

Welsh Writing in English: An Interview with Ned Thomas

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MODERN WALES IS enriched, and conflicted, by two literatures. Welsh literature, extending back to the sixth century A.D., was preeminent through the nineteenth century. But by the early decades of the twentieth century enough Welsh men and women were writing in English to give birth to a new literature. Complex and controversial issues accompanied this development, generating a continuing debate over the nature of Anglo-Welsh writing. These issues include the claim of some Welsh-language writers to represent the only authentic literature of Wales, the question of whether or not an extended literary tradition in English has existed in Wales, the absence (until recently) of a publishing apparatus for English-language writers, the rise of a Welsh nationalism committed to preserving the Welsh language, and the question of whether English-language literature in Wales can be distinguished from English literature proper. During 1990 and 1991 I conducted interviews with writers, editors, and publishers of Anglo-Welsh poetry and fiction to explore these and other issues relating to cultural and literary identity in Wales.¹ This interview with critic, editor, and scholar Ned Thomas took place on June 30, 1990, at his home in Llandre, near Aberystwyth in Wales. Ned Thomas is the author of *The Welsh Extremist*, an influential political and literary study of contemporary Wales. He is also, with Sara Eskine, a founding editor of *Planet*, an English-language Welsh literary and cultural magazine. He has taught in the English Department at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, since 1970; in 1991, he left *Planet* and his lectureship to become Director of the University of Wales Press.

When I began looking at Anglo-Welsh literature back in 1975, you advised me to read two articles in Planet by Tecwyn Lloyd, who asserts that the origins of Anglo-Welsh literature could be traced to the “traveller’s literature” coming from the English Romantic tradition. Do you still accept Tecwyn Lloyd’s thesis?

I think that Tecwyn Lloyd is probably one of the few people—perhaps the only person—who has done any research into the origins of Anglo-Welsh literature. I’m referring to the nineteenth century when I say “origins.” Whether he’s entirely right, nobody is in a position to say. But I think one of the strands of writing in English about Wales is that travellers’ literature. Remember the opening passage in Matthew Arnold’s *Lectures on Celtic Literature*? There he stands on the Great Orme at Llandudno and looks east towards Liverpool, and he sees industry, practical industry. He looks west and sees mists and mountains and Celtic magic. So you have a definition of Wales in those terms. At the time Arnold was writing, Merthyr Tydfil was a world centre of industry, but by his definition that wasn’t Wales, that was intrusive England. Yet it was probably more Welsh, if you care to define it linguistically—there were more Welsh speakers in Merthyr Tydfil than perhaps in the whole of Gwynedd.²

I see Romanticism as very two edged. On the one hand, the Romantic tradition leads to clichés of Wales, tourists’ perceptions: castles, sheep, druids. On the other hand, there was something nationalistic in the Romantic tradition that got transplanted in due course to Wales. Welsh men and women were perceived from outside in a Romantic light and found to be picturesque, but later that same tradition is transplanted into our culture (similar things have happened in many parts of the world), and then an identification with place and people and mystical experience can become a Welsh Romanticism. English Romanticism is the author of many of the clichéd perceptions of Wales which are then taken up, Tecwyn Lloyd argued—and I think rightly—by numbers of Welsh writers writing in English. But the other side of Romanticism is that it can be transplanted and become a powerful vehicle for national feeling.

The view you've described is at odds with the idea that Anglo-Welsh literature has origins extending back many centuries.

I don't have an ideological need to deny that thesis. But it doesn't seem to meet the facts to say there is an Anglo-Welsh tradition going back to the late Middle Ages. You can of course discover texts by Welsh people. John Donne had a Welsh grandfather, and Henry VIII's father came from Wales. But where do you stop? That isn't a tradition. It seems to me that these writers relate in their own time to English literature. Their connection to Wales is more or less strong in their lives, but it doesn't seem to me that you can construct credibly a tradition going all the way back. It probably began with the nineteenth-century travellers, and then you have Welsh people writing material that is not too unlike what the travellers wrote. As I say, Tecwyn Lloyd is the only person who has read all these novels—often by women—written in Wales but perhaps for consumption by the new rail travellers who came from England. I'm told they're often written by ladies of Swansea, but they're not set in Swansea. They're set up in the hills, so the English travellers who arrived by train in Swansea could find a book telling them about the wilder reaches, what goes on in "the Celtic areas."

How does this view of origins relate to the burst of Anglo-Welsh writing in the twentieth century?

In the 1930s and 1940s, of course, you have the school of Anglo-Welsh writing based in the valleys of south Wales,³ and that gets built on in a very curious way to the existing Anglo-Welsh tradition. On the one hand, some of the more political writers, like Lewis Jones, write self-consciously proletarian novels about strikes, conflict, and struggle. But the less politicized, or less consciously political practitioners, created a special brand of humour, a sort of black comedy—in Dylan Thomas or Gwyn Jones—that relies on anecdotal humour and on valleys' dialect but, I would want to note, valleys' dialect as dialogue, never as the language of narrative.

In The Welsh Extremist, you argue that Idris Davies faced this kind of dialect problem in his poetry.

By trying many styles—ballads, dialect poems, and so on—sometimes Idris Davies gets it right, sometimes he gets it terribly wrong. I'm reminded in prose of the Scottish writer, George Grassic Gibbon. He wrote a great trilogy of rural and urban life in the first part of the century in Scotland, the first of which is the best known, *Sunset Songs*. His characters speak Scots, but his narrative is also in Scots. It's not in a Scots you'd find difficult to understand—but there isn't that difference between the narrative and the dialogue. I mention this because it seems that if you present your own society, or people you *say* are your own society, as speaking a Welsh-inflected English dialogue but with a straight literary English narrative, then you're in a very difficult position. Even if you say, "I love these people" or "I love this place," you are in fact speaking not *their* language but the language, perhaps, of your audience. Then, of course, you have to look at the whole question of publishing and audience.

Would the audience for English writing in Wales have been largely outside Wales during the 1930s and 1940s?

I would guess that the novel reading public was not very well represented in the valleys about which these books were written. But I might be proved wrong if somebody came up with the evidence. The publisher exerts some influence, and I think this must be a problem. English publishers are sometimes seen as villains in this regard; I don't see it as deliberate malice so much as a problem inherent in the situation. If you are a publisher and you get a manuscript that claims to represent a society you're not terribly familiar with, you can't check up on it in the same way that you check up on something from the place where you live. So you are perhaps going to find it striking because of its exotic quality. The praise lavished on early Dylan Thomas by the reviewers is very like the praise now given to some Nigerian writers published in England. They are said to bring a new vitality to the language. They are praised not for being transparent but for being painted differently. Is that a good thing? It's not good for the individual writers. They make a name, but they may then have to live up to having this special exotic quality, rather than pursuing their interaction with their own societies.

Hasn't this issue been addressed in Wales through the creation of Welsh magazines and presses for English-language writing?

There had always been publishing in Wales, mainly in Welsh. I suppose it could be said that the establishment of the Welsh Arts Council as a separate body from the Arts Council of Great Britain made publishing in English within Wales more possible. It's argued that this change allowed authors like Harri Webb or John Tripp, who perhaps would not have appealed in London very much, to find an audience.⁴ Having said that, I have to say it's still a fairly limited audience. The only daily paper published in Wales is the *Western Mail*, with, I think, a circulation figure of seventy or eighty thousand, whereas the *Daily Mirror* or the popular London papers are selling many many times that in Wales. Having established that context, I would say that publishing within Wales is in some ways healthier in terms of not requiring its authors to be exotic but merely requiring that they have something to say that people want to hear and respond to. One still has to say that's within a very small section of the Welsh population, perhaps even a small section of those who read books, because people have to be already Welsh-identified in a very clear way to find their way to the English books published in Wales.

What are the differences you perceive between Welsh-language and English-language audiences?

No doubt in ten years I'll be an expert on where and to whom you sell books. Within the Welsh language the situation is precarious, but at least it's clear what the limitations are. The total possible audience is very limited for publications in Welsh. On the other hand, people who speak Welsh and read books, which of course isn't everybody, are in a fairly tight network. They probably turn on Radio Cymru⁵ and hear a review of a book. They will go to a Welsh bookstore and see that book, and there's a chance they will buy it. Those who don't speak Welsh are more likely to listen to Radio 4 or Radio 1 or Radio 2, from London, so they will never hear about Welsh books. They will go into a Smith's bookstore, and they might see *Planet* there, but it'll be one of 250 magazines and they've probably never heard of it, so they don't notice it. In theory there are half a million Welsh speakers and three million

English speakers (including most of those who speak Welsh). So there should be six times the audience, but all the evidence is that there isn't six times the audience, indeed there isn't sometimes half the audience for a book in English in Wales that there is for a book in Welsh.

Islwyn Ffowc Elis once wrote about his sense of feeling very close to his Welsh-speaking audience (156). There would seem to be a much larger gap between the English-language writers and their audience or potential audience than for the Welsh-language writers. And for Anglo-Welsh writers, there's also the problem that the potential audience of English speakers in Wales—the so-called “in-migrants”⁶—might well be ideologically opposed to the nationalist sympathies held by a number of Anglo-Welsh writers.

I think it would be wrong to assume that Welsh-language writers have an audience that entirely shares their nationalist sympathies. It is true that almost every Welsh-language writer in recent years has been a nationalist, but clearly the Welsh-speaking areas are mixed in their political allegiances. They may have nationalist MPs, but they're getting only twenty-five percent of the vote. So it cannot be the case that one hundred percent of the Welsh-speaking population is nationalist politically. Maybe the non-nationalists are the ones who don't read books, or maybe they are happy for their writers to be nationalist but not themselves. I think this might be a feature of Welsh-language culture—people think of Plaid Cymru⁷ as a cultural movement to a certain extent because of its early preoccupation with language. I remember that when we lived in the Welsh-speaking Tregaron area, people who were clearly not going to vote Plaid Cymru would give money because they thought it was a good cultural cause. More Welsh speakers are voting nationalist, but it's still not one hundred percent.

And in the English-speaking areas?

In English-speaking Wales you must be right. In the 1970s, the Harri Webbs and John Tripps were putting out more downright political messages than most Welsh-speaking writers, who were more oblique in their political messages. Their problem was not

so much that people read them and thought, "I don't want to have anything to do with that," but that people didn't read them. I think that as time goes on English-speaking Wales is more receptive to that kind of effort, but the writers don't believe in it any longer. Things have moved on. The problem now is to define Anglo-Welsh writing at all. A lot of its practitioners don't want the label "Anglo-Welsh." They don't want to bounce themselves off Welsh at all. The valleys tradition is dying—probably faster than the Welsh language even. So those elements of Welsh life which might have been claimed as idiosyncratically Welsh though not necessarily in the Welsh language—mining, the close communities of the valleys and so on—are fading. Of course, whether they were ever wholly Welsh traditions or only partly Welsh is a good question, but a lot of people did define "Welsh" as that. After the last closure, we heard that mining was down to 6,000 workers, and that's already out of date—it's probably under 4,000. More people are probably employed in the tourist industry in the west coast of Ceredigion than that. So how long can you go conjuring that valleys myth as to what Wales is? In fairness to people who are writing in south Wales now, they don't want to conjure that myth. But if you want to write in English yet latch on to the traditions of the Welsh language and somehow perpetuate them through new forms of English, how do you go about it?

In his article "The Anglo-Welsh Tradition," John Barnie has criticized Anglo-Welsh poetry that is loaded down with self-conscious signs of Welshness.

Saying, "Shall I use the word *hiraeth* in this English poem?" I think the younger generation has said, for God's sake let's stop doing that. They're right, although for an earlier generation—Roland Mathias and so on—it wasn't an affectation. It had to do with that experience of being brought up either in Welsh or close to Welsh and feeling it to be just outside one's reach but present in one's father or one's grandfather or somehow in the place names. It wasn't a trendy thing in that generation. It was a wish to establish in one's own poetry one's relation to and distance from something both strange and familiar. But by the time you have a

generation who have grown up in much more anglicized times and circumstances, then it is an affectation to write *cariad*.⁸

And you can choose to identify yourself linguistically. Gillian Clarke deliberately moved into Welsh-speaking Wales and learned Welsh.

She was not brought up in Welsh, but I think her father had Welsh so certain words, like *cariad*, had a very special resonance to her. You either have that or you don't. I don't see it as either a good or a bad thing in itself. I think in a certain period, a certain place, a certain personal history, it was necessary and expressive. But it also became an available style taken up by people who don't have those same strains and stresses.

When John Tripp was the literary editor of Planet from 1973-79, was there a particular kind of poem Planet was looking for? What kinds of poems are you looking for now?

In the *Planet* of the 1970s, I don't know that there was ever a spoken policy between John Tripp and myself or whether it was just an affinity, but we had a predisposition to what you might call socially-oriented poems. They didn't have to be political, but we were a bit hostile to those poems of individual angst we felt were everywhere else to be found. If your angst somehow connected to the closure of a steel works, it had a better chance of getting into *Planet*. I would admit to that, and I think it was just as noticeable when I was choosing poems before John Tripp came to be literary editor. In the revived *Planet*, I would say we are probably more eclectic. John Barnie, who is taking over full editorial responsibilities with Gwen Davies, is a poet himself, which I never claimed to be. In recent years it has been a joint decision about what finally goes in, but it's become more and more John's province, rightly I think. There is a wider spread of poems that goes in now. I don't attribute that entirely to the fact that John chooses them and not me; but it is also true that *Planet* is generally more eclectic and less ideological.

There seem to be a number of pressures on publishers, editors, and writers which help shape contemporary English writing in Wales. Is there pressure on young Anglo-Welsh writers to identify themselves as nationalists?

In the early and mid-1970s, you had the new Welsh Arts Council, supporting magazines, books, readings, bursaries for writers, in a period of growing national feeling, growing electoral victories by Plaid Cymru, and a growing Anglo-Welsh cultural scene. In that period, it did seem as if the cultural establishment was fairly nationalist. I don't think that is the case today. People like myself usually see themselves as holding the fort. But I don't see the arts scene as politically led in Wales today. At the same time, it's become more normal to think of Wales as a unit and particularly so in the Thatcher period because of the atmosphere of popular front. What *sort* of Wales, who would be running it, are questions that don't have to be asked because Labour party people and Nationalists all agree that it shouldn't be Mrs. Thatcher. But you wait until Mr. Kinnock gets there—the divides will open again: Is there to be a parliament in Wales? Will it be a glorified local government? There's disagreement within the Welsh Labour Party on these questions. These are not now pressing issues, but they will be.

*Is this trend away from political engagement reflected by the New Welsh Review?*⁹

The *New Welsh Review* has, I suppose, cast itself in an academic role. There might be, or there might have been, room for it had the academic institutions provided the right support. If every one of the students in English at Aberystwyth and the other colleges was *required* to do an Anglo-Welsh course, you'd have a lot of academics employed teaching it, and they would want to be publishing in the *New Welsh Review*. Then they would want to read what their colleagues were saying, and there would be room for that sort of magazine.

It seems to me that literature in Welsh—or in Irish—has good years and poor years, but it sort of goes on. It's different with literatures in English that are not English, or not sure if they're English. In a place like Canada there are moments of a big surge of saying, "we are Canadian, despite the fact that we write in English." That is a moment of nationalist assertion. Then for one reason or another that falls away. With a bit of luck, if you've established university courses, publishing houses—all the mate-

rial basis for culture—then those works will go on being read, and something which is not quite as strong a tradition as a language may emerge in which people are studying what is being written in English in that country for years. But whereas certain gains were made for the Welsh language in the higher education system, it's still pretty precarious to study Anglo-Welsh literature. Without institutional support, the minute things fall away, they risk falling away completely.

Why is there so little interaction among the Irish, Scots, and Welsh English-language magazines?

It depends on your own contacts and so on. I would say that *Planet* has had a steady trickle from Scotland and Ireland, not only literary pieces. And this is largely through contacts. Sara, my wife, who used to edit *Planet* with me during the first run, has connections with some of the Scottish and Scottish Gaelic poets we have published. And we sometimes go out of our way to make contacts in Ireland. But I don't see any special responsibility to the British Isles, or Celtic countries, if you want to put it that way, over anywhere else.

For the non-Welsh material in *Planet* I've always posited the criterion of relevance. It seems to me that Scotland is often more relevant to Wales in political than literary terms, because the linguistic situation is very different in Scotland. But there's no *particular* affinity, I think. Sometimes there's no affinity at all. We've had much more in *Planet* about Australia. John Barnie's got Australian contacts, that's one of the explanations, but the other one is that we do find someone like Les Murray relevant to our interest in new literatures in English. We've published African writing, an interest of mine, but again it's not an interest just by chance. And then we've had quite a lot about linguistic minorities, usually in Europe, though not always. Two very broad categories of relevance to *Planet* have been linguistic minorities in relation to the Welsh-language situation and new literatures in English in relation to Anglo-Welsh. Now if Scottish or Irish gets into one of those at some time, we would feel they should be there, but not specially more than anyone else.

You might find French Quebec more relevant to Wales?

Yes. Of course, ideology, I'm afraid, does come into it because where you choose your comparisons—Scotland or French Quebec—reveals where your preoccupations are within Wales. People making a Scottish connection a great deal—or even the Irish one—might be saying it is possible to write in English in Wales and be wholly Welsh, leaving the question of the Welsh language at one side. I would have to say that those comparisons are not good ones for Wales because Ireland has its independence. First get your independence, then it may be a different world. In the meantime the Quebec comparison reveals a great deal about our own linguistic situation.

NOTES

- 1 I wish to express my gratitude to the Research and Development Committee of Le Moyne College for the grant which allowed me to undertake this interview project.
- 2 A county in the north of Wales.
- 3 This school includes the novelists Gwyn Jones, Gwyn Thomas, and Jack Jones, and the poets Idris Davies and Glyn Jones.
- 4 In their poetry of the 1970s, Harri Webb and John Tripp were outspoken about their nationalist politics.
- 5 Part of the BBC radio network.
- 6 "In-migrants" is a term coined to refer to English people who move to Wales, often upon retirement, and often from urban areas.
- 7 The Welsh Nationalist political party.
- 8 *Hiraeth* means "longing"; *cariad* means "love" or "darling."
- 9 Founded in 1988, *The New Welsh Review* is one of three English-language Arts Council supported literary magazines in Wales; the other two are *Poetry Wales* and *Planet*. The Arts Council also supports magazines in the Welsh language.

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