? If so, the explanation may lie in the legacy of the nineteenth century – that is, the triumphant rise of middle-class Welsh Nonconformist politics across the second half of that century. The outlines will be well known to most of you. How, gathering strength from the controversies surrounding the so-called Educational Blue Books of 1847 – which gave such offence in Wales, with their insensitive English disparagements of the Welsh language, and in particular Welsh morality – a new social and political dynamic emerged, in parallel with the sequence of Methodist revivals across Wales. And how over the following two or three decades, brilliant advocates and journalists such as Henry Richard, Thomas Gee, the editor of the journal *Baner ac Amserau*, Tom Ellis and others, catalysed a movement that gave long overdue political expression and dignity to the Welsh-speaking Nonconformist middle and working classes, the *gwerin*. And of course, crucially, the success of this vastly important movement in the 1860s, 70s and 80s defined itself in opposition to – even through demonisation of – the land-owning gentry and aristocratic classes, who for centuries, it is true, had retained a monopoly on political and rural economic power.

Here is Henry Richard in 1867, in full campaigning flow: 'The people who speak this language [Welsh], who read this literature, who own this history, who inherit these traditions, who venerate these marvellous religious organisations, the people forming three-fourths of the people of Wales – have they not a right to say to this small propertied class... We are the Welsh people and not you? This country is ours and not yours, and therefore we claim to have our principles represented in the Commons' House of Parliament'.¹⁴ As Professor Paul O'Leary has observed, this hugely important perspective involved an 'attempt to create a myth of an organic Welsh nation in the image of Nonconformity'.¹⁵ This reinforces Professor Gwyn Alf Williams's perception that: 'Everything outside the *gwerin* came to be seen as only half-Welsh; they were the *real* Welsh. As they became more radical in their politics, they came to feel that they, as a Nonconformist people, *were* the Welsh nation'.¹⁶

Here I must briefly mention a third Brynddu antecedent of my own: William Bulkeley Hughes, who was my great-great grandfather, and served as Member of Parliament for Caernarfon Boroughs for more than forty years with only a single break. He had started out as a Peelite Tory, favouring free trade, and then became a

¹⁴ Aberdare Times, 14 November 1868.

¹⁵ P. O'Leary, 'The Language of Patriotism in Wales, 1840–1880' in G. H. Jenkins (ed.), *The Welsh Language and its Social Domains, 1801–1911* (Cardiff: UWP, 2000), p. 551.

¹⁶ G. A. Williams, *When Was Wales?* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 206.

Gladstonian Liberal. There is copious evidence that he felt himself to be deeply and authentically Welsh, and acted as such. He was an improving landlord who, though English-educated, spoke passable Welsh. He promoted Welsh history, and even old Welsh law, and helped bring the railways to Anglesey. In the 1859 election, his seat was targeted by Richard Davies, the Methodist Menai Bridge ship-owner who later became MP for Anglesey. At the hustings, Davies's supporters pilloried and disparaged him as being out of touch. As it happens, he lost the seat briefly to another Tory, rather than Davies. But he then became a Liberal himself, and won it back, staying the course for the best part of another twenty years, having adapted to the new winds until his death in 1882.¹⁷

As is well known, this new wave of Welsh-language Nonconformist politics, encapsulated in *Cymru Fydd*, had changed Wales dramatically by the turn of the century – through a sequence of campaigns against ‘landlordism’ and Tithes, and in pursuit of the disestablishment of the Anglican church, all compounded by the sea-changes brought about by the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1889, which meant that elected local authorities took over from the old magistracy, removing the historically embedded local power of the gentry. Passions ran high, sometimes with much bitterness. It has to be said that the Royal Commission on Welsh Lands investigation set up in the 1890s, in response to the claims of the radicals of *Cymru Fydd*, was able to uncover little evidence of most of the claimed abuses by landowners. The rural historian David Howell later observed: ‘...the Radical leaders were sincere men, dedicated to achieving their goals, (but) they often pressed anti-landlord allegations which had no basis in fact... (feeding a) myth of oppression and martyrdom which so pervaded and influenced the course of Welsh politics’.¹⁸

Largely for economic reasons, by the early twentieth century many former estates – in Wales as in England – were fragmenting and being sold off. A fascinating little book first published in 1926, ‘*The South Wales Squires*’ by Herbert Vaughan,¹⁹ documents much of what this historical turn felt like. It can be read as almost an elegy for the many smaller Welsh landowners with modest landed estates, who felt they had been demonised unfairly, and now were disappearing with their positive contributions to Welsh rural life and community largely unacknowledged. But they had been privileged and, in terms of social justice, could not openly complain. And now their time had passed. Indeed, ironically, the sense of alienation documented by Vaughan in the 1920s may well have been reinforced inadvertently with the creation of new Welsh Universities like Bangor, with new History departments fostering a narrative of Welsh history in which the decadent role of the former land-owning class was widely assumed.

Let me conclude. In light of all this, it is perhaps little wonder that my personal experience of inheriting the rump of an old Welsh estate twenty years ago should have been tinged initially with unease and ambivalence. Had my antecedents really

¹⁷ M. Cragoe, *Culture, Politics and National Identity in Wales 1832–1886* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

¹⁸ D. W. Howell, *Patriarchs and Parasites: The Gentry of South-East Wales in the Eighteenth Century* (Cardiff: UWP, 1986), pp. 149, 151.

¹⁹ H. M. Vaughan, *The South Wales Squires* (Carmarthen: Golden Grove Book Co, 1988).

been Welsh, compared with the *gwerin*? Had they really ‘defected and withdrawn from national life’ and ‘become separated from the life of the community in which (they) lived’, as implied by some of those mid-twentieth century Welsh historians? Had the landowning class really had such a pernicious impact in the past, as to still be undermining the welfare of Wales in the present? Perhaps the meaning of what I have been trying to uncover in this discussion of my experience of becoming a hereditary landowner in Wales is just a sense of a section of society having been written out of the script and left dangling?

It is good to observe that these days the historiographical pendulum is now moving increasingly towards more generous outlooks. Indeed, close to home here in Bangor, there’s the rapid development of the Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates, under the dynamic directorship of Dr Shaun Evans, building on beginnings by Nia Powell, Lowri Ann Rees and Einion Thomas – with all of whom I’ve had the pleasure of collaborating. This Institute is generating a wave of new scholarship and interest in the past significance of the landed estates (and their owners, and houses) for a fuller understanding of their significance for the history, culture and economy of Wales.²⁰ And I suggest this may all have meaning and importance for the wider future. The ‘Welsh (Plural)’ essays referred to at the outset of this talk may hold a clue. Martin Johnes is surely right that the building and sharing of a more inclusive sense of Wales’s history, and what their lived experience has meant for groups and minorities of many kinds, is now vital for shared understanding of one another, as the momentum builds for new degrees of Welsh self-government into the future. The essays in that book reveal a twenty-first century Wales of multiple identities, all of them sincere in an overarching identification with Wales, and needing recognition as such. In this sense, perhaps these personal reflections on my own historically-charged experience of inheriting land in Wales may even contain a few modest pointers.

²⁰ Also relevant here is a notable recent study – L. Bowen, *Early Modern Wales c.1536–c.1689: Ambiguous Nationhood* (Cardiff: UWP, 2022).