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Progress and tradition: listening to the singing of the Welsh c.1870 to c.1920

Helen Barlow

Abstract

Wales in the period c.1870-c.1920 was home to massive heavy industry, accompanied by a huge upsurge of population and the growth of large and thriving towns. Many Welsh people saw it as a time of unparalleled national progress. It was also a period of ascendancy for the Liberal Party, in Britain generally, but nowhere more so than in Wales, where the Welsh Liberals articulated a vision of the potential of Wales as a progressive, modern nation. Welsh music and the supposed musicality of the Welsh became part of a discourse about progress, cultural achievement and the promise of future greatness. Choral and congregational singing, which flourished in the buoyant chapel culture of the expanding towns and villages, was often cited as evidence not just of innate Welsh musicality but also of cultural development. But most intriguing is the apparently contradictory belief, articulated particularly by the newly-founded Welsh Folk Song Society, that Welsh *traditional* song could be harnessed to the cause of progress. How did Welsh people understand Welsh singing in this period? What did it mean to them? What did listeners think they were hearing – the voice of progress, or the voice of tradition?

Keywords

choir; cymanfa ganu; folk song; Liberal Party; nineteenth century; Nonconformity; traditional music; twentieth century; Wales; Welsh Folk Song Society

Introduction

This chapter looks at the reactions of listeners to Welsh singing practices in the period from about 1870 until just after the First World War, locating them within the historical context of a period of economic buoyancy and cultural confidence in Wales, unparalleled either before or, arguably, since. It considers the ways in which these practices were marshalled as evidence of that optimistic, progressive national mood. The initial signs of this interpretation of the significance of Welsh singing emerge in commentary on Welsh choirs and congregational hymn singing, so it is to this world that the chapter turns first. We then move on to a musical world perhaps less well known outside Wales – the world of Welsh traditional music, and specifically the mission of the Welsh Folk Song Society (Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru), which was founded precisely during this period, in the firm, if apparently contradictory, belief that the collection and performance of Welsh *traditional* music had a vital role to play in the development of a *modern* Welsh nation. My interest lies as much in language as in the music – the language people used to articulate what they felt they were hearing when they listened to Welsh singing in this period.

A progressive nation

...[I]n their love of music, poetry, and culture, for every man, the Celt stands pre-eminent. Throughout the length and breadth of Wales the holidays are consecrated to the enjoyment of music, poetry and literature by all the people, by all the workers, by the poor.... This is a force in the making of Britain... And [the Celt] will yet have much to say and do in the re-making of Britain. [Footnote: Annie J. Ellis (ed.), *Speeches and Addresses by the Late Thomas E. Ellis, M.P.* (Wrexham: Hughes and Son, 1912), pp. 114-115.]

This resounding declaration was made by the charismatic [Welsh Liberal MP Tom Ellis](#) (1859-1899), in an address entitled ‘The Influence of the Celt in the Making of Britain’, which he gave in 1889 to the Welsh community in Manchester. In it, he characterised Welsh musicality (alongside poetry and culture generally) as not just a long-established national tradition but also a *force*, an active and indeed democratic element (‘for every man’, ‘for all the people’) in the shaping and development of Britain as a whole, into the future. Quite how music was to have this effect, Ellis didn’t spell out, but that is not unusual in this kind of romantic, visionary discourse about the potential of Wales at this time.

The period from about 1870 through the First World War was one of unprecedented cultural and national confidence in Wales. Industrial Wales – particularly the south Wales valleys – experienced a massive influx of population, including significant numbers from rural Wales, along with the growth of large and thriving towns. Alongside this, religious revivals in 1840 and 1859 (there was to be another in 1904) fed a buoyant Nonconformist religious culture. New chapels proliferated, [Footnote: Christopher B. Turner, ‘The Nonconformist Response’, in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds), *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880*, Welsh History and its Sources series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 74. Turner also provides evidence from the 1851 Religious Census of the scale of Nonconformist worship in Wales and of the accompanying rates of chapel building.] and in 1851 when the religious census was taken, it was found that, of those attending a place of worship in Wales on census Sunday, more than 80% had gone to a Nonconformist chapel, not to an Anglican church. A quarter of a century later, statistics confirmed a very similar picture: in 1905, of the two in five people in Wales who were members of a religious denomination, 25.9% were Anglicans, and nearly 75% were Nonconformists. [Footnote: R. Tudur Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation: Wales 1890-1914*, trans. Sylvia Prys Jones, ed. Robert Pope (Cardiff:

University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 10-11. The statistics were gathered for the Commission looking into the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales, which published its report, *The Royal Commission on the Church of England and Other Religious Bodies in Wales and Monmouthshire*, in 1910, euphemistically omitting the word ‘disestablishment’ from the title.] These were figures that rendered more than a little hollow the official position of the Anglican Church, or Church of England, as the established or state church of Wales.

The religious statistics also had profound political implications, which R. Tudur Jones summarises succinctly:

[The growth of Nonconformity] created an opportunity for common folk to organize their religious life in an unprecedented way. The [Nonconformist] churches nurtured for themselves many thousands of leaders from among people who throughout the centuries had been voiceless and powerless... This development was revolutionary, to say the least. Now the former leaders of society, the [Tory] squire and [Anglican] parson, were forced to share their kingdom with new princes who had risen from the land. [Footnote: Jones, *Faith and the Crisis of a Nation*, pp. 38-39.]

To dissent in religious terms from the Anglican Tory hegemony that had prevailed for centuries in Wales did not necessarily also imply a particularly radical political position – indeed, Nonconformity was generally ‘a conservative force in society’ in Wales. [Footnote: Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, ‘Religion and Society in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century’, in *Explorations and Explanations: Essays in the Social History of Victorian Wales* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1981), pp. 228-235; see also Turner, ‘Nonconformist Response’.] Rather, Welsh Nonconformists found their political home in the only other British parliamentary party of the time, the Liberal Party. During the second half of the nineteenth century, not only

the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884, but also significant local government reorganisation, saw the traditional Welsh Tory authority of ‘squire and parson’ displaced by a Liberal, Nonconformist ascendancy under which more people lower down the social scale were politically engaged and had more self-determination – and they were well-versed in democratic modes of participation (broadly speaking), having learned them through the organisation and governance of their chapels. Liberalism became the political voice of the ‘common folk’ of Wales, and they returned Welsh Liberal MPs to Westminster in numbers that far outweighed the Welsh Tories who had historically dominated there, creating an influential and challenging presence which congregated around the charismatic figures of [David Lloyd George](#) (1864-1945) and, until his premature death in 1899, Tom Ellis. The spearhead of the Welsh Liberals’ demand for reform was, unsurprisingly, the call for disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales.

Despite the buoyant national mood, the period was certainly also one of significant industrial and political unrest, and I have written elsewhere about the deployment of the idea of Welsh musicality as a counterweight to fears of Welsh militancy. [Footnote: (Add reference to [19thCMR article – not yet available](#))] But to many it was indeed pre-eminently a period of unprecedented progress, marked by vigorous campaigning, principally but not exclusively by Welsh Liberals, for the foundation of national institutions as evidence of a distinctive and mature culture – in particular, a national university, a national museum and a national library. There was, in effect, a national conversation – and not only in Liberal discourse – that revolved around the idea of progress and Wales as a modern, progressive nation. [Illustration: title page of *The Welsh Outlook* – just one of a number of periodicals in both languages that capitalised on the national mood of progress and looking outwards.]

This was the backdrop to Welsh cultural life. A populist musical culture of congregational and choral singing flourished, rooted in the thriving chapels, and the first decade of the twentieth century saw the foundation of the Welsh Folk Song Society, its mission being to preserve the traditional songs that it was feared would be lost, as people born in rural Wales migrated to industrial Wales and lost touch with their rural culture. Both choral singing and the performance of folk song were fostered by competition in the National Eisteddfod, which had come into being as a national rather than simply a local institution in 1861 – another example of the preoccupation of the times with the establishment of national cultural institutions.

Music and the much-vaunted musicality of the Welsh were harnessed to the cause of progress. It became a commonplace to characterise music not merely as a national talent or a source of national pride, but as an active means of developing a progressive Welsh identity with a contribution to make to modern Britain, very much in the spirit of Ellis's sense of music as an active cultural force. A frequent caveat amongst professional Welsh musicians and music journalists was that a truly sophisticated and progressive nation would be developing an instrumental, orchestral tradition as well as a vocal one. But that is not the focus of this essay. My interest here is in what people said and wrote about the Welsh music they *did* hear, rather than what some thought was missing.

'A new epoch': the Côr Mawr and the cymanfa ganu

The famous Côr Mawr victories at the Crystal Palace in the summers of 1872 and 1873 are an early illustration of the tendency to interpret Welsh musicality as a measure of Welsh cultural progress. In those two summers, a choral competition was organised at the Crystal Palace in London, as part of a British 'National Music Meeting'. Being well-versed in the culture of the

eisteddfod, for the Welsh the idea of choral competition was a familiar one, and they needed no persuasion to enter. The choir of 1872 numbered more than 450 voices, and was called the South Wales Choral Union but more popularly known in Welsh as the Côr Mawr (the Great Choir). [Footnote: See Trevor Herbert, 'Popular nationalism: Griffith Rhys Jones ('Caradog') and the Welsh choral tradition', in Christine Bashford and Leanne Langley (eds), *Music and British Culture, 1785-1914* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 255-274.] It was conducted by [Griffith Rhys Jones](#) (1834-1897), better known by the nickname Caradog, a gifted musician who had been an apprentice blacksmith. In both years the Côr Mawr won the Crystal Palace competition – although little was said about the fact that it was the only choir competing in 1872, and had only one competitor in 1873.

The periodical *Y Cerddor Cymreig* (*The Welsh Musician*) reported at length on the winning performances, and in 1872 felt moved to add:

We are grateful to the South Wales Choir for opening the eyes of our neighbours, yes, and of many of our fellow countrymen too.... The English nation has been used to think lowly and speak contemptuously of the Welsh... This choir proved that here is life, here is ability, and here is achievement; and the Welsh in Wales are not to be despised anymore.... Once one of our talented sons or daughters goes to live in England, or expresses their thoughts in the English language, [to the English] they become English, and the Englishman insists that they don't belong to us. They trample on us in Wales, and plunder what belongs to us in England. But another era has begun: and the victory of the Welsh Choir will have no small effect in raising the Welshman in his own country in the sight of the world.

Yr ydym yn ddiolchgar i Gor y Deheudir am agorwyd llygaid ein cymydogion, ie, a llawer o'n cydwladwyr hefyd.... Y mae corph cenedl y Saeson wedi arfer meddwl yn isel a siarad yn ddiystyrllyd am y Cymry.... Profodd y cor hwn fod yma fywyd, fod yma allu, a bod yma waith; ac nad ydyw y Cymry yng Nghymru i'w dirmygu mwyach.... Unwaith yr a un o'n meibion neu ein merched galluog i drigo i Lloegr, neu i roddi allan ei feddyliau yn yr iaith Saesneg, y mae yn myned yn Sais, a thaera y Saeson mae nid ein heiddo ni yndynt. Sathrant arnom yn Nghymru, ac ysbeiliant ni o'n heiddo yn Lloegr. Ond y mae cyfnod arall wedi dechreu: ac nid ychydig fydd effaith buddugoliaeth y Cor Cymreig tuag at godi y Cymro yn ei wlad ei hun yn ngolwg y byd. [Footnote: *Y Cerddor Cymreig*, Rhif 138, 1 Awst 1872, p. 59. Author's translation.]

Perhaps it seems excessive to hang a 'new era' on a prize won in a choral competition, but the sense of historical and current grievance is impassioned and unmistakeable. Wales, the writer insists, has been exploited by the English for its industrial potential, and any achievement by Welsh people is recognised only in those who leave Wales for England, where they are appropriated as English. Welsh culture in and of itself ('the Welshman in his own country') has no merit in English eyes. So for the Welsh to triumph on an English stage as the *Côr Mawr* had just done was heralded as a cultural and indeed moral victory, and as the writer has it, the dawn of a new era: a sign that, through cultural achievement, Wales was establishing its identity amongst other modern nations.

Similarly, in a report of a *Côr Mawr* rehearsal at Aberdare in 1873, written for the Conservative Cardiff newspaper the *Western Mail*, the prominent journalist ['Morien'](#) ([Owen](#)

[Morgan](#)) stresses the wider cultural promise – on a ‘world’ stage – represented by the advance in musical knowledge and achievement embodied in the Côr Mawr:

A great many in the throng had music books in their hands and were following the singing, indicating how great a knowledge of music has extended among all classes in Wales. It was most interesting to watch ladies of aristocratic bearing, poring over the same kind of books as were in the horny hands of miners. It made me proud of the little old nationality which has produced such people. The world is justified in anticipating in the future great results from this little nation among the mountains. Its knowledge of music must exercise a vast influence on the people in stimulating them to other branches of mental superiority. [Footnote: Morien, ‘The South Wales Choir Rehearsal: Aberdare’, *Western Mail*, 7/7/1873.]

The idea that the choral and congregational singing of the Welsh could be interpreted as an expression of cultural aspiration and progress crops up repeatedly in this period. We find similar language in accounts of that most Welsh of singing events, the annual cymanfa ganu or hymn-singing assembly – a product of the proliferating chapel culture, and the place where almost all of the Côr Mawr singers would have cut their musical teeth. As described by [Moses Owen Jones](#), a greatly respected choral conductor of the period:

It commences, as a rule, with a children’s service in the morning, when light and suitable tunes are sung and the catechism gone through....

The afternoon and evening meetings are devoted to adults. A number of congregational tunes are sung at each meeting, interspersed with anthems, chants and choruses. The choir, which is made of those of the several chapels in the Union, ranges from 300 to 800, according to the population of the district, and, after a

thorough training, the singing, which is always devotional, is often very majestic and highly impressive....

Strangers labour under the impression that the best Welsh singing is to be heard at the National Eisteddfod. Picked choirs sing there, but the masses are to be heard at the *Cymanfa Ganu*, and anyone who would make himself acquainted with the musical life of Wales should visit some of our popular *Cymanfaoedd*. [Footnote: Moses Owen Jones, 'The culture of music amongst the masses in Wales', in T. Stephens (ed.), *Wales To-day and To-morrow* (Cardiff, 1907), p. 334. <https://led.kmi.open.ac.uk/entity/lexp/1523374983599>, accessed 30/07/2018.]

In 1875, several newspapers published reports of a *cymanfa ganu* held in Penygraig in the Rhondda, and here again we find the idea that the singing in some sense represented a milestone in the upward progress of Welsh musical culture:

[The chairman] repeatedly complimented the singers upon the feeling they displayed, and the singing appeared to make a deep impression upon all present. The reverend chairman stated that he had never attended meetings of this kind where the audience entered more thoroughly 'through the letter to the spirit' of what they sang. The great feature of these meetings was anthem singing and Psalm chanting. The rendering of the Psalms by the choirs was simply grand beyond description. There may have been room for technical [sic], but the volume for melody was superb.... [He] said they were now entering upon a new epoch in Welsh music.... [Footnote: *Western Mail*, 6 May 1975, quoted in Tom Jones, 'Hanes Cymanfa Ganu Dosbarth Canol Rhondda', published in *Y Darian*, 19 December 1929. <https://led.kmi.open.ac.uk/entity/lexp/1523542064246> accessed 30/07/2018.]

The cymanfa ganu literally became a national institution in its own right when the National Cymanfa Ganu was constituted in 1916 at the National Eisteddfod. In typically populist, crowd-pleasing style, Lloyd George, who was by then Prime Minister, and who made a point of always attending the National Eisteddfod, described the singing of ‘the old tunes’ at the 1917 National Cymanfa as ‘full of life and vigour and outpouring the beautiful hopes and aspirations and faith of the Welsh people’. [Footnote: ‘Prime Minister’s Day Out: Mr. Lloyd George at National Gymanfa’, *Cambria Daily Leader*, 8 Sept 1917.] It is notable that his first instinct is to link the cymanfa singing with what can readily be interpreted as political preoccupations – cultural aspiration and progress – and only then with religion and faith.

‘The real power of the Folk-song’: the foundation of the Welsh Folk Song Society

The cymanfa and mass choral and congregational singing were relatively recent developments in Welsh music culture. Harnessing a much older musical *tradition* to the cause of progress seems on the surface to be something of a contradiction in terms, but that is what happened with Welsh traditional music or folk song in this period. The Welsh were not the only people to look to folk culture for the basis of a national identity – this was already well established in many European countries. The Folk Song Society had been founded as a pan-British endeavour in 1898, though its Irish members seceded to form their own society in 1904. [Footnote: Alfred Perceval Graves explained the split in the context of the debate over Home Rule for Ireland: ‘Ireland, with its Home Rule tendencies, felt, however, that her own folk song affairs needed special treatment, and an Irish Folk Song Society has been started...’. (Graves, ‘Folk Song: An address delivered before the Cymmrodorion Section of the Welsh National Eisteddfod of 1906 at Carnarvon, and brought up to date’, in *Irish Literary and Musical Studies* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1913), p. 176.) Alfred Perceval Graves (1846-1931), [Footnote: Graves was a poet and civil servant, and the father of the First World War

poet Robert Graves. His autobiography *To Return to All That* (1930) was written as a riposte to his son's ungenerous treatment of the family in *Goodbye to All That* (1929).] an Irishman, and a founder member of both the Folk Song Society and the Irish Folk Song Society, may also be said to have planted the seed of the Welsh Folk Song Society, having been charged by the Folk Song Society (presumably on the basis of his existing Welsh connections [Footnote: Graves had a great interest in Welsh poetry and culture, and owned a holiday home in Harlech, where he lived permanently after his retirement in 1919. He gives a brief account of much of this in his autobiography *To Return to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), pp. 280-284. His daughter Rosaleen shared his enthusiasm from childhood onwards. She reported for both the *Musical Times* and *Welsh Outlook* on the folk song sessions at 'The Celtic Congress in the Isle of Man' in 1921 (see *Welsh Outlook*, 8 (1921), p. 185, and *Musical Times*, 62/942 (1 Aug 1921), pp. 583-584); and her brother Robert remembered going with her on folk song collecting trips near Harlech when they were children, as well as joining John Lloyd Williams on coastal walks (see 'Where the crakeberries grow – Robert Graves gives an account of himself to Leslie Norris', *The Listener*, 28 May 1970, pp. 715-716).]) with trying 'to capture a strong Welsh contingent'. [Footnote: Graves, *To Return*, p. 267.] As Graves knew, Welsh traditional music was already an interest at Bangor's University College through the activities of its Director of Music, [John Lloyd Williams](#), and the support of the College's Irish Principal, Harry Reichel. Lloyd Williams was appointed to the College as a botany lecturer in 1897, but he was also an amateur musician and choral conductor, and as such was invited to take on the voluntary music directorship.

In his 'History of the Welsh Folk-Song Society', written for the Society's journal, Lloyd Williams describes how he suggested to Reichel 'the desirability of confining the music sung at important College functions to arrangements of Welsh National Melodies'. [Footnote: John

Lloyd Williams, 'The History of the Welsh Folk-Song Society', *Journal of the Welsh Folk-Song Society*, 3/2 (1934), p. 89.] However, he found the published eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collections flawed in several respects. Having largely been arranged for performance on the harp in fashionable salons and concerts, they were 'distinctly diatonic, modern in tonality' and 'nearly all without words'. [Footnote: Lloyd Williams, 'History', pp. 89-90.] One solution was to select some of the melodies and have words written for them (Alfred Graves was one of the poets to whom he turned). This proved successful in so far as the songs were well received by audiences. But the fact that they lacked their original words continued to trouble him. Then he tried another experiment – he arranged for the College choir a folk song he had noted down years before, while listening to his wife and her sister singing it – 'Tra Bo Dau' ('While there are two'). Its success encouraged him to try more of these 'songs of the people' (as he described them [Footnote: Lloyd Williams, 'History', p. 91.]), and to form a choir specifically for their performance, 'Y Canorion' (The Singers).

All this activity must have happened between 1897 when he began his career at Bangor and 1906 when the Society was founded, and it was this work – and in particular, a specific performance at a College garden party – that he claims first opened his eyes to the 'real power of the Folk-Song':

The first Society that was ever formed with the prime object of collecting and singing Welsh Folk-songs was a small Society of Students at the Bangor University College... The little group of Students called themselves 'Y CANORION'... At that time our professional Welsh musicians pooh-poohed the whole thing. It was said and written that all important Welsh airs were already known, and that in any case the chief interest of Folk Music was antiquarian. If I may make a personal confession - it was in one of these College functions held in the grounds of the old College that I first

fully realised the significance of the work in which we were engaged. A Brass Band was playing in the grounds, but as is usual in such places, conversation filled the air. Our small group of 'CANORION' assembled quietly under a tree and started singing. There was a sudden hush. The guests drew nearer. Tune after tune were sung; and it was with difficulty that we were allowed to leave off. Then it was that the real power of the Folk-song first revealed itself to me. [Footnote: John Lloyd Williams, 'The Welsh Folk-Song Society', *Y Cerddor*, Medi (September) 1931, p. 314, quoted in Phyllis Kinney, *Welsh Traditional Music* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press: 2011), p. 205.]

Far from being an antiquarian preoccupation, he saw that folk songs had the capacity to make a connection with both singers and listeners *now*, in the present day – a capacity which he put down to their 'vocal origin... spontaneity and ... preoccupation with words'. [Footnote: Lloyd Williams, 'History', p. 91.]

Thus Graves's overtures on behalf of the Folk Song Society certainly fell on fertile ground, but they actually resulted in a decision – with which Graves himself seems to have been entirely sympathetic – to establish a specifically Welsh society. It was launched at the 1906 Caernarfon Eisteddfod, and Lloyd Williams was its editor and guiding light until his death in 1945.

Lloyd Williams had first-hand knowledge not only of the Welsh folk song tradition but also of its vulnerability. In a note in the *Journal of the Welsh Folk-Song Society*, he remembered the abrupt end of his father's career as a local ballad singer:

When I was about five years old, my father used to sing in the public-houses to the accompaniment of Ifan y Gorlan's harp-playing. Soon after, he joined the Calvinistic Methodists and gave up the drink and the old songs. My mother burnt all the printed ballads in the house; and it was only with the greatest difficulty that father could be persuaded to sing to us, even the most innocuous of the old ballads. [Footnote: John Lloyd Williams, editorial note to the song 'Crefydd Sionto' (Sionto's Religion), in *Journal of the Welsh Folk Song Society*, 4/1 (1948), p. 14.]

He tells the story at greater length in his autobiography, linking it specifically to the impact of the 1859 religious revival and its associated temperance campaign. Traditional music was tainted by association with the inns in which it was played and sung, and the drinking that inevitably accompanied it, and his mother's act of destruction was far from an unusual one. An almost identical incident is recounted of a ballad singer called Joseff Rees who 'sang ballads until 1903 until the revival came. [Then] he burnt the ballads...' ('Odd e'n canu baledi nes 1903 nes i'r diwygiad ddod. Fe llosgodd y baledi...'). [Footnote: St Fagans National History Museum, Cardiff, transcript of oral history recording, tape 7520, David Griffiths. Author's translation.] A number of Welsh Folk Song Society members set out to collect songs (particularly the less well-known and unpublished ones) by recording them being sung by those who remembered them, but found that it was common for elderly people to refuse to acknowledge that they had ever even heard 'the old songs'. On her collecting trips in the early years of the twentieth century, for example, Ruth Herbert Lewis encountered 'a pious old man' who insisted he 'could only remember hymns', and an old man 'much to [sic] respectable to "canu maswedd" [sing rude songs]'. [Footnote: Kitty Idwal Jones, 'Adventures in Folk-Song Collecting', *Welsh Music/Cerddoriaeth Cymru*, 5/5 (Spring/Gwanwyn 1977), p. 45 and 47.]

While Nonconformity fostered a thriving mass culture of religious singing, its impact on the traditional, secular songs was little short of disastrous. It bred a real and widespread belief that the traditional music was sinful and specifically that it would draw sober, God-fearing people under the influence of alcohol. Years after the event, Lloyd Williams's mother, seeing that her husband did not in fact stray from the path of sobriety and that her sons were growing up to be studious young men interested in their traditions and culture, told him 'many times how much she regretted the burning' (Pan welodd fy mam mor sicr ydoedd troediad fy nhad ar y llwybr newydd, a gweld hefyd ei meibion yn tyfu i fyny'n ddarllengar, dywedodd wrthyf lawer gwaith faint ei hedifeirwch am y llosgi.). Poignantly he adds:

...when my eyes were opened to the interest of the old songs, my father had left us, and his abundance of songs was lost.

...pan agorwyd fy llygaid i ddiddordeb yr hen ganu, yr oedd fy nhad wedi ein gadael, a'i doreth caneuon ar goll. [Footnote: John Lloyd Williams, *Atgofion Tri Chwarter Canrif*, Cyf. 1 (Y Clwb Llyfrau Cymraeg, 1941), p. 25. Author's translation.]

Little wonder then, that for Lloyd Williams the work of the Society was much more than mere antiquarian curiosity, but rather the rescue of a strand of Welsh cultural identity that had been vital and vibrant within living memory and in his own family and community. Amidst all the enormous endeavour he put into the Welsh Folk Song Society and all the influence he had on it, this belief in traditional song as a living force that resonated in ordinary people's experience was arguably his most significant and distinctive contribution.

The Welsh Folk Song Society was embedded in the cultural nationalism of the Welsh Liberals, and reflected their progressive agenda. The Welsh Liberal network that underpinned

the Society is not hard to uncover. To name just some of the most obvious figures, one of Lloyd Williams's most important early colleagues was [Ruth Herbert Lewis](#), a significant collector of Welsh folk songs [Footnote: She published *Folk Songs Collected in Flintshire and The Vale of Clwyd* (Wrexham, 1914) and *Welsh Folk Songs* (Wrexham, 1834). See also E. Wyn James, 'An 'English' Lady among Welsh Folk: Ruth Herbert Lewis and the Welsh Folk-Song Society', in Ian Russell and David Atkinson (eds), *Folk-Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation* (Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2004), pp. 266-83, <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/42463/1/insrv-solar-an-english-lady-among-welsh-folk.html> (accessed 13/11/2018).] and married to the Welsh Liberal MP, [John Herbert Lewis](#) [Footnote: See Kitty Idwal Jones, *Syr Herbert Lewis* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1958)]. John Herbert Lewis was instrumental in the campaigns for a national university, library and museum, and a close colleague of Tom Ellis and Lloyd George. The Ellises and the Herbert Lewises were particularly good friends, and after Tom's death 'the friendship between Ruth Lewis and Annie Ellis [Tom's widow] became a close one', with the two women going out together on folk song collecting trips. [Footnote: Kitty Idwal Jones, 'Adventures', p. 33 and 43-52.] The membership list of the Welsh Folk Song Society is full of their Liberal friends and colleagues, with Lloyd George listed as a Vice President. [Illustration: WFSS membership list]

John Lloyd Williams was himself on friendly terms with Lloyd George, perhaps through their participation in local chapel activities in Cricieth, [Footnote: Lloyd George was brought up around Cricieth (in the village of Llanystumdwy), and maintained a family home there. Lloyd Williams may also have been living there at this time – some of his correspondence from this period bears the address 'Ty Mawr, Criccieth'; certainly his notebooks and journals show that he was at the very least a frequent visitor to Cricieth.] and Lloyd George apparently

considered that he owed much of his charismatic trademark oratory to Lloyd Williams's skills as a singing teacher, if Lloyd Williams's journal for Sunday 26 December 1909 is to be believed:

Ev[ening] to Seion [Chapel]... sing nicely except the men who are very poor. Lloyd George sits the whole time on the steps of the pulpit – Megan [Lloyd George, his daughter] before his knees.

Up w. Ll. G. to his new house to supper....

[He describes their conversation over supper, then starts to quote Lloyd George:]

Importance of voice in speaking. “Bonar Law and I are g[rea]t friends and he always tells me that I have an unfair advantage...in my voice - but many of them never study voice prod[uctio]n - I owe most to you for showing me the importance of voice prod[uctio]n... Tom Ellis had a very limited range - only 2 or 3 notes but he used them in a very effective manner...” [Footnote: National Library of Wales, Dr J. Lloyd Williams Papers, MB1/16 (iii), 9v.]

Lloyd Williams is not explicit about his own political persuasion, but he clearly had connections with prominent Welsh Liberals and shared his interest in and knowledge of folk songs with them – as a journal entry for 1 September 1913 notes, ‘Lloyd George and I had a short talk ab[ou]t F[olk] S[ong]s. He wanted me to get two songs sung to him week last Sunday...’. [Footnote: National Library of Wales, Dr J. Lloyd Williams Papers, MB3/1 (ii – a & b).]

‘The upward progress of a country’: John Lloyd Williams’s philosophy for the Welsh Folk Society

In the first volume of the Society's journal, Lloyd Williams set out a philosophy which saw Welsh folk song not just as part of the nation's heritage but as a constituent of a distinctive and *modern* Welsh cultural identity, and went yet further in presenting it as a contribution to a wider British and even world musical culture. In essence, he argued that folk song was not a nostalgic but a progressive musical and cultural practice:

We maintain that folk-songs form a valuable national asset, and that it would be madness to ignore them – folk-music is *one* of many factors which help in a nation's development.

... In spite of the clever English critic and his Welsh followers, I believe there are great possibilities in Welsh folk-song from a national point of view... May the day soon come when a Welshman, well equipped with all the resources of modern technique will also have drunk deep of the spirit of its literature and of its national songs, until his own personality and genius discovers to the world some new aspect of music that will both advance the credit of our little nation, and contribute to the development of the world's music. [Footnote: John Lloyd Williams, 'A Review of the Society's Musical Work', *Journal of the Welsh Folk-Song Society*, 1/4 (1912), pp. 154-155.]

He also positioned the Welsh Folk Song Society in the context of the other recently established national cultural institutions, pointing out that the Society had a comparable mission to that of the National Library and National Museum, and suggesting that it offered invaluable source material to the students and academics of the Welsh university colleges – not only historians, but also anthropologists and psychologists:

But what of the value of these songs?... We have now in our Welsh Library and our Welsh Museum the opportunity of collecting and preserving everything that pertains

to the life of the past - old implements, vessels, articles of furniture and clothing, and old MSS. of every kind. Are the old songs of the people of less importance than their old drinking cups?...

Our Colleges are now turning out young people trained in scientific methods of study - who are closely investigating the history of our people and language from different points of view. We are providing rich material for him who will undertake to unravel the ethnology, the history, and the psychology wrapped up in these rescued songs. [Footnote: Lloyd Williams, 'A Review', p. 151.]

It is interesting to set the founding philosophy of the Welsh Folk Song Society alongside the ways in which some key English contemporaries conceptualized folk song. [Footnote: I am grateful to Stephen Rees of Bangor University for suggesting this as a line worth pursuing. The comparison with the English perspective is indeed instructive. The position of the Irish Folk Song Society is less obvious – certainly their early journals offer little in the way of a 'mission statement'. Perhaps, given the much better-established nature of folk song and folk lore collection in Ireland than in England and Wales, little need for one was felt. The Scots appear to have been content to pursue their interests within the bounds of the Folk Song Society, which had been conceived as a pan-British institution.] The idea that it could form the basis of a new national school of composition was something that the Welsh and English had in common, but in other ways their preoccupations differed. For the English, the 'threat' posed by the music hall was a powerful factor. In his 'Inaugural Address' to the Folk Song Society, Hubert Parry (one of its Vice Presidents) explicitly presented folk song as an antidote to the vulgarity of the urban, capitalist popular culture of the music hall, which he described in rather startlingly apocalyptic terms:

... this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious [in]... the outer circumference of our terribly overgrown towns where the jerry-builder holds sway; where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewellery and shoddy clothes, pawnshops and flaming gin-palaces. [Footnote: Hubert Parry, 'Inaugural Address', *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, 1/1 (1899), p. 1.]

By contrast, 'the old folk-music is among the purest products of the human mind [because it] grew in the hearts of the people before they devoted themselves so assiduously to the making of quick returns'. [Footnote: Parry, 'Inaugural Address', p. 2.]

In the course of a more extended and complex argument, Cecil Sharp makes the same point in his influential book, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (1907):

... good music purifies, just as bad music vulgarizes... [T]he mind that has been fed upon the pure melody of the folk will instinctively detect the poverty-stricken tunes of the music-hall, and refuse to be captivated by their superficial attractiveness.... [Folk songs will] effect an improvement in the musical taste of the people, and... refine and strengthen the national character. [Footnote: Cecil Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (London: Simpkin & Co., Ltd; Novello & Co., Ltd; Taunton: Barnicott & Pearce, Athenaeum Press, 1907), p. 135.]

There was a paternalistic slant to the English vision, [Footnote: Ralph Vaughan Williams is another figure whose ideas about English folk song might be expected to be quoted here, but his writings on the subject come from a composer's perspective and are notably free of the kind of moralising of both Parry and Sharp. A useful selection is given in David Manning (ed.), *Vaughan Williams on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).] according to which, folk song was a product of 'unsophisticated humanity' with the power to remedy 'the

sordid vulgarity of our great city-populations’ as Parry put it [Footnote: Parry, ‘Inaugural Address’, p. 3.]; or, in Sharp’s terms, while it might be appreciated by ‘cultivated people’, it also had the merit of appealing to and educating ‘the uncritical’, and ‘will do incalculable good in civilizing the masses’. [Footnote: Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, p. 137.] Sharp also saw folk song as a means of ‘stimulating the feeling of patriotism’, and by this he meant very specifically *English* patriotism. English education was, he said ‘too cosmopolitan’ and bred ‘citizens of the world rather than Englishmen. And it is Englishmen, English citizens, that we want’. [Footnote: Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, pp. 135-6.]

Seen in this light, it is perhaps not surprising that the Welsh had certain reservations about Cecil Sharp. [Footnote: In fact Sharp was also something of a thorn in the side of his English colleagues. Hubert Parry had his differences with Sharp at an earlier period when both were involved with the running of the Finsbury Choral Association (see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/36040> (accessed 14/09/18)), and Vaughan Williams noted in his 1937 *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Sharp that ‘his ideas were not always cordially welcomed’ by his FSS colleagues; entry reprinted in Manning, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, p. 238.] The working relationships of the folk song collectors of the four British nations were generally close and collaborative, as the mutual contributions to their various journals reveal, [Footnote: Indeed, these relationships and cross-currents often predate the foundation of the folk song societies. In mid-nineteenth century Welsh/Irish circles, for example, the Third Earl of Dunraven is a pivotal figure. Owning land in both Ireland and south Wales, he enjoyed friendships and shared intellectual interests with the Graves family on the Irish side, and with the important folk song collector Maria Jane Williams and her family on the Welsh side. See Graves, *To Return*, p. 83, and Elizabeth Belcham, *About Aberpergwm: The Home of the Williams Family in the Vale of*

Neath, Glamorgan (Aberpergwm: Heritage Ventures, (1992)), pp. 58-59.] but Lloyd Williams thought Sharp proprietorial and domineering in his attitude to the study of folk song, and noted in his journal for 24 October 1909:

Mrs D [Mary Davies, then secretary of the Welsh Folk Song Society and a noted singer] interviewed C. Sharp. (No one likes him – he is dictatorial and headlong.) Dictated to her – told her that if she wanted to know about Welsh ballads to go to Wynne Jones Carnarvon [!] His astonishment when Mrs D had gone to discover she was “the singer”. [Footnote: National Library of Wales, Dr J. Lloyd Williams Papers, MB3/1.]

Like Sharp, Lloyd Williams emphasised the utility of folk songs in developing musical taste, and regarded them as a means of nurturing patriotism, but for the latter, patriotism in the British context was ‘the sum of the local patriotisms within it’ and was rooted in ‘the love of family’. [Footnote: John Lloyd Williams, ‘Introduction’, *Alawon Gwerin Cymru: Welsh Folk Songs Arranged for Schools*, Vol. 1, p. xii.] He also took a distinctive path in his vision of Welsh folk song as Wales’s contribution to what he called the ‘culture fund’ of Britain. [Footnote: Lloyd Williams, ‘Introduction’, p. xi.] That contribution would, he felt, stamp the ‘individuality’ of Wales on that general culture, by which he surely meant that it would establish a cultural identity distinct from and equal to that of England, and in so doing would contribute to ‘the upward progress of a country’. [Footnote: Lloyd Williams, ‘Introduction’, p. xi.] By ‘a country’, he probably meant Wales – but it is possible to interpret this as a suggestion that a ‘culture fund’ in which the four nations were established as equals would be progressive for Britain as a whole.

It was widely seen as important that folk song should be instilled into the young and should form part of the school curriculum, and both Sharp and Lloyd Williams arranged and published folk songs for schools. [Footnote: The links between the folk song societies and educationists are notable and would merit further study – Graves, for example, spent a considerable portion of his career as an inspector of schools.] Sharp insisted that:

Educationalists are agreed that the inclusion of music in the curriculum of the elementary school will not only tend to cultivate a taste for music, but will also, by exciting and training the imagination, react beneficially upon character.... [And since] folk-music came first and provided the foundations upon which the superstructure of art-music was subsequently reared... folk-music is clearly the best and most natural basis upon which to found a musical education. [Footnote: Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, pp. 134-135.]

Lloyd Williams was in sympathy with the musical aspects of this – folk music as the basis of a musical education and a means of cultivating musical taste – but the idea that it might have an impact on ‘character’ is notably lacking from his thinking. Folk song is never regarded by him as a means of educating the uncultivated ‘masses’; for him, these are the ‘songs of the people’, and an expression of a living cultural identity with a positive contribution to make to the modern world.

Lloyd Williams’s vision found sympathetic minds in government circles. The place of folk song in the curriculum acquired particular relevance in Wales against a backdrop of concern that education, which was delivered through the medium of English, was ‘betraying the linguistic, cultural and social needs of Wales’. [Footnote: Gareth Elwyn Jones, ‘Wales 1880-1914’, in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds), *Wales 1880-1914*, Welsh History

and Its Sources series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 8.] The Liberal Government of 1906-1915 moved early on to create a Welsh Department within the Board of Education, and in 1907 [Alfred T. Davies](#), another close associate of John Herbert Lewis, [Footnote: They had started out as partners in a firm of solicitors in Liverpool (see Idwal Jones, *Syr Herbert Lewis*, p. 17), and were both involved in the administration of education at county level in north east Wales.] became its first Permanent Secretary (a post which he held until 1925). In 1913, we find him writing to Mary Davies in the following terms:

I am sorry I cannot be present at the Annual Meeting, to-morrow, of Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru [the Welsh Folk Song Society]... [I]f I may venture on a suggestion it would be to concentrate more effort during the coming year on cultivating Folk-Songs among the children. It is with them that all hope for the perpetuation of these national melodies lies. Unless Welsh Folk-Songs are sung on the hearth, in the school, in the smithy and on the mountain side, as the kine are being brought home, and the children are being nursed, they will not really flourish but only have that exotic existence which is, after all, but the prelude to their ultimate disappearance....

Are the Council quite sure that they have yet done all that is necessary (1) to enable every Head Teacher in Wales to put on the Requisition List for his or her school a thoroughly well-edited and standard edition of the best Welsh Folk-Songs and (2) to enable school teachers, in every county, to learn how these songs should be rendered?... [Footnote: National Library of Wales, WFSS/CAGC Correspondence 1905-1939, B1, Ffeil 1, Bundle 1905-1914.]

His imagined listening scenarios – ‘on the hearth, in the school, in the smithy and on the mountain side, as the kine are being brought home, and the children are being nursed’ –

derive from the same strain of romantic cultural nationalism as Ellis's vision of music as a 'force in the making of Britain'. The romanticism is tempered, however – on one level by the practical concern of the civil servant with schoolbook requisition lists and standard editions, but more profoundly by his sense that folk songs were not – or should not be – 'exotic' or antiquarian, but retained their relevance to daily life.

'My mother used to sing us to sleep with that song': listening to traditional songs

At the risk of over-stretching the point, what the Welsh Folk Song Society and its supporters often seemed to think they heard in Welsh folk song was as much the voice of the future as the voice of the past. This may not be quite how 'ordinary listeners' heard it, and I want finally to look at some of those more instinctive, less conceptualised or less politicised reactions.

In 1923, Grace Gwynedd Davies (1879-1944), a singer and collector of Welsh folk songs [Footnote: She published two volumes of Anglesey folk songs, *Alawon Gwerin Môn* (Vol. 1 published Caernarfon 1914, new edition published Wrexham 1923, and Vol. 2, Wrexham 1924).], travelled for three months in the USA and Canada, giving talks about the Society's work to expatriate Welsh communities in Montreal, Toronto, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York, amongst a number of others. [Footnote: Wyn Thomas, *Meistres 'Graianfryn' a Cherddoriaeth frodorol yng Nghymru* (Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 1999), p. 9.] She reported back to her colleagues:

I do not know that the truth of the old adage, *Goreu Cymro, Cymro oddicartref* [the best Welshman is an expatriate Welshman], ever came home to me more forcibly than during the three months in which my husband and I were touring America... [W]e took the opportunity of meeting our fellow-countrymen at different points on our

journey, to tell them of the work of the W.F.S.S., and to let them hear some of our finds. Those meetings will always stand out in my memory as a touching proof of the deep and abiding love of the Welshman for his own country. They were usually opened by the singing of 'My Country, 'tis of Thee,' but they always ended with 'Hen Wlad fy Nhadau,' and their loyalty to the one was as unmistakeable as their *hiraeth* [longing] for the other. Perhaps it was because we carried them right back into the old days. They did not know that my singing of these old songs was going to revive memories of childhood, of loved parents and of localities endeared to them, and those memories moved them over and over again to tears.

They listened with the greatest interest to what we had to say about the songs, and picked up the airs quickly, joining in the singing with a heartiness that added more than a little to the success and homeliness of the meetings.... [The songs] were familiar to many, as one could easily see by the way their faces lit up and their heads moved to the lilt of the song; and after the meeting was over they would come to tell us where they had heard them. 'I come from Llanrhystyd; my mother used to sing us to sleep with that song;' or 'My father sang *Dibyn a Dobynd*, but he used to say: 'A ddoi di'r coed? meddai Richie pen Stryd,' ['Are you coming to the wood? said Richie pen Stryd'] and not 'A ddoi di'r coed? meddai cwbl i gyd.' ['Are you coming to the wood? said everybody.] [Footnote: National Library of Wales, Kitty Idwal Jones Papers, 15, Welsh Folk-Song Society, Seventeenth Annual Report, June 1924-June 1926. Author's translations.]

Lloyd Williams had inculcated in the Society the belief that folk songs had the power to resonate with the experiences of ordinary people, and Grace Gwynedd Davies's account provides valuable evidence of their actual impact. It is of course a second-hand account, and

one could argue that in any case, an audience of expatriate Welsh people was always likely to respond emotionally to music that took them back to their Welsh childhoods. However, there are some corroborating first-hand accounts that tend to confirm that their reaction was not simply prompted by expatriate sentimentality. The National History Museum in Cardiff holds an important collection of oral history interviews, conducted largely in the 1960s to capture the memories of people who had been children in Wales at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Many of these focused on traditional music, and the interviewers invariably asked their subjects, ‘Where did you hear this song?’ or ‘Who did you learn it from?’ – and the answers, though almost always brief and factual, often give a glimpse of an emotional reaction, because usually the songs were learned from close relatives. The following are a brief sample of many similar testimonies. Evan Evans (born 1877, Denbighshire) learned ‘lots’ of carols from his aunt, who learned them from her father, ‘a great carol singer’ (‘carolwr mawr’). Wallis Evans (born 1910, Aberdare) recalled hearing ‘Dydd Llun, Dydd Mawrth, Dydd Mercher’ (‘Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday’), now a standard of Welsh folk song, ‘in Aberdare from my father at home... when I was a small child... about six or seven years old’, (‘yn Aberdâr o ’Nhad gartref... yn blentyn bach... rhyw chwech neu saith’). (A recording of another interviewee, E. Thomas Evans, singing a version of [‘Dydd Llun, Dydd Mawrth, Dydd Mercher’](#) can be heard on the Museum’s website, along with a number of [other songs recorded in the course of the oral history project](#).) Jane Owen (born 1879, Port Talbot) remembered her father singing ‘Bore fory coda i’n fore’ (‘Tomorrow morning I will get up early’) to the children ‘when they were little’. Maud Ellen Davies (born 1894, Cardiganshire) recalled ‘hearing Nana singing this when I was a child...in Rhydlewis’ (‘...clywed Mamgu yn ei chanu amser o’n i’n plentyn...yn Rhydlewis’); and David Miles (born 1913, Pembrokeshire) ‘heard my Grandad singing [‘Ceiliog Beti’ (Beti’s cockerel)] ... at home when we lived in Croesgoch’ (‘clywa’ ’Nhadcu

yn ei chanu... gartref pan ni'n byw yn Croesgoch'). Arthur Stanley Parry (born 1896, Carmarthenshire) remembered his mother singing the lullaby 'Hei lwli, babi', 'to sing my little sisters to sleep' ('i ganu fy chwiorydd bach i gysgu'). Typically, these responses offer a memory of the person and often the place brought to mind by the act of remembering the song. [Footnote. St Fagans National History Museum, oral history recordings, tape numbers, in order, 396, 463, 499, 564, 610, 1001. Author's transcriptions and translations.]

One account gives us a more specific and detailed memory. Owen Morgan (born 1887, Anglesey) remembered how his grandmother would sing an 'action song' to him, 'Gyrru, gyrru, gyrru i Gaer' ('Drive, drive, drive to Chester'), bouncing him up and down to mimic the rhythm of the horse and cart:

... and of course nana would lift me up and down while singing that one – 'gyrru, gyrru, gyrru i Gaer'.

(...a wrth gwrs fydda nain 'n nghodi fi i fyny ag i lawr wrth ganu honna'n te – 'gyrru, gyrru, gyrru i Gaer.')

[Footnote: St Fagans National History Museum, oral history transcripts, Tape 69. Author's translation.]

These are, of course, no more than snippets – none of the interviewees elaborates on the emotions and memories these songs evoked. But these memories of children being sung to sleep and grandmothers bouncing little boys up and down on their laps are surely nonetheless full of meaning – flashes of insight cast by music into people's childhood experience.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century and the first couple of decades of the twentieth, the propensity for hitching Welsh musical achievement to the wagon of national progress was strong. The first signs can be detected in the often overstated reactions of listeners to Welsh choral and congregational singing, with all it could be said to imply about the social respectability, piety, (musical) literacy and intellectual aspiration of the masses. While choirs and *cymafoedd ganu* were to be found all over Wales in both rural and industrial communities, these were singing practices that were crucially linked to industrial expansion and the burgeoning chapel congregations it bred. As such, they were readily linked in people's perceptions with what was for many (though not all) an optimistic period of economic prosperity and cultural development, which, as Morien put it, justified the world in anticipating 'in the future great results from this little nation among the mountains'. [Footnote: Morien, 'The South Wales Choir Rehearsal: Aberdare', *Western Mail*, 7/7/1873.]

Traditional song seems at first glance to be a less easy fit within a discourse about national progress, and the reactions of 'ordinary listeners' to Welsh folk song, in their focus on past experience, express something more like a sense of tradition. They certainly seem very distant from the way in which Welsh music was brought into a wider cultural discourse about a vision for a nation by the politicians, journalists and scholars, and it seems doubtful that many of those ordinary listeners had conceptualised the songs of their childhoods as part of such a discourse. But John Lloyd Williams would have recognised in their reactions to the songs exactly the connection with family and community – with the human, the emotional and the personal – that he understood as the underpinning vitality of traditional music, and its potential to contribute to 'the upward progress of a country'.

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