

Introduction

GERAINT EVANS AND HELEN FULTON

The last book to be called *A History of Welsh Literature* was published in 1955, and its title signified the literature of Wales written in Welsh. The volume was a translation into English, by H. Idris Bell, of the literary history published two years earlier, *Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg hyd 1900*, by Thomas Parry, one of the foremost medieval scholars and literary critics of his day. The literature of Wales is one of the oldest continuous literary traditions in Europe and Parry's history was understandably designed to focus attention on the medieval centuries, on religious writing, and on the eisteddfod tradition. It dealt exclusively with literature written in Welsh and it stopped at the end of the nineteenth century, although Bell added to his translation a brief appendix on twentieth-century trends.

Parry's history, valuable though it remains as a work of scholarship, suggests the reasons why a new literary history for Wales is needed. It was also in 1955 that Cardiff was proclaimed the capital city of Wales and in the six decades since then the political situation of Wales, and consequently its cultural preoccupations, have changed in ways that Parry could not have imagined. Principally, the political devolution of Wales in 1999 and the establishment of firstly a National Assembly and more recently a Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru), which is located in Cardiff, has changed the social and cultural landscape of Wales almost beyond recognition. Secondly, and just as significantly, the language movement in Wales has led to substantial institutional support for the Welsh language and a culture of bilingualism that has shaped generations of writers and audiences since the middle of the twentieth century. As cultural production in Wales has changed, so have perceptions of Wales's cultural heritage: the Middle Ages, though undoubtedly a golden age for Welsh literature, are increasingly received via modern remediations, while the importance of religion – particularly Nonconformist religion – as an agent of both linguistic preservation and cultural conservatism in Wales needs to be balanced against the

GERAINT EVANS AND HELEN FULTON

economic consequences of industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its collapse in the twenty-first.

This new *History of Welsh Literature* offers a comprehensive, multi-authored critical survey of the literature of Wales from the earliest centuries to the present day. It is the first substantial single-volume account of Welsh literature in both languages, and as such it recognizes its responsibility to canon formation and the shaping of cultural identity. While taking full account of the older canon, as marked out by Parry and his predecessors, this book aims to identify a new modern canon which includes writing in both languages addressed to a range of audiences in Wales and beyond. Written at a time when the study of medieval literature was at the heart of the university curriculum, Thomas Parry's literary history inevitably suggested that the golden age of Welsh writing was in the past. This new volume celebrates the grandeur of the past but also imagines a literature of Wales which has a golden future.

The main aim of the book is to formalize the recent turn in Welsh scholarship towards adopting a single, holistic view of Wales's cultural past and present by balancing the two literatures of Wales – in Welsh and English – within a coherent historicized vision. In order to do this, we have included chapters at the beginning of each section which provide some historical background and we apply modern paradigms of cultural theory including postcolonial and gendered readings of key texts and literary developments. The book attempts to dismantle a simple binary between 'literature' and 'writing' in all its forms and resists a privileging of 'literature' while still engaging with the idea of a canon and the forces by which canons are created. The book is written in English in order to address an international audience and to locate our discussion of Welsh literature, in both languages, in the field of comparative literature. As a complement to this outward-looking focus, we are closely engaged with the politics of language and cultural production within Wales itself, looking at the processes by which the cultural practices of Welsh-language society gradually became comprehensible to, and shared with, an English-speaking public.

The structuring rationale of the book is chronological and contextual. Starting with the vitality of medieval Welsh literature, whose echo is still heard by contemporary writers and film-makers, the book considers a series of key periods in the literary history of Wales including moments of social and political change, when the economics of cultural production demanded modernization and a re-evaluation of the past. The sixteenth-century Acts of Union coincided with the Reformation, inspiring a Tudor sensibility in Welsh

Introduction

writing that led directly to the antiquarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Industrialization in south Wales and the creation of ‘the valleys’ sparked a new awareness of Wales’s vulnerability to external forces and legitimated Welsh writing in English. In the long post-industrial decades of the twentieth century, literary voices spoke of decline, as if all of Wales had once been down the mines, before the contemporary drama of devolution, on the cusp of the new century, released the possibility of a multicultural future for a multilingual Wales.

The contextualizing argument of the book has three aspects. Firstly, it promotes literature as a significant medium of political expression and change. Just as canon formation is a kind of nation building, Welsh literary texts, from the medieval to the modern, work through the problems and challenges of representing a nation that is not a state. In the literatures of both languages, speaking for the nation means, very often, articulating resistance to the idea of England as the colonizing and imperial power, a resistance that is often problematic and self-defeating. From the earliest poetry of Taliesin and Aneirin, forged in the battlefields of post-Roman Wales and the ‘Old North’ of Britain, to the passionate rhetoric of Saunders Lewis in the mid-twentieth century, the push of the Welsh against English power is matched by the pull of hegemonic safety and set off-balance by the factionalism within Wales itself. The heroic battle of the men of Gododdin in sixth-century north Britain pitted the British against each other as much as against the Anglo-Saxons, while the long controversy following the publication of Caradoc Evans’s collection of short stories, *My People* (1915), points to a deep and longstanding cultural divide within modern Wales. The origins of this can be traced to Nonconformist religion and the social changes wrought by industrialization in the late nineteenth century, resulting in the competing needs of rural and urban environments, one largely Welsh-speaking and the other mainly English-speaking. With the slow march towards devolution at the end of the century, after a close-won referendum that displayed the reality of a politically divided nation, writers began to find new subjects for a politically engaged literature, especially inequalities of class, race, and gender which, while certainly not confined to Wales, nonetheless had a distinctive Welsh articulation. The industrial novels of the early twentieth century champion the working classes and express the predominantly socialist and patriarchal politics of the steel and mining areas, while practices of writing and publishing result in the systematic exclusion of women’s voices in any great number until later in the century.

GERAINT EVANS AND HELEN FULTON

A second aspect of the book's focus has to do with the economics of cultural production, without which literature, in any language, cannot survive. From the Tudor prohibition of printing presses in Wales to the establishment of Welsh-medium education and media in the twentieth century, the means by which literary texts are reproduced and disseminated have had a direct impact on the form and content of the literature of Wales. To some extent, Welsh culture has always been a 'survivor' culture, that is, a culture that has had to be flexible in devising the means of ensuring its own continuity, and most chapters in the book reflect this in various ways. In the medieval centuries, patronage from the church and secular lords was the only means by which literature could be produced and preserved: without the regional princes before 1282 and the *uchelwyr* (gentry) after 1282, who supported the poets and native Welsh culture throughout the centuries of Norman and English rule more or less up to the introduction of printing, the medieval heritage of Wales is likely to have been very small indeed.

Similarly, the humanists and antiquarians of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were instrumental in preserving the medieval literary past while recording the preoccupations of the present and nurturing a poetic tradition that could be traced back to Taliesin. Even the Puritan-leaning Nonconformist chapels made a strong contribution to literary production in the form of sermons, biographies, commentaries, and especially hymns which provided a popular connection to music and poetry. In the modern period, the emergence of publishing houses and literary periodicals in Wales, along with the rise of film and broadcasting, has generated a significant increase in the quantity and range of cultural production in both languages, and while funding remains an issue, particularly from the public sector, the contemporary literary scene is relatively buoyant. Perhaps the most significant element in the cultural production of Wales since the eighteenth century has been the *eisteddfod*, the tradition of annual literary competitions which, emerging from a somewhat obscure medieval past, was appropriated and rejuvenated by Iolo Morganwg into a cultural celebration that remains highly influential as a literary barometer. The National Eisteddfod has created a unique culture of literary prizes for writing in Welsh and maintains a particular power in the economy of literary publishing and canon formation.

Finally, this book looks squarely at the politics of language as a key determiner of literary production and one of the most defining markers of Welsh cultural life since the late Middle Ages. By considering the two literatures side by side, as part of a singular history and under the single

Introduction

rubric of 'Welsh literature', the book argues that bilingualism, always present in Wales, is becoming widely recognized as its normative condition. Bilingualism has not always been seen as an unmixed blessing, and there are many in Wales who fear it is merely a phase that will give way to a final collapse of the Welsh language; however, there are many others who look to examples from Europe and further afield and see that bilingualism can be a stable and long-term state that is good for both languages. The beginnings of Welsh writing in English can be traced back at least to the fifteenth century, when Welsh and English speakers were co-located in many areas of the March of Wales in the east and south of the country. Writing in English became a more powerful literary movement in the nineteenth century, mainly as a result of industrialization, and was fully established as an economically and culturally significant literature by the twentieth century. Originally called 'Anglo-Welsh' literature, a term that was generally disliked by writers on both sides of the hyphen, it was reconceived as 'Welsh writing in English' towards the end of the century, and this term has now become standard. There remains the problem of what 'Welsh' writing means, whether in Welsh or in English. For the purposes of this book, we have tended to think about textual identity rather than the social identity of writers and have generally included texts which engage directly with Welshness in one way or another, whether written inside or outside Wales, and whether the author identifies as Welsh or not.

Part I of the book, 'Britain, Wales, England', covers the largest period of time, from the emergence of Wales as a clearly defined territory in the aftermath of the Saxon invasions and settlements of the fifth and sixth centuries, through the period of Norman settlement and the creation of the Welsh March, beyond the Edwardian conquest of 1282 and through to the end of the fifteenth century, and to the end of the *medium aevum*, the time between the classical world and the modern. This is a rich period of Welsh literature, with the earliest surviving poetry, attributed to Taliesin and Aneirin, reaching back to a time as distant from Chaucer as we are now. The texts of the earliest *hengerdd* (old poetry) mark the recorded beginnings of an unbroken, living poetic tradition that stretches back almost to the post-Roman period. With the earliest poetry surviving in a language which is still recognizable to speakers of Welsh today, this is one of the literary glories of Europe. This section of the book also discusses medieval prose texts including histories and considers the extraordinary collection of prose tales which we now know as the *Mabinogion*. Towards the end of the period of Welsh independence there is a period of complex court poetry known as *gogynfeirdd*

GERAINT EVANS AND HELEN FULTON

poetry, which is some of the most linguistically complex poetry in the language. These court poets rapidly disappeared in the years after 1282, and a new kind of poetry gradually emerges, written by professional poets, and often praising the *uchelwyr* or gentry class, who became the new literary patrons after the suppression of the princely dynasties. The period of the *cywyddwyr*, poets who wrote mainly in the *cywydd* metre, spans the last three centuries of this opening section and includes the work of some of the greatest of the medieval Welsh poets, including Dafydd ap Gwilym, Iolo Goch, and Guto'r Glyn.

Part II, 'After the Acts of Union', describes a period of rapid change for Welsh poets and scribes. The Acts of Union coincide with the tumult of the Reformation, and the end of traditional bardic culture overlaps with the rise of printing and the change to vernacular worship. The concerns and challenges of European humanism are visible in every aspect of the cultural life of Wales, and the production of a Welsh translation of the Bible in a Tudor state which promoted vernacular worship would have a lasting effect on linguistic survival. The decade of the 1540s sees the first appearance of printing in Welsh, an innovation which will also have a profound impact. The leading figure in this, as in so much else during this century of change, is William Salesbury, who exemplifies the humanist ideal in Welsh life, writing books which cover the full range of humanist learning, translating the New Testament and other religious texts into Welsh, and publishing books in London in Welsh and in English.

In the early sixteenth century, the bardic tradition overlaps with the rise of antiquarian writing and some of the most significant figures, such as Edmwnd Prys and William Salesbury, combine poetry and manuscript production with serious interests in translation, genealogy, and Latin learning. In this period many parts of the March of Wales, now incorporated into English counties, were still largely Welsh speaking so that Welsh life and culture was visible over a far larger area than the new Tudor maps might indicate. In the mid-sixteenth century, it is possible that there were more Welsh speakers living in London than in any one of the Welsh towns, while prominent writers such as Maurice Kyffin and Wiliam Llŷn, the most famous Welsh poet of his day, both lived in Oswestry, which, though technically in England, was still a largely Welsh-speaking town.

The first examples of Welsh writing in English are to be found in the Tudor period, often linked with the Welsh in London. This is partly because of the importance of London for trade, education, and printing, but despite this innovation it is literature in Welsh, and literacy in Welsh, that will

Introduction

continue to be the dominant force in Wales until the late nineteenth century. But in the centuries that follow the Reformation, the pace of change in the ideas which dominate Welsh life and literary production will increase. This is the period covered by Part III, 'Revolution and Industry', when new ideas flood into Wales relating to the Enlightenment, to the Romantic movement, and to political revolution. All of these find a platform in literary writing, where new forms of expression begin to emerge. Popular poetry and travel writing become more prominent and the patterns of literary production and consumption begin to change, in the country as well as in the towns. The unusually high literacy rate in eighteenth-century Wales, a phenomenon which is linked to the rise of Nonconformist religion, produces a new kind of serious but genuinely popular poetry in the form of Welsh hymns. Other forms of printing, such as broadsheet ballads, also appeal to popular tastes, and throughout Wales and England, following the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, there was an explosion of provincial printing. The first significant centre of Welsh book production outside London is Amwythig, or Shrewsbury, another former Marcher town where Welsh had lingered; however, by the second quarter of the eighteenth century, printing in Wales itself was properly established with locally produced books competing for the first time with Welsh books from the London trade. A huge amount of Welsh-language printing would now transform Welsh literary life over the next two centuries.

Part IV, 'The Transition to Modernity', shows how secular fiction becomes much more significant as the nineteenth century develops, with representations of Wales and Welsh life beginning to appear more frequently in English and Welsh texts. As the twentieth century begins, there is change everywhere. A renaissance in Welsh-language poetry sweeps away the didactic mediocrity of most nineteenth-century verse as writers such as T. Gwynn Jones rediscover the glories of the medieval bardic tradition, reinventing the art of *cynghanedd* and inspiring a whole generation of young writers. Looking back now at the first half of the twentieth century, it is hard not to see it as a golden age of Welsh poetry when writers such as R. Williams Parry, Gwenallt, and Waldo Williams created a new canon of Welsh poetry in response to the challenges of the modern world while Kate Roberts recorded the dreams and hardships of working people in the finest Welsh short stories of the century.

At the same time there was a profusion of Welsh writing in English, with new periodicals helping to create new markets for writing which captures the reality of industrial life in a colonial economy. Periodic literature

GERAINT EVANS AND HELEN FULTON

in Welsh, which had been enormously strong in the nineteenth century, continued to thrive, and alongside the new magazines in English, such as *Wales* and *The Welsh Review*, writers working in both languages found ready outlets for poetry and short stories, two forms which came to dominate Welsh literary production. In the decades between the wars, a new generation of writers started to sell books about Welsh life, in Wales but also in London and New York. Rhys Davies supported himself as a professional writer in London for half a century and, while Dylan Thomas captured many of the headlines, writers such as Geraint Goodwin, Margiad Evans, Idris Davies, and Dorothy Edwards were all quietly establishing an international audience for literature from Wales.

After two world wars the Wales which emerges into the 1950s was changed almost beyond recognition. The apparent certainty of the industrial economy began to fade, and this is reflected in the literature of the period. Many more writers in English were being published from London, while for writers working in Welsh the third quarter of the century was a time when the yearning for self-determination finally began to feel like a possibility. At the same time, new kinds of emancipation brought unprecedented levels of mobility and the rural heartland of Welsh-language culture began to feel the threat of the outside world. Meanwhile, the world of Welsh poetry was as brilliant as ever, with the renaissance sparked by T. Gwynn Jones still producing new generations of strict-metre poets who invigorated the eisteddfod culture and kept the old traditions feeling fresh and new. Poets such as Dic Jones, Alan Llwyd, and Gerallt Lloyd Owen continued to write poems which captured the aspirations of the nation, and with the rise of Welsh broadcasting a new era of mass communication created something which seemed unlikely in the modern world: a popular weekly radio programme with a national following in which teams of poets competed at different kinds of poetic composition.

Part V, 'The Path to Nationhood in the Late Twentieth Century', examines the last decades of the century when Welsh literary life was vibrant, in both languages, although the idea of the full-time writer continued to change rapidly as the major publishing houses of London and New York sought new ways to maximize their market share in a shrinking world. Small Welsh publishing houses such as Poetry Wales Press, Gomer Press, and Barddas offered an alternative to metropolitan or university publishers, but the pull of the older paradigms of difference remained strong.

The first writer to unite fully the two literatures of Wales in a single body of work emerged at this time, and he was one of the great poets of the

Introduction

twentieth century. R. S. Thomas already had an international reputation as an English-language poet when he began writing prose in Welsh in the 1970s and 1980s and associating himself more closely with Welsh-language culture and with what Emyr Humphreys called 'the Taliesin tradition'. Living close to the sea in Sarn-y-Plas on the Llŷn peninsula, 'R.S.' became the first writer in Wales whose international stature as a poet in English was matched by his stature as a cultural ambassador for the Welsh language.

As the century drew to a close, the political yearning for national self-determination took an unusual turn. The growing sense of a shared European identity aligned with the political and economic identity of the European Union, made Westminster seem less and less relevant and, in the end, the grip of colonial rule which had held on to Wales for centuries slipped quietly away. Part VI, 'After Devolution', shows that when devolution finally came in 1999, the new century immediately brought a rejuvenated cultural confidence to writers in Wales. Poets such as Menna Elfyn were writing in Welsh and translating their own work into English, while Gwyneth Lewis took the next step and wrote original poetry in both languages. Other writers followed, including Fflur Dafydd and Owen Martell, and with the new millennium has come a new paradigm of literary production in which the dragon's 'two tongues' speak together.

With the emergence of Cardiff as a political capital and a major centre for theatre and television, and with the rise of decentralized new media, small publishing houses, and self-publishing, writers are moving between these different channels to create new kinds of literary careers. Welsh writing today makes a significant contribution, as economic and cultural capital, to the cultural industries of Wales, which include theatre, film, television, and digital media, as well as fiction and poetry, all in both languages. The role of national bodies such as the Welsh Arts Council, Welsh Books Council, Literature Wales, and the National Theatre Wales in promoting a Welsh culture which is both distinctive and heteroglossic remains crucial to the vitality of Welsh writing.

In a chronological history such as this, the temptation to write in a teleological mode is strong: has Welsh literature finally arrived at the place where it has been heading since the days of Taliesin and Aneirin? But the ending of this book is not the end of the story. As with all living histories, there is no point of closure, no *telos* that satisfies the need for an ending; there will always be more to come. The literature of Wales has shadowed the nation's politics since the Middle Ages. Today, a flourishing multicultural literature, in all its forms, continues to describe the state of the nation.