

Welsh Nationalism and Cultural Identity

Tetsuya Taguchi

本論考は政治学と比較文化論の立場からウェールズのナショナリズムについて考察したものである。ナショナリズムを一般的に定義するのではなく、むしろナショナリズムがどのように形成されるのか、そのメカニズムを、ウェールズをケース・スタディーの対象に選んで分析したが、とりわけ冷戦後のヨーロッパの政治的状況の激変、今日のグローバリズムの先駆けであるイギリス帝国主義政策のイデオロギー的支柱となった「英国化」の本質、さらに言語と文化的アイデンティティーの関係の3つをウェールズという文化的磁場に集約させる形で議論を展開させている。

1. Introduction

"The average Englishman found himself better informed on Russian, American and Far Eastern politics than his nearest neighbours."

-- P. Berresford Ellis¹

"For all modern purposes, let us all as soon as possible be one people; let the Welshman speak English, and if he is an author, let him write English."

-- Matthew Arnold²

"One: I am a Welshman; two: I am a drunkard; three: I am a lover of the human race, especially of women."

-- Dylan Thomas³

"Welsh-speaking Welshmen thought of Anglo-Welsh writing as destructive of the Welsh way of life and, over a period of three decades, there is little doubt that they were right."

-- Roland Mathias⁴

We often come across the phrase 'England and Wales' in the British mass media, especially when they report some changes in institutions or services. The phrase seems to remind us that England and Wales have much in common in their systems. The conjunction 'and' employed there is definitely connective. On the other hand when we hear they say 'England and Ireland', or 'England and Scotland', the chances are ten to one the phrase implies either contrast or conflict between the two. But there exists a distinctive nationalist movement in Wales. How is it different from the other forms of nationalism in Britain? This was my initial question, to which I must give an answer in this essay. The question, however, has led me to another question. How can we relate today's Welsh nationalism to the world politics in the latter half of the twentieth century? It appears to be different from the nationalism in the Third World, but it must have something in common with the nationalism in the continent including ex-communist countries.

The discussion begins with the broad question of nationalism and then will be narrowed down to the question of the uniqueness of Welsh nationalism, especially in relation to language. The aim of this

¹ Ellis (1968), p.13.

² Coupland (1954), p.207.

³ Geoffrey Moore, 'Dylan Thomas', *Kenyon Review*, vol. xvii (Spring 1955), p.261, quoted by Ackerman (1979), p.1.

⁴ Roland Mathias, "Thin Spring and Tributary: Welshmen Writing in English", in Jones (1972),

essay is to examine and clarify the nature of Welsh nationalism in the post-Cold War era. While the analysis of Welsh nationalism inevitably leads to the problem of Anglicisation, a special attention will be paid to the Welsh language since it is the core of their cultural identity.

2. Nationalism

Wales is half the size of Estonia, but its population is twice as large as that of Estonia.⁵ Wales has, as Estonia does, its own history, tradition, culture, and among other things, its own language. It is natural that Estonian independence in 1991 stimulated Welsh nationalists.

It was the ideology that had bound the Baltic States to the former Soviet Union for half a century. But when Estonia was annexed to the Soviet Union, one of the most hideous political conspiracy was at work between the two powerful Estonian neighbours. In 1939 Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany signed a non-aggression pact which contained secret protocols giving the Baltic States to the Soviet Union. It was quite natural that Estonian nationalism rekindled in the late 1980s, when the communist ideology was declining.

Wales did not suffer from such a horrible humiliation that Estonia had last century. On the contrary it even rejected devolution when James Callaghan was in office, to the dismay of many pro-devolutionists, despite the fact that the Labour and Liberal parties as well as Plaid Cymru were officially in favour of devolution.⁶ Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that a considerable number of Welshmen and Welshwomen still feel alienated in the present polity. Welsh nationalism is not new. As it had been influenced by the continental nationalism in the past, nationalism in Wales in the 1990s is inseparable from the continental counterpart.

During the Cold War nationalism was limited, by

and large, to non-aligned countries of the Third World. The end of the Cold War has allowed long-suppressed nationalism to come to the surface. The phenomenon is not confined to the Soviet Union. Western Europe has also seen powerful nationalist movements in France, Spain and Britain. Linda Colley points out that "the re-emergence of Welsh, Scottish and indeed English nationalism which has been so marked in recent decades can be seen not just as the natural outcome of cultural diversity, but as a response to a broader loss of national, in the sense of British, identity."⁷

Welsh nationalism and especially the growing popularity of Plaid Cymru should, therefore, be understood in the global context, that is, in the light of disintegrating nation states. But in comparison with the collapsed Soviet Union, nation states in Western Europe have more elaborate built-in systems in their polities and more complicated historical background. What has bound Wales to Britain is less manifest and plausible than what tied Estonia to the Soviet Union. This is why the British were puzzled when the Free Wales Army made their first public appearance in green battle dress on October 22, 1963.⁸

Nationalism is a difficult term to define. When the term is loosely employed, it can mean anything and what is brought about in the end is sheer confusion. To make my point clear and to prevent any possible misunderstanding which may occur in the course of discussion, first of all, it is necessary to place the term in the due course of argument, rather than to define it. Otherwise we will be put into the endless digression.

Nationalism is not separatism. The latter is explicitly a political idea, often taking the form of political radicalism. Such movements as in Basque in Spain and Tamil in Sri Lanka are good examples. Nationalism is basically a political doctrine, but it is a doctrine which views the nation as the principal unit of political organization. Nationalism, then, presupposes the definite existence of nationhood in a particular

⁵ In 1991 Welsh population was approximately 2,886,400. The area is 20,761 square kilometers while Estonia has 1,583,000 people in 45,100 square kilometers. Five percent of the population of Great Britain live in Wales.

⁶ In 1978 a devolution bill for Wales passed its various stages and referendum took place the following year. However, the result was "243,048 voted for an assembly, 956,330 against" (Jones, 1984, p.271).

⁷ Colley (1992), pp.6-7.

⁸ Julian Caio Evans, a leader of F.W.A., once told reporters that "there were now 2,000 men in the F.W.A. To get a Welsh Republic may take them ten or twenty years, but what the I.R.A. achieved we will achieve." But Brendan Behan was reported to say that "Caio Evans was better at the blarney than I am" (Ellis, 1968, pp.139-141).

region which has been incorporated into a nation state for a considerable space of time. Likewise nationalism is not identical with chauvinism, which tends to be seen as the extreme form of nationalism. But while chauvinism is fundamentally emotional and more often than not emerges as personal sentiment, nationalism is collective and inseparable from cultural identity.

As I have argued above, re-emergence of nationalism in the Western European countries in the latter half of the twentieth century results from the disintegration of nation states. In the process of this disintegration, however, the political aspect of nationalism has been unduly emphasised. This is probably because the speed of political disintegration has been too rapid. Centralization is not a mere concept. The centralized government has its highly centralized institutions. Industry, commerce, finance, and education are equally centralized. National language, in particular, played an important role in achieving this centralization. It worked as a kind of infrastructure of the centralized systems. In this respect Welsh case is exceptional, for as we will see in the next section, most of the minority languages were destroyed by the central governments.

Another difficulty with nationalism is that its definition can never be satisfactory, because it is closely related to each region, each ethnic group, each cultural tradition, to name a few, so that any generalization is futile. In the nineteenth century, the rise of continental nationalism, especially in Hungary and Italy had awoken nationalism in Britain and Ireland, but each nationalism followed the different courses of development. When and how nationalism in a particular region is evoked is wholly up to the historical and political condition. For example, Wales and Scotland were not conscious of their situation until 'Gradstone's Irish Crusade' made the Welsh and the Scots begin to think that what seemed good for Ireland might be good for Wales and Scotland.⁹

The decline of ideology does not necessarily mean the victory of Western democracy as some optimists in the West thought. It is, to the great extent, the victory of international capitalism which easily transcends the political borders with the help of the highly developed

technology and the worldwide financial deregulation.¹⁰ It is not only the people in the ex-communist countries who began to see nation state as an illusion, for the same force that destroyed the communism is undermining the status quo of industrialized countries in the West. The basis of a nation state is the centralization of a nation, but as long as it remains national and only represents the interest of a group of national capitalists, it is doomed to be disintegrated by the more powerful multinationals. One can say that nationalism today will greatly benefit from the changing power structure on the global scale. My opinion is, however, that nationalism should be advocated as a vision opposed to the political idea that has created and maintained a nation state. It is even possible to find in it an alternative way of collective life which is relatively, if not absolutely, different from the market-oriented civilization. But before entering into the discussion of Welsh cultural identity, we must give a brief historic sketch of how Wales was incorporated into Britain. It will clarify the difficult situation Welsh nationalism faces today.

3. Anglicisation

Wales was politically united with England at Act of Union, 1535, and crowns of Scotland and England united in 1603. But it was after unsuccessful Jacobite rebellions that Britain emerged as the strongest nation, at home as Great Britain and abroad as British Empire. During the period of successive wars with the Catholic France, Wales and Scotland were merged with England, and Great Britain was established. Needless to say, history saw a series of conflicts before the union was firmly cemented, but politically Great Britain was a great success after all. The success can be attributed to the strength of the union itself which was only possible because of the existence of the strong rival in the continent. But at the same time there were three major factors which served as firm cements between England and Wales, and England and Scotland. They are religion, the establishment of 'British' ruling class, and finally industrialization. Now let us see how

⁹ Coupland (1954), p.222.

¹⁰ Political leaders in the West uniformly conceded deregulation. For the discussion of the dangerous prospect of this deregulation, see Healey (1991), pp.199-208.

these three factors worked in the Anglo-Welsh relation.

The first cement, Protestantism, may sound odd when we look back into the history of religious conflicts between England and Wales. Obviously Wales was the centre of Nonconformism, but the frequent wars against Catholic France made Protestantism the national spirit, which became the basis of British solidarity. Nonconformists were accepted as 'British' while Catholics were seen as 'Non-British.' Linda Colley writes:

From the late seventeenth century until 1829, British Catholics were not allowed to vote and were excluded from all state offices and from both houses of Parliament. For much of the eighteenth century they were subject to punitive taxation, forbidden to possess weapons and discriminated against in terms of education, property rights and freedom of worship. In other words, in law -- if not always in fact -- they were treated as *potential traitors*, as *un-British*. (Italics mine)¹¹

In contrast to Catholics who were thus wholly excluded from British social and political life, Welsh dissenters as well as Scottish Presbyterians were endowed with almost the same rights as the English enjoyed.

Secondly, England and Wales came to be interdependent because of what Colley terms as 'the making of the British ruling class.' It was not the Welsh but the Scottish who first penetrated the English establishment. According to Colley, again, between 1770 and 1790, "60 Scots were elected for seats outside their own country." And over the following thirty years, "over 130 Scots sat for seats south of the border."¹² Soon Welshmen followed Scotchmen. Wales supplied Britain with a number of renowned statesmen from Lloyd George to Aneurin Bevan, and indeed to Neil Kinnock, Monmouthshire man. Liberals dominated Welsh constituencies and later the Labour Party replaced them. As they built up their career, however, they were more concerned with Britain than Wales. In short they were British

statesmen rather than Welsh Statesmen. Lloyd George's transformation was most symbolic. As a young nationalist, Lloyd George made the following speech at the Commons:

Welsh Nationality has survived two thousand years in spite of every human effort to crush out its vitality.

The strongest governing forces in the world have successively attempted to crush it, to coax it, and even pray it out of existence: The Roman, the Saxon, the Dane, the Norman, and lastly the race which is a blend of all...

Still, after all, here we are . . . claiming the same measure of self government as our forefathers fought and died for.¹³

As he stepped up the ladder, however, he ceased to be radical. After he accepted office at the Board of Trade, the Home Rule programme was dropped from the Liberals' plan.

The strength of Britain was due to its incessant recruitment of the new ruling class from the periphery. It was extraordinary indeed, but industrialization was more striking because it affected the whole nation. Industrialization was to create the British working class which completely changed the nature of Wales. The division between the wealthy ruling class and the poor working class became decisive and even fatal for Wales. Partly because of its geographical position, and partly because of the cheapness of coals and labour, capital flowed into South Wales.¹⁴ Industrialisation was also destroying the agriculture of North Wales. Industrialised South and devastated North were thus divided. According to Coupland:

Year after year, the process of anglicisation had been steadily continuing in the great industrial belt. More and more Englishmen were settling there. More and more Welshmen, even in the mining valleys, were speaking English. Commercial and financial ties were being strengthened. Cardiff and Swansea were drawing

¹¹ Colley (1992), p.19.

¹² Colley (1992), pp.49-50.

¹³ Ellis (1968), p.76.

¹⁴ R. O. Roberts, 'The Development and Decline of the Non-ferrous Metal Smelting Industries in South Wales', in Minchinton (1969), pp.121-160.

still nearer to London.¹⁵

Consequently desire for Welsh self-government was apt to be weaker in South than in less industrialised, hence less anglicised North.

4. Language as Cultural Identity

As far as Anglicisation is concerned, Wales and Scotland have much in common, but at the same time they differed in many respects. Scotland has its own legal system and its own religious organization. Wales lost its legal system and its religious organization was modelled on the English one. Another significant difference between Wales and Scotland is that Wales does not have its own cultural and political centre equivalent to Edinburgh. For the Welsh upper and middle class, London has been more attractive than Cardiff. But what is really interesting and even astonishing difference is the fact that Wales still has a considerable Welsh speaking population.

Every modern nation state has its highly-centralized government and they are uniformly industrialized. There is no single exception. Industrialization urged urbanization, and urbanization deprives peripheries of their autonomy. In the process of industrialization conformity and uniformity are required in every conceivable institution. The reason is quite simple. Dissent and diversity are against the principle of capitalism. They reduce effectiveness. It is by no means accidental that inventions of state education, factory and hospital all coincide in the nineteenth century. State education promotes secularization and children are trained to work to the schedule set up by Board of Education which is controlled by the central government. Needless to say, this is an early preparation for factory work from nine to five. In school practical subjects including national language are replacing religion and classic. Children are discouraged to speak their own local language because in a factory one national language is enough for effective communication. Thus many minority languages are to be destroyed.

This is exactly what happened in the nineteenth-century Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. They had swept away the minority languages in order to

have a single national language which is one of the most important qualifications for a nation state. In case of Insular Celtic, statistics clearly shows the disastrous outcome. It is said that the last speaker of Cornish died around 1800. There are over a million people who speak Irish or Erse. Half a million still speak Breton. Wales has half a million Welsh-speaking people. Gaelic is most endangered. Today only eighty thousand speak this language.¹⁶ It is said that as late as the 1880s three out of four of the Welsh spoke their own language.¹⁷ Today this proportion is almost reversed.

But Wales did not lose its own language after all. This is astounding when we consider the nature of British imperialism, to which Wales itself contributed. British imperialism can be defined as commercial invasion with the head of the English language. Even in the subcontinent Maculay succeeded in spreading English at the expense of local languages.¹⁸ Coupland says that "As a rule, but not quite always, the best proof of the survival of a subject nationality is the preservation of its language."¹⁹ In this sense, however, Ireland should be as proud as Wales. Wales managed to preserve their language and it was a great achievement. But why must they emphasise it? The truth is that their language is the only vital element of their nationhood.

The rise of Welsh nationalism was much later than that of Ireland. It was in the late nineteenth century that Wales became aware of their nationalism, but even then their nationalism did not take the form of the continental nationalism such as one finds in Italy and Hungary. Ireland directly suffered from British imperialism while England had been less harsh to Wales since Henry Tudor. As we have seen in the last section, amalgamation with England had entirely robbed Wales of its cultural identity. Language was the last stronghold. At the time of Newport Rising (1839), "most of the upper and middle class were anglicised in speech and custom."²⁰ If Rebecca Riots (1842-44) had not happened, England would not have

¹⁶ Statistics are based on the articles in Crystal (1993).

¹⁷ Colley (1992), p.13.

¹⁸ Coupland (1993), p.190.

¹⁹ Coupland (1993), p.6.

²⁰ Coupland (1993), p.179.

¹⁵ Coupland (1954), pp.236-37.

sent its Commissioners to Wales, and would not have evoked Welsh nationalism. But the honest, but prejudiced English view of the Welsh language was published in the form of Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales in London, 1847. It says that Welsh is "a language of old-fashioned agriculture, of theology, and of simple rustic life, while all the world about him [a Welshman] is English."²¹

The vital issue was school education. If Welsh were banned at school, they would lose their language sooner or later. The Welsh fought back and won. Welsh now gained equal status with English in legal and administrative affairs. There is even a Welsh-language TV channel. Education, administrative institutions, and media are the most important channels of communication. It appears that Wales has obtained the fundamentals of cultural identity as far as their language is concerned. In 1962 Saunders Lewis argued in his BBC radio lecture that the Welsh language was more important than self government and direct action was required to preserve it.²² Direct action still continues and it is nothing wrong in itself. Phil Williams maintains that "I believe that in the future people will need to preserve their sense of belonging to a community small enough to recognize them as individual human beings; a distinctive language will be the sign of this identification."²³ Also Gwynfor Evans and Ioan Rhys write in *Celtic Nationalism* that "In a world so open to commercial influence, national identity is becoming a problem all over Western Europe."²⁴ As both of them insist, we are daily being reduced by commercial pressure to an anonymous homogeneity and it is increasingly difficult to maintain our cultural identity. Wales provides us with a good model of autonomous community. Nevertheless a question remains. How shall we place Anglo-Welsh writers in this context.

Roland Mathias makes a very important point when he says:

Thus writers-to-be like Glyn Jones, Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins, Idris Davies and Alun

Lewis grew up unversed in Welsh, in varying degrees and from attitudes by no means identical, but nevertheless very close to speakers of the language and within the culture which it had handed on. Out of this break and the sadness born of it came the specific quality of Anglo-Welshness which this generation of writers possessed. They knew, if only by the observation of the child, what Welshness was, and were capable either of exploiting it or, in the end, achieving a poignant evaluation of what they had lost.²⁵

An essay on Welsh cultural identity which is written in English is a sheer contradiction because it is obviously directed to English-speaking readers. I have been aware of the contradiction which many Anglo-Welsh writers must have shared. Although I am by no means ready to answer this difficult question, I believe it is vital to be conscious of this limitation. Dylan Thomas' parents spoke Welsh, but he did not. Language connects people, but it also separates them.

References

- Ackerman, J. (1979). *Welsh Dylan: Dylan Thomas' Life, Writing, and His Wales*. Cardiff: John Jones.
- Colley, L. (1992). *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Coupland, R. (1954). *Welsh and Scottish Nationalism: A Study*. London: Collins.
- Crystal, D. (Ed.) (1993). *Cambridge Encyclopedia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, O. D., Evans, G., Rhys, I. & MacDiarmid, H. (1968). *Celtic Nationalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ellis, B. (1968). *Wales — A Nation Again: The Nationalist Struggles for Freedom*. London: Tandem.
- Healey, D. (1991). *When Shrimps Learn to Whistle: Signposts for the Nineties*. London: Penguin.
- Jones, G. E. (1984). *Modern Wales: A Concise History c. 1485-1979*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, R. B. (Ed.) (1972). *Anatomy of Wales*. Peterston-super-Ely: Gwerin.

²¹ Jones (1984), p. 340.

²² Jones (1984), p. 268.

²³ Edwards et al. (1968), p.265.

²⁴ Edwards et al. (1968), p.259.

²⁵ Jones (1972), p.195.

Minchinton, W. E. (1969). *Industrial South Wales
1750-1914: Essays in Welsh Economic History*.
London: Frank Cass.