The Incredible Adventures of Betsi Cadwaladr: 'Welsh Florence Nightingale' or 'Munchausen in Petticoats'? An evaluation of The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis as a historical source

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The Incredible Adventures of Betsi Cadwaladr¹: ‘Welsh Florence Nightingale’ or ‘Munchausen in Petticoats’?

An evaluation of The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis as a historical source.

The traveller, he, whom sea or mountain sunder
From his own country, sees things strange and new;
That the misjudging vulgar, which lies under
The mist of ignorance, esteems untrue,
Rejecting whatsoever is a wonder,
Unless 'tis palpable and plain to view.
Hence inexperience, as I know full well,
Will yield small credence to the tale I tell.

The Orlando Furioso, Canto VII.²

Word count 6,438
(Introduction to Conclusion, excluding footnotes)

¹ Baptised Elizabeth Cadwaladr, she has been known variously as Elizabeth/Betsy/Betsi/Beti Cadwaladr/Cadwaladyr/Davis/Davies, and as Elizabeth David Cadwalher on her death certificate. She is referred to as Betsi Cadwaladr throughout this dissertation, but Elizabeth Davis has been retained for referencing the original autobiography of 1857, and where the name is quoted in published material.

I would like to thank my tutor, S. J. Allen, for helpful and constructive criticism throughout, and Richard Marsden and his team for creating an interesting, stimulating and challenging course.

I would also like to thank my fellow students for their constructive engagement and ideas.

I am grateful to Gwyneth Tyson Roberts for allowing me access to her unpublished PhD thesis on Jane Williams (Ysgafell).

Most of all, I would like to thank Lisa, my wife, for listening and, while I was doing all this, doing everything else.
Contents

1. Introduction

2. Betsi - the Book

3. Betsi at Sea
   3.1 The Perseverance
   3.2 The Iris
   3.3 The Denmark Hill

4. Summary of Research Findings

5. Discussion and further research
   5.1 The Crimea
   5.2 Nursing
   5.3 Children’s literature
   5.4 Sexuality

6. Conclusion

7. Primary source databases

8. Bibliography

9. Appendix
1. Introduction

Most people living in North Wales have heard of Betsi Cadwaladr, if only because of their eponymous NHS board. The story of the “Welsh Florence Nightingale” is proudly presented on the web site of the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.³

In the traditionally taught version of her life story, Betsi Cadwaladr (1789-1860) was one of sixteen children of Bala preacher, Dafydd Cadwaladr. Her mother died when Betsi was five. She was taken in by Simon Lloyd of Plas yn Dref, a clergyman, at the age of ten but ran away to Liverpool at the age of fourteen, taking the name of Elizabeth Davis. After innumerable fantastic exploits in domestic service on land and sea, she worked at Guy’s hospital for a few months before volunteering in 1854 for service under Florence Nightingale in the Crimea. She showed great dedication, often challenging authority, nursing soldiers and running the extra diet kitchen until invalided home the following year, dying in poverty five years later.⁴ ⁵ ⁶ ⁷

Cadwaladr first came to public attention in 1857 when An Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis, a Balaclava Nurse, Daughter of Dafydd Cadwaladyr, edited by Jane Williams (Ysgafell), was published in two volumes.⁸ It attracted a scathing review in the Monmouthshire Merlin, which complained of the ‘exaggeration’ and of how ‘feats are gravely recounted without any apparent sense of their impropriety or improbability’.⁹ The Critic was more charitable, but could not decide whether Cadwaladr was ‘the most extraordinary woman that ever lived, or a ‘Munchausen in petticoats’.¹⁰

⁵ This version of her life is based on the original autobiography, although Meirion Jones revealed in 1960 that parish records show that Cadwaladr was ten when her mother, Judith, was buried on 10 February 1800. The biography of Dafydd, her father, states that he had nine children, not sixteen. See notes 6 & 7.
⁷ Anon., Ychydig gafnodaau am fywyd a marwolaeth Dafydd Cadwaladr: yr hwn a fu farw Gorphenaf 9, 1834, wedi bod yn bregethwyr llafurus ym mysg y Trefnyddion Calfinaidd 52 mlynedd. (Bala, Sauderson, 1836), p. 15.
A later review in *Baner Cymru*, however, had no such doubts. Elizabeth was the daughter of Dafydd Cadwaladr, and Jane Williams was *‘yr un llaw gelfydd a blethodd y fflangell orlem honno a elwid Artegall, ac a’i doddod ar gefnau awduron y llyfrau gleision.*

Cadwaladr was an honest, compassionate, and religious woman whose story was told without exaggeration and with truth shining from every sentence. Her refusal to *‘blygu ei wddf dan iau Hymen’* after the tragic death at sea of her betrothed allowed comparison with Elizabeth Tudor, and her administrative skills equalled those of Catherine the Great.

The Autobiography was written in the shadow of the Blue Books, and it is hardly surprising that *Baner Cymru* sprang to the defence of the Autobiography in such effusive terms when the integrity of the daughter of a famous Methodist preacher, the author of Artegall and, by proxy, Welsh culture itself, were under renewed attack.

The book was not a commercial success – selling only 700 copies. Cadwaladr then faded from public consciousness, and for the remainder of the nineteenth century was less well known than her father. A press report of her sister Bridget’s funeral in 1878 devotes a page to Bridget, a column to her famous father but only the last short sentence to her sister – *‘Bu Elisabeth, chwaer Bridget, yn faethforwyn yn y Crimea o dan Miss Stanley’.*

At intervals of a few years, Cadwaladr was rediscovered briefly in the Welsh language press when new readers extolled her achievements with a selection of anecdotes sourced exclusively from the Autobiography. These included an article in *Cymru*, edited by O. M. Edwards, in 1910, a serialization in a Patagonian newspaper from August 1916 to August 1917, and an article in *Y Ford Gron* aimed at...
Welsh expatriates, in 1932. The appeal of Cadwaladr to these authors lay in her Welshness – a heroine that could be used to foster the self-confidence of a culture under threat and, in effect, continue the defence against the Blue Books.

After the Second World War, Cadwaladr’s appeal began to broaden. In 1954, during the centenary of the Crimean War, an English language article appeared in the Nursing Mirror. The author, my father, was a physician of the Liverpool Welsh diaspora. A prominent consultant physician in this group became president of Cymdeithas Beti Cadwaladr – a Welsh language nursing society formed in 1967, on the initiative of Wrexham nurses, to promote the Welsh language in patient contact. The society was instrumental in the placing of a plaque at Cadwaladr’s childhood home at Pen Rhiw. Our heroine was becoming a nursing as well as a Welsh icon.

The Autobiography was republished in 1987, by Honno press, a new publishing house set up by women to rediscover Welsh women in history. It was re-branded as Betsy Cadwaladyr: A Balaclava Nurse, and the original preface was replaced with an introduction by Deirdre Beddoe, an eminent historian of women, who described it as ‘..the authentic voice of an early nineteenth century working woman recalling the events and experiences of an action-packed life’. It was welcomed as a ‘forgotten classic’.

But Cadwaladr remained forgotten. This was made clear in 2009 when the Welsh minister of health, Edwina Hart, revealed the proposed names of the six new Welsh NHS boards. Of 417 public

23 Society communication, N.D., found in copy of Nursing Mirror, see note 12, among my late father’s archived magazines – see image in Appendix 9.3.
responses, 128 commented on the proposed names of the new bodies, and virtually all of these came from North Wales, where there was overwhelming opposition to the name of Betsi Cadwaladr who, as the Anglesey LHB put it ‘was unknown to the majority of North Wales residents including NHS staff’.  

Every single doctor from North Wales who commented on the name objected to it. The chairman of the Local Medical Committee hinted enigmatically - ‘...there is a darker side to her activities, which would not be conducive to today’s Public Health advocacy as regards teenage and underage sexual relations, sexually transmitted disease and pregnancies...’. One psychologist had heard that Cadwaladr died of syphilis.

Some welcomed the proposal – ‘Mae’n ffordd arderchog i gydnabod y ffigwr hanesyddol a lliwgar hon a wnaeth gyfraniad diddorol a gwahanol i hanes Cymru, yn arbennig felly i hanes merched yng Ngwynedd’ [my emphasis].

Only six respondents approved of the name, all from North West Wales with the trust chairman finding it ‘inspirational’ that a nurse had been chosen as figurehead and that Betsi Cadwaladr had been ‘plucked from the mists of history’. The Minister of Health was not swayed by the protests, and the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board was born.

Professor Donna Mead suggested that the subtext of the opposition of doctors to Betsi was ‘that she was a woman and a nurse’ and that they underestimated Edwina Hart ‘who is a formidable

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30 Consultation responses 1-120, p. 226, (see note 25).

31 Consultation responses 1-120, p. 139.

32 An extensive search of the literature has found no support for this claim.

33 ‘This is an excellent way to acknowledge this colourful historical figure who made an interesting and different contribution to the history of Wales, and especially to the history of the women of Wales’ [my translation and emphasis].


35 Consultation responses 171-210, pp. 5-12.

woman’. This illustrates how Betsi was as divisive in 2009 as she had been in 1857. To the Victorian fault lines of class, religion and language, were added the fault lines of gender and profession.37

This dissertation is based on the premise that this polarisation is due to the absence of an academic evaluation of the Autobiography as a historical document, leaving gender, cultural identity and professional loyalties to determine what is believed, disbelieved or ignored.

The most debated aspects of the Autobiography are its critical comments about the running of the hospital at Balaclava and about the qualities of Florence Nightingale. This dissertation does not address these comments specifically but aims to establish whether they come from a reliable source.

Chapter 2 examines the Autobiography and its potential biases.

Chapter 3 examines the factual accuracy of the Autobiography. While it is easy to disbelieve the more implausible anecdotes, they cannot simply be discounted without reference to another trusted contemporaneous source. Cadwaladr did not keep a diary, and her activities were not independently recorded. However, the movements of the ships on which she worked were recorded and the chapters dealing with her life at sea provide, therefore, an opportunity to compare the timeline of events as presented in the Autobiography with that constructed from impartial data.

37 ‘Why she loathed Florence Nightingale and was dubbed a prostitute; The Real Betsi Cadwaladr: Part 2.’ The Daily Post, (29 January 2013) available via Free Library at: https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Why+she+loathed+Florence+Nightingale+and+was+dubbed+a+prostitute;+THE....a0316729164. [Accessed 26 May 2019].
2. Betsi - the Book

The Autobiography was published to raise money for an ageing, infirm, unmarried and childless domestic servant. It contained an appeal for donations. Tyson Roberts suggests that Lady Llanover was the driving force behind the project. The book was written in English and published in London. Priced at 21/- when a teacher in Corwen might earn as little as £10 p. a., it was firmly aimed at the middle classes of England.

Biographies were popular. At a time when the shocking failure of British military medicine in Crimea was a source of great concern, interest in Florence Nightingale was high and made the book publishable. Williams’s personal contribution to the book is focused on these issues that she addresses in long footnotes to chapters 6 and 7, and in Appendices B and C.

In her preface to the first edition, Williams describes how the book was written and details some of the problems she faced. These five pages, omitted from the 1987 edition, are central to the understanding of the book as a primary source.

Cadwaladr, referred to as the ‘heroine and narrator’, did not write any of the book, nor did she have any written notes to give her ‘editor’ as Jane Williams is referred to on the title cover. This was an exercise in oral history, taken from a working-class woman, structured and turned into a coherent narrative by a young, erudite, middle-class female author.

The pitfalls of oral history are well known. The narrator may not be wholly truthful. Details may be omitted through choice or forgetfulness. The passage of time may alter the interpretation of past events. The historian may, unconsciously or otherwise, ask ‘closed’ questions leading to expected answers and the narrator may sense this and become complicit in the process. This risk is greatest when the narrator has a personal relation with the historian and understands her expectations, and it is clear from the preface that the two women had contact in 1851 at Llanover Hall.

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44 Tyson Roberts has used census data to establish that Cadwaladr worked for Lady Llanover at Llanover Court and 9 Great Stanhope Street, London, at a time when Jane Williams spent a great deal of time at the same addresses. Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, Jane Williams (Ysgafell) and Nineteenth-Century Welsh Identity, pp. 125-6.
The preface describes how Cadwaladr told her story in ‘a desultory and digressive manner’, and Williams admitted that ‘discrepancies and mistakes may be detected in the details,’ along with errors in chronology and geography. She explains that it was ‘a difficult manipulation’ to construct a narrative and that it was not always possible to use the narrator’s exact language, which was however, retained when Cadwaladr’s words were ‘apt and striking’. Clearly, Williams put a lot of herself into the published text – a process that Tyson Roberts characterises as ‘an act of ventriloquism’.  

Williams added her own touches to the book – inserting literary epigraphs at the head of each chapter and footnotes on botanical and theological issues that she thought interesting.

The Autobiography missed its targeted market for many reasons. Throughout the book, Cadwaladr champions her Welshness, gender, class and non-conformism, which failed to impress The Merlin and was equally unlikely to appeal to the intended readership, which was primarily interested in the Crimean War.

Victorian readers preferred to read about heroic men, and tales that confirmed the exceptional nature of British ingenuity, valour and success. They were accustomed to fiction in the form of the first-person ‘false’ autobiography, Robinson Crusoe being the prime example. The memoirs of Henry Havelock, published in 1860, provided the hero that readers found both inspiring and reassuring in the context of another great imperial shock – the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It was a best-seller of the kind described by Lytton Strachey as ‘romantic sentimental heroism’ ‘so dear to the readers of novels and the compilers of hagiologies’.  

Unlike modern biography, objective fact-checking and balance were not a priority. The Merlin left the reader ‘to his own estimate of her work’, as did Williams, who expected readers to ‘bring in the contribution of diffused and personal information...’ to point out inaccuracies. This may partly explain why Williams’s engagement with the factual content was sporadic and inconsistent. Simple errors of fact abound. Dafydd Cadwaladr grew up in Erw Ddinmael not Erwd Dymel, had nine children, not sixteen, and died in July, not September 1834, according to the biography to which

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45 Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, Jane Williams (Ysgafell) and Nineteenth-Century Welsh Identity, p. 122.
Williams had access. There was no King John the Eighth of Portugal, and Williams knew that no farm could possibly adjoin both Denbighshire and Radnorshire. Cadwaladr’s claim to have accumulated savings of £1,283 10s 4½d during her time on the Denmark Hill, twelve times Jane Williams’s annual income and fifty times the annual wage of a well-paid Tasmanian servant, is accepted without comment.

It is easy to understand why it failed to sell. The Merlin review disliked its egotism, self-conceit, dullness, lack of humour, elaborate minuteness and almost boundless vanity. It complained that ‘the most considerable occurrences are told with as much precision as the most important could be’, criticism reiterated by Lytton Strachey sixty years later when he lamented the state of British biographies – ‘with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyrical, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design...’

Perhaps the greatest criticism, and the greatest reason to doubt its authenticity as an autobiography, is its lack of emotional content. Williams was aware of this ‘absence of sentiment and air of unsympathising indifference’. Expression of love, grief, shock or joy, is minimal and transient. A Black boy dies ‘very happily’. Vexatious characters appear and disappear without reason or consequence. Tyson Roberts sees similarities with the picaresque novel. A more contemporary analogy might be the structure and emotional depth of Popeye, and in Cadwaladr’s most persistent suitor, Mr Barbosa, the recurring and repeatedly vanquished villain, Bluto.

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49 Anon., Ychydig gofnodau... (1836).
54 Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians, p. vii.
58 Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, Jane Williams (Ysgafell) and Nineteenth-Century Welsh Identity, p. 272.
The Autobiography is a hybrid of biography, autobiography and first-person novel, and the reader needs to understand through which of these genres its content is being presented before its value as a historical source can be judged.
3. Betsi at Sea

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, Britain’s wealth depended on shipping, and the movement of merchant ships was ‘one of the best-documented aspects of the UK economy in the nineteenth century’. This information was published in commercial journals, such as Lloyd’s List, and in newspapers. Thus, individual ships can be traced throughout the commercial cycle of loading, unloading and sailing from port to port within the Empire. The digitalisation of these records now provides a ready means of using independent shipping data to establish objective historical timelines.

Cadwaladr worked on two ships - the Iris and the Denmark Hill, but a third ship played a significant part in creating the image of ‘Betsi’.

3.1 The Perseverance

According to the Autobiography, Cadwaladr’s fiancé, Captain Thomas Harris, perished when the Perseverance foundered in fog on the Black Rock (a rocky outcrop on the north-east tip of the Wirral peninsula), on Sunday morning 14 May 1816 between two and three o’clock, with all hands lost apart from one boy left clinging to a rock.

It states that she had met Captain Harris at the home of her employer, describing him as ‘a fine-looking man’ with ‘a buff waistcoat and blue coat’. They became engaged in secret and he bought a house ready for their wedding in May. Having expected his ship back from Bristol by Sunday morning, she went to the docks on Monday and hearing that the ship had not come in went, in vain, to a churchyard which commanded an extensive view. Calling in a shop on the way home she saw in ‘the Liverpool newspaper’ that the Perseverance was lost. She fainted on the spot and was carried home in a sedan chair.

It is curious that this significant biographical detail has been faithfully repeated for over 160 years although 14 May 1816 was not a Sunday, and there is no newspaper record of a ship of this name going down off the Black Rock in May 1816.

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The total loss of the *Perseverance* is, however, recorded in *Lloyd’s List* of 24 May 1814 and repeated in *The Hull Packet* of 31 May. A fuller account of the shipwreck is given in *The Cambrian*, a Swansea newspaper, on Saturday 28th May 1814:

*On Thursday night last was totally lost on the Bishops, off the port of Milford, the Perseverance, of Cardiff, Harris master, laden with rod and sheet iron, malt, and anchors, bound from Bristol to Liverpool. - Crew saved."

This proves that Harris survived the shipwreck, which occurred on Thursday 19th May 1814 on Bishop’s Rock just off the south-east tip of Pembrokeshire, when according to the Autobiography, Cadwaladr was on the continent, witnessing the return of Louis XVIII to Paris on 3 May.

Cadwaladr’s version of the loss of the *Perseverance* has all the melodrama of a first-person Victorian novel – the heroine forlornly scans the sea from a churchyard. The lover is drowned while only a boy, found clinging to a rock, survives to tell the tale. The heroine faints on hearing the tragic news. As the Examiner said in 1857 ‘... we fancy now and then we are reading fiction by Defoe’.

### 3.2 The *Iris*

The Autobiography states that Cadwaladr sailed for the West Indies in November 1820 on board the *Iris*, commanded by Captain S____, master and joint owner with Mr Elliott.

There were twelve ships registered under the same name in 1820, but only one owned by Elliott & Co. This *Iris* was a two-decked copper-sheathed ship, tonnage 248, that was trading between London
and Jamaica under Captain Cassie. The Lloyd’s register entry for this ship is unchanged for 1821 and 1822, except for the addition of a Captain Smith as joint commander.

The Autobiography’s habit of only revealing the first letter of some surnames is, in this case, undermined by the information that Captain S_____ served under ‘…his kinsman and namesake, the celebrated Sir Sydney Smith’. His child’s unusual name is a further clue – ‘his name was Orlando Furioso Stanislaus Francescal Sydney _____.’

This information is enough to confidently identify the captain as William Sidney Smith, who married Eliza Christian in Bristol on 8 December 1819. She bore him a son on 12 September 1820 and the boy was baptised Stanislaus Franciscus Salesius Orlando Sidney Smith at Our Lady of the Assumption & St Gregory in Warwick St, Soho two weeks later. The name of the church and the Latin record corroborates the Autobiography’s assertion that Eliza Smith was Catholic.

There is, however, no record of the Iris sailing for the Caribbean under Smith in November 1820.

The Iris had left Deal for Jamaica on 25 March that year, under Captain Cassie, arriving back at Gravesend on 23 October. She sailed again from Falmouth under Cassie, on 5 April 1821, arriving in Jamaica on 18 May, and returning to Gravesend on 27 September 1821.

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74 See image of baptismal record. Appendix 9.4.
The first record of the *Iris* leaving Britain under Captain Smith was from Deal on 30 December 1821, arriving at St Vincent on 8 February 1822 and returning to Gravesend, again under Smith, on 29 June 1822.\(^80\)\(^81\)\(^82\)

This information supports the claim that Cadwaladr sailed to St Vincent aboard the *Iris* but sets a different timeline. The voyage lasted from 30\(^{th}\) December 1821 until the end of June 1822 — a period of six months.

Cadwaladr says she ended her engagement with Mrs Smith on their return to London.\(^83\) Captain Greathead took command for the next voyage, to Demerara, 3 May 1823.\(^84\)\(^85\) The *Iris* never returned to Britain. She was lost on the Cobbler’s Rocks, off Barbados, on 8 August 1823.\(^86\)

The Autobiography claims that, during this six-month period, Cadwaladr not only sailed to and from St Vincent, but also visited Martinique, Trinidad (twice), Jamaica (‘all the ports’), Demerara (where she stayed for 3 months), Cuba and Martinique. There is no record in Lloyd's List of the *Iris* visiting any of these ports.

Cadwaladr was demonstrably not at Demerara ‘during the commotion about Smith the Missionary’ as she claimed, as the slave rebellion in Demerara began on 18 August 1823, over a year after she returned to Britain and 10 days after the *Iris* sank.\(^87\)\(^88\)

Cadwaladr claims she stayed in Demerara on a plantation with 1450 slaves owned by Mr Porland.\(^89\) There is no owner of that name in the Legacies of British Slave ownership database, which also


reveals that the largest British Guiana plantation in 1823 had 671 slaves. Nor does a ‘Mr Shum of Liverpool’ appear as a Trinidad plantation owner.

However, the Autobiography is more accurate about St. Vincent itself. Captain Smith’s father, referred to as ‘Old Dr S____’, lived within walking distance of the estate of Dr French, overlooking Calique. James Charles French appears as the owner of the Richmond Hill Estate in the slave owners database, and he was resident on the island according to the list of subscribers to a history of St Vincent.

The Deed Book of St. Vincent contains the mortgage deed dated 16 October 1823, for Lot 95, adjoining the French plantation, owned by Thomas Smith ‘practitioner in physic’ as surety in relation to the purchase of the Golden Grove plantation in Trinidad. The property includes the dwelling house, outbuildings and ‘negro houses’.

Dr Smith bought and sold slaves in the period 1815-1818. He purchased Maria, her infant son Edward, and all her future progeny for £134 on 10 March 1817. This was a joint purchase with Peter Deshon, whose heirs appear as creditors on the above mortgage deed.

In summary, primary sources corroborate that that Cadwaladr worked as a domestic servant for Captain William and Mrs Eliza Smith aboard the Iris and at the home of Dr Thomas Smith and his wife Eleanor on St Vincent for six months from 30 December 1821 to 29 June 1822. The family were slave owners.

There is no independent evidence that Cadwaladr travelled beyond St. Vincent as described in the Autobiography. The inaccuracies and fabrications in the narrative about destinations beyond St Vincent cast doubt on the veracity of these Caribbean travels.

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90 The Bachelor’s Adventure and Enterprise Plantation see: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/estate/view/884. [Accessed 26 May 2019].
93 Deed Book of St Vincent, (1823-1826), pp. 30-32. Available at: https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP688-1-1-74?_ga=2.172098727.504531719.1556910606-1756391139.1544885735#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=60&xywh=-19%2C711%2C2320%2C1631. [Accessed 26 May 2019].
94 Deed Book of St Vincent, (1815-1818), pp. 100-01. Available at: https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP688-1-1-63?_ga=2.135602613.504531719.1556910606-1756391139.1544885735#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=130&xywh=83%2C287%2C1933%2C1359. [Accessed 26 May 2019].
While her most factitious observation from this period may be that of the animal she claimed to have seen with a...

‘...head like a shark, with holes for ears, six wings, and twelve feet, besides a row of feet across the widest part below. The colour was green, mixed with white above, and the colour of oyster-shells beneath. The front part looked like feathers, and the hinder parts shelly’, 95

her most pernicious claim is that slave women in Demerara had a 30-hour week and that their state was ‘not slavery at all’. 96 In sharp contrast, the parliamentary report by Sir George Murray, Protector of Slaves for Demerara, described ‘an extraordinary number of punishments.’ These could be for offences such as ‘neglect of duty’, ‘bad work’ and ‘not doing a day’s work’. 97

But perhaps the most intriguing embellishment is Cadwaladr’s consistent referral to Orlando Smith as the fictional Orlando Furioso. 98

98 See note 2.
3.3 The Denmark Hill

Chapters VII to XII of Volume 1 and chapters I to III of Volume 2 cover the time Cadwaladr served on the Denmark Hill. This period starts after she left the Iris and ends ‘more than a year’ after her father’s death.99 This represents a period of approximately eleven years, ending with Cadwaladr parting with Captain Foreman in London, before he sailed back to Australia without her.100

The Denmark Hill was a three-masted, two-decked, copper-sheathed barque, tonnage 257. She was built in Boston, Massachusetts, and captured as a prize of war in 1814.101 102 In the following years she plied the London-Rio route under different masters. John Foreman first appears as joint master in Lloyds register in the 1821 issue and from 1822 onwards as sole master and owner, trading between London and New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania).103

John Foreman left Gravesend on 11 December 1821 on his first voyage to Tasmania.104 This was 18 days before Cadwaladr sailed on the Iris for St Vincent which indicates that she was not on the Denmark Hill for this voyage.

The Denmark Hill arrived at Hobart 22 weeks later, on 18th May 1822. She offloaded merchandise and 29 passengers.105 She sailed on for Sydney, arriving on 19 June.106 Her departure from Sydney was delayed, partly due to a court case in March 1823.107 She left with ‘a full cargo of colonial produce’ on 3 May 1823,108 arriving back at Gravesend on 21 September 1823 – a return voyage of 20 weeks.109

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99 Stated as 9 September 1834 but, in fact, 9 July 1834. See image of burial record. Appendix 9.2.
100 Anon., Lloyd’s Register of Shipping, (London, 1815), Supplement Entry D29. Available at: https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044105233597?urlappend=%3Bseq=673 [Accessed 27 May 2019].
102 Anon., Lloyd’s Register of Shipping, (London, 1822), Entry D120. Available at: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?q1=denmark%20Hill;id=hvd.32044050661024;view=image;seq=139;start=1;sz=10;page=search [Accessed 27 May 2019].
103 Anon., ‘The Marine List’, Lloyd’s List, No 5653, 12 December 1821. Available at: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?q1=lloyd%5CL%20list;id=hvd.39015006574233;view=1up;seq=338 [Accessed 27 May 2019].
The second Foreman voyage from Britain left on 14th April 1824, arriving at Hobart on 31 August—again a voyage of 20 weeks. The passengers were:

*Cabin Passengers* - Mrs. E Foreman, wife of the commander; Mr. and Mrs. Ries and two children - one of whom was born on the passage; Miss Matilda Jennings, Mr. George Bunning, Mr. Wm. Elliot, Mr. Wm. Malcolm, Mr. Thomas Gregory, Mrs Selina Tomlins and Elizabeth Davis.
*Steerage* - Mr. Robert Pringle, Mr. Wm Gibson, Mr. Thomas Bickett, Mrs Mary Marshall, Master Wm Marshall.¹¹⁰

This confirms that Cadwaladr was on the ship, along with Mrs Foreman and sixteen other passengers, one of whom was a baby born during the voyage. As further evidence, the Autobiography mentions Mr Pringle and Mr Malcolm (see list above).¹¹¹ The fact that Cadwaladr is not accorded a title supports the assertion in the Autobiography that she was travelling as Mrs Foreman’s maid, and not as a paying passenger or as a stewardess or other member of the crew.

However, the voyage of 1824 as described in the Autobiography bears little resemblance to this report in the Tasmanian press. According to the former, the *Denmark Hill* had 180 paying passengers, 14 confinements during the passage, nearly sank in a violent storm, had its foremast and sails set alight by lightning, lost three masts and yet still managed to rescue 430 people from the burning wreck of the *Thetis*, before limping in to Cape Town for repairs.¹¹²

None of this is mentioned in the Hobart Town Gazette report of 3 September, or in the included letter of thanks from the passengers to the captain. This passage took no longer than the one in 1822, surely impossible with the loss of three masts *en route*.

The claim of 180 passengers plus crew is not only contradicted by the passenger list but is wildly implausible. Merchantmen were only permitted to carry one passenger for every two tons of unused cargo space, and there were only around seven cabins on the ship.¹¹³¹¹⁴ The *Denmark Hill* was 91.6 feet long and x 25.6. feet across the beam.¹¹⁵ Even if one whole deck was assigned to 180


passengers, each would only have about a square yard, before adding 430 rescued passengers and fourteen new-born babies to the total!

The *Denmark Hill* sailed on from Hobart for Port Jackson (Sydney) on 24\(^{th}\) September 1824\(^{116}\) arriving on 1 October. Three days later Capt. Foreman advertised his departure for Rio via Hobart. He left on 22 November, arriving at Hobart on 3 December.\(^{117} \ 118\)

On 17\(^{th}\) December 1824, crew and passengers on the *Denmark Hill* advertised for all claims to be presented ahead of the ship’s forthcoming departure. This list includes ‘Elizabeth Davis’.\(^{119}\) The ship left Hobart for Rio on 29 December with passengers intending to travel on to England and Mr Barboza\(^{120}\) for Rio. The ship was expected to return to ‘these colonies' before finally departing for England.\(^{121}\)

A testimonial dated 14 March 1825 from the passengers that left the *Denmark Hill* at Rio was published in the Hobart Gazette, indicating that the *Denmark Hill* was in Rio on this date.\(^{122}\)

The *Denmark Hill* left Rio on 12 May 1825 arrived back at Hobart on 15 August carrying two male passengers and ‘a female servant’.\(^{123}\) She suffered storm damage on the return voyage but a survey deemed her seaworthy, despite a rathole in the hull above the waterline.\(^{124}\) She duly left for Sydney on 18 September 1825 with Mrs Foreman’s female servant on board.\(^{125}\)


\(^{120}\) Mr J. A. Barboza a.k.a. Barbosa travelled on the Denmark Hill from Sydney to Hobart to Rio in Nov/Dec 1824. He appears to have been a tobacco merchant based in Rio, trading with Australian importers. He is portrayed as an ardent and recurring suitor in the Autobiography.


Following repairs, she left Sydney on 6 December, arriving at Hobart on the 14 December 1825. Elizabeth Davis is not listed, nor any female servant. However, the Autobiography mentions that Mrs Fowler and her three children were among the passengers, and the passenger list confirms this.

This was the last time the *Denmark Hill* arrived at a British mainland port and the above evidence shows that Cadwaladr was aboard. The Autobiography states that Cadwaladr ended her maritime service at this point, before the *Denmark Hill* left Britain for good. This was not in 1835, as claimed in the Autobiography, but on the 15th June 1826.

The third, and last, Foreman voyage from Britain was for Sydney and left Portsmouth on 17 January 1827, arriving in New South Wales on 1 July 1827 with 16 passengers. There is no mention of Elizabeth Davis or of a maid.

The next voyage was advertised as a triangular voyage to Hobart, Mauritius and back to Sydney. The *Denmark Hill* was chartered to bring a cargo of sugar from Mauritius, leaving Sydney on 22 August 1827 and arriving at Hobart on 30 August. She left Hobart on 7 September with four paying passengers, arriving back at Sydney on 14 January 1828 with Mrs Foreman and two children as the only listed passengers. This triangular voyage took just over 18 weeks.

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The second Mauritius voyage was left on 16 March 1828.\textsuperscript{138} There follows a gap of 20 weeks before the \textit{Denmark Hill} was back in Sydney on 2 August 1828 having left Mauritius on 16 June with a cargo of 300 tons of sugar.\textsuperscript{139}

On 4 October 1828 the \textit{Denmark Hill} left Sydney for the Cape of Good Hope via Hobart.\textsuperscript{140} She made the eastern passage round the horn, putting into Rio for water in early February and reaching Table Bay by 10 March.\textsuperscript{141} She left Cape Town for Mauritius on 7 May,\textsuperscript{142} arriving on 18 June 1829 where Mrs Fenton and her daughter Flora joined the ship.\textsuperscript{143} Mrs Fenton and child are listed among the passengers who arrived at Hobart on 13 August 1829, after a seven-week journey.\textsuperscript{144} The ship arrived back at Sydney 14 September 1829.\textsuperscript{145} 146 This was almost a year after she had left the port and was the third time the \textit{Denmark Hill} brought a cargo from Mauritius.

She left for Mauritius again, via Hobart, on 19 November 1829, arriving at Port Louis on 8 January 1930 and back at Sydney on 1 April 1830.\textsuperscript{147} 148 149

The Sydney Gazette of 13 April 1830 announced that Captain Foreman had completed his last voyage – being the eighth to Australia ‘three direct from England, four from the Mauritius and back,’


\textsuperscript{143} Elizabeth Fenton, \textit{The Journal of Mrs. Fenton}, pp. 334-8.


and one to the Brazils and the Cape of Good Hope and back’. 150 This tallies exactly with the timeline constructed in this dissertation.

Later that month The Australian reported that the Denmark Hill was to be hove to and fitted out as a whaler, and that Captain Foreman was looking for a buyer before settling in Australia.151 152 John Foreman did, in fact, complete one more return voyage to Mauritius, leaving Sydney on 3 July 1830 and returning on 6 December.153 154 Already affected by ‘an awful squint’155 likely to have left him amblyopic and blind in one eye, he was severely ill during the return voyage and his eyesight deteriorated to the extent that ‘a total extinction of that faculty is expected’. 156

The Denmark Hill was advertised for sale in the Sydney Gazette on 8 Jan 1831 by Captain Foreman who ‘from ill health wishes to remain on shore’. 157 Mr T. H. James bought her for £2,700. 158

There is no mention of Elizabeth Davis or of a female servant on the Denmark Hill from June 1826 up to the point Captain Foreman sold his ship, and Cadwaladr never claimed to have worked for another captain. The fate of the Denmark Hill after this point is, therefore, not relevant to this dissertation. Suffice it to say that she continued as a whaler, then as a bulk coastal cargo vessel under different owners until she sprang a leak and sank off Broken Bay on 25 April 1839.159 The Sydney Gazette suspected that she had not been properly seaworthy for 20 years,160 as Elizabeth Fenton had already suspected in 1829.161

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4. Summary of Research Findings

Shipping records show that:

1. The story of Harris’s death on the *Perseverance* is a fabrication.

2. Cadwaladr served for six months on the *Iris*. She was four months in the Caribbean, probably spending the bulk, if not all her time on St Vincent.

3. Cadwaladr served for two years and two months on the *Denmark Hill*, sailing to the Antipodes and back, four times between Hobart and Sydney, and once from Hobart to Rio and back.

At no point during Cadwaladr’s employment, or on any subsequent date, did the *Denmark Hill* sail to any of the other countries and major ports that Cadwaladr claimed to have visited. In other words, the *Denmark Hill* never sailed to Whampoa, Macao, Singapore, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, the Ganges, Ceylon, Siam, Canton, Malta, Constantinople, Greece, Alexandria, Cairo, Valparaiso or Lima.
5. Discussion and further research

5.1 The Crimea

Cadwaladr’s observations have some historical significance in the context of the military hospital at Balaclava. However, there is evidence that this ‘somewhat suspect source’ was influenced by the Charlotte Salisbury libel case. The ‘Autobiography’ contains text taken from Salisbury’s statement of defence.

One of the most quoted passages from the ‘Autobiography’ is the hostile conversation Cadwaladr had on Nightingale’s first visit to the diet kitchen, which she later reported to Lady Stratford de Redcliffe. However, Alexis Soyer, the French chef and expert on mass catering, reporting on the same visit says:

‘We left Miss Davis much pleased with Miss Nightingale’s kind remarks [...] very proud of having two days before, been visited and highly complimented by Lady Stratford de Redcliffe...’

Cadwaladr’s oral history should be reappraised for bias and weighed more appropriately against the observations of those who, like Florence Nightingale, kept contemporaneous notes.

5.2 Nursing

Few writers about Cadwaladr have made it clear that there is a fundamental difference between the contemporary meaning of ‘nurse’ and its early and mid-nineteenth century meaning, when it implied a menial occupation. The recommended textbook for O-level history in Wales implies that Cadwaladr trained as a nurse at Guy’s, when all that is claimed in the ‘Autobiography’ is that she worked there for ‘perhaps a year’ around 1850 – well before the nursing school was established in

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168 Helmstadter and Godden, Nursing before Nightingale: 1815-1899, p. 87.
1880. Beddoe suggests that Cadwaladr never had formal training, while Helmstadter and Godden make an unreferenced claim that she was ‘an experienced accident ward nurse from Guy’s Hospital’.

Cadwaladr’s account could have some value as it is the only written record made by a working-class woman at Balaclava, but research into her service at Guy’s is needed to establish whether she had the clinical experience necessary to make credible judgements about hospital nursing care.

5.3 Children’s literature

The implausibility of the ‘Autobiography’ was obvious in 1857, and yet it seems to have escaped full academic scrutiny, allowing ‘Betsy’ to develop into a cherished myth, making an iconic Welsh nurse out of a domestic servant who lived and worked virtually all her adult life outside Wales. How did this occur?

One possible mechanism is her early introduction into children’s literature, from 1950 and onwards.

The 1959 National Eisteddfod at Caernarfon offered a prize for a children’s version of the ‘Autobiography’, suitable for schoolchildren aged 11 to 13. Meirion Jones’s winning entry was published the following year in a bilingual version by Cardiff University Press. Although not intended

171 Guy’s Hospital School of Nursing was established in 1880: see [http://www.kingscollections.org/catalogues/kclca/collection/g/10gu75-1/]. [Accessed 29 May 2019].
173 Helmstadter and Godden, Nursing before Nightingale: 1815-1899, p. 88.
as a scholarly work, he revealed some new information about Cadwaladr’s childhood, and this children’s book is now cited by academic biographers.

Children’s books have developed ‘Betsi’ beyond the scrutiny of historians, adding further romantic elements. In the ‘Autobiography’, Cadwaladr melodramatically leaves Plas yn Dref by throwing a bundle of clothes out of a window and climbing out after it. Wikipedia has her ‘escaping’ using knotted sheets. This myth-building process has reached its zenith on the 100+ Welsh Women website which manages one historical inaccuracy for every eight words, suggesting that this ‘nurse’ and ‘author’

‘...worked internationally on cruise ships where she delivered babies, cared for the sick, and also performed one-woman Shakespeare plays...’

5.4 Sexuality

One of the consequences of the development of myth through children’s literature and school textbooks is that adult issues are left unexplored.

The historian R.T. Jenkins pointed out in 1959 that Cadwaladr ‘sedulously refused the adventure of matrimony’ — giving the impression of a ‘somewhat masculine woman’. It would be unwise to dismiss this remark as misogyny. It was made when sex between women was shameful, sex between men illegal, and allusions to homosexuality were coded. Jenkins was from Bala and was brought up by his grandparents who were contemporaries of Dafydd Cadwaladr’s children and grandchildren.

176 Established the date of death of Judith Cadwaladr, but omitted the facts that Judith Cadwaladr was buried under her maiden name of Judith Humphrey, and that a daughter, Anne David was buried the following day.
177 Including current entries in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Beddoe) and the Welsh Dictionary of National Biography (Tyson Roberts).
178 See image Appendix 9.5.
180 See image Appendix 9.6.
184 His grandfather was William Davies, coal merchant of Bala, born 14 June 1823, and baptised on 20 July 1823 by Simon Lloyd, clergyman, Dafydd Cadwaladr’s landlord and owner of Plas yn Dref where Betsi Cadwaladr lived from age 10-14 approx. Baptismal Record, Public Record Office, Reference RG4/4121.
In a scene recorded in Bala for the S4C programme ‘Mamwlad’ the rumour that Cadwaladr was ‘gay’ is mentioned in passing.\textsuperscript{185}

Throughout the ‘Autobiography’, Cadwaladr emphasises her physical strength. She was a tomboy, rejects innumerable suitors, runs away from planned marriages, rejects Bala for the big ports and has fun cross-dressing, even wearing false whiskers and ‘flirting with some young ladies’.\textsuperscript{186} In fiction, these episodes, along with the adjectives \textit{colourful}, \textit{interesting} and \textit{different}, would be recognised as nineteenth-century lesbian codes, often occurring in liminal spaces between classes and cultures.\textsuperscript{187}

Literature was one of the few ways same-sex attraction could be publicly expressed, even if it was often in a form that could only be understood by a small, knowing elite. Wales may be behind Sweden, where Karin Boye’s sexual relationship with Margot Hanel has been discussed openly since the early fifties, and in coded form before then,\textsuperscript{188} but the homosexuality of Cranogwen and other Welsh women writers is now also being discussed.\textsuperscript{189} \textsuperscript{190}

The emotional poverty of ‘Autobiography’ makes it, perhaps, difficult to explore Cadwaladr’s sexuality in any depth or to determine whether this self-portrayal of ‘masculinity’ is genuine or not. But it is, nevertheless, a legitimate area for historical and literary analysis.

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Mamwlad}, presented by Ffion Hague, S4C, (2016), 00:04:49 -> 00:05:02
\textsuperscript{189} Jane Aaron, ‘Gender Difference is Nothing. Cranogwen and Victorian Wales’ in \textit{Queer Wales}, Osborne, H. (ed.), Ch. 2, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2016), pp. 29-44.
6. Conclusion

The chapters of the ‘Autobiography’ dealing with Cadwaladr’s life at sea are bogus. They are a hybrid of autobiography, biography and novel, and a hybrid of truth, half-truth, exaggeration, embellishment, fabrication and omission. The reliability of the other chapters is in serious doubt, and no part of the ‘Autobiography’ should be used as a historical source without further research and corroboration by other, more reliable sources.

GCSSE history teaching in Wales encourages students to think critically and effectively through ‘a process of historical enquiry’. Betsi Cadwaladr’s life story is suggested as suitable material for study, and students are expected to develop an understanding of ‘the influence of Florence Nightingale and Betsi Cadwaladr on nursing from the mid-nineteenth century’. Yet, to accept an equivalence between the achievements of these two women requires the suspension of critical thinking.

If the ‘Autobiography’ has any place in a school curriculum, it is surely to illustrate how modern myths develop. Students could learn a great deal from it, not by uncritically accepting its content, but by critically analyzing who chose to believe it, and why.

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7. Primary source databases

Newspapers and Periodicals

**Gale Primary Sources** - Subscription service via Open University library.  

[https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000549597](https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000549597)

**Lloyds Register of British and Foreign Shipping Archive** - HATHI Trust Digital library. Open Access.  
[https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012313508](https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012313508)

**TROVE** - National Library of Australia. Open access.  

[https://journals.library.wales/](https://journals.library.wales/)

**Welsh Newspapers Online** - National Library of Wales. Open Access  
[https://newspapers.library.wales/](https://newspapers.library.wales/)

Other databases

**Deed books in Saint Vincent for the slavery era, 1763-1838** - British Library. Open Access  
[https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP688](https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP688)

**Find my Past** - Genealogy Site. Subscription service via Open University Library  
[https://www-findmypast-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/](https://www-findmypast-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/)

**The Florence Nightingale digitization Project** - Open Access.  

**Legacies of British Slave-ownership** - UCL Department of History. Open Access.  
[https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/)

**U.K. Parliamentary Papers** - Proquest. Subscription service via Open University Library  
[https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/profiles/hcpp/search/basic/hcppbasicsearch](https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/profiles/hcpp/search/basic/hcppbasicsearch)
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Evans, Robin, Merched y Môr: Hanes merched Cymru a’r môr, 1750 hyd heddiw, (Llanrwst: Gwas Carreg Gwalch, 2013)


Glasfrwdd, ‘Ymweliad a’r Bala’ *Y Lladmerydd*, Vol 8, No 95, November 1892, pp. 327-38. Available at: [https://journals.library.wales/view/2550540/2554175/16#?xywh=-650%2C240%2C3156%2C1884](https://journals.library.wales/view/2550540/2554175/16#?xywh=-650%2C240%2C3156%2C1884)


Jenkins, R. T., ‘Davi(e)s (neu Cadwaladr), Elizabeth (1789 - 1860)’, gweinyddes yn y Crimea. *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig*, (Llundain, Y Cymmrodorion, 1953).


Jones, Lewis (1880 [1835]) ‘Dafydd Cadwaladr’ *Y Traethodydd*, 1 July, pp. 261-76. Available at: https://journals.library.wales/view/2889046/2942626/0#?xywh=-1639%2C776%2C5456%2C3257


WJEC, ‘GCSE History Specification (For teaching from 2017 – WALES, Version 2, January 2019), Available at: [https://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/qualification-resources.html?subject=History&level=gcsefrom2017](https://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/qualification-resources.html?subject=History&level=gcsefrom2017)
9. Appendix

9.1 Draft letter from Florence Nightingale to unknown recipient, 4 Jun 1860

[Accessed 28 May 2019]

Mrs. Davis, (if the Nurse who came out in December 1854 & remained as cook to the General Hospital Balaclava till October 1855 when she went home at her own request) was an active, respectable, hard-working, kind-hearted old woman with a foul tongue & a cross temper.

She did a great deal of good service in cooking for the Hospital. And I would gladly have kept her; notwithstanding her mischief-making.

She was amply rewarded - had a year’s wages (over & above the other gratuities) paid her on leaving - as a gratuity.

After she returned home, she fell into bad hands, published a book in two Vols.; with a greater amount of lies than I could have conceived possible - about Lord Raglan’s esteem for herself, & against many innocent people. She did much harm in calumniating Nurses in the Crimea.

The whole of Miss Salisbury’s statement (in her own “defence”) was incorporated without her name, which made it very dangerous. I consider that Mrs. Davis’s excellent services were amply remunerated by the War Office & that she has less claim upon Mr. Sidney Herbert than any ordinary beggar.

Florence Nightingale
London June 4 1860
9.3 Communication from Cymdeithas Beti Cadwaladr (N.D)

CYMDEITHAS
BETI CADWALADR

Y Pryorllog Cenedlaethol.

Llwydd: Dr. EMYR WYN JONES, Lerpwl a Llansannan.


Is. Cadeirydd: MAIR MATHONWY HUGHES

Ysgriydd: Gwyneth Roberts, 14, Maes y Bronydd,

Y Bala. Ffôn: 537.

Trysorydd: Mr. HUMPHREY GRIFFITH, Brongarth,

Penrhyndeudraeth. Ffôn: 310.

Gwehebydd: MARGARET WYN EVANS, Aelybryn, Arthog.

AMCANION

1. I ffurfio Cymdeithas Gymraeg i nyrys.

2. I ddiogelu’r iaith Gymraeg yn ein perthynas a’ chleifion ym mhobman.

Croesawn aelodau o bob cenedl ac iaith ond Cymraeg yw iaith y Gymdeithas.

Mae’r Gymdeithas yn amholitiaidd ac anenwadol.
9.4 Image of baptismal record of Stanislaus Franciscus Salesius Orlando Sidney Smith at Our Lady of the Assumption & St Gregory in Warwick St, Soho, 28 September 1820. (Last entry on page).
9.5 1984 - Betsi heads for England like Dick Whittington:

*Image Removed for Copyright Reasons*

9.6 2019 - Betsi escapes from Bala down knotted sheets:

*Image Removed for Copyright Reasons*

Image Credit: Lyon & Turnbull Ltd, Artwork produced by Lleucu Williams (USW). Available at: [https://www.100welshwomen.wales/100-women/betsi_cadwaladr/](https://www.100welshwomen.wales/100-women/betsi_cadwaladr/).