

WAKING THE DRAGON WITHIN:
EMPOWERING LOCAL LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

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When asked for a title for this paper, ‘Empowering Local Language Communities’ did not seem sufficient. The bards took hold and the phrase ‘Waking the Dragon Within’ was added – very Celtic, very Welsh. But metaphor has its uses. There is an old Welsh legend that relates the story of Gwrtheyrn (Vortigern, appeaser of the Saxons) trying to build himself a castle at Dinas Emrys in Eryri (Snowdonia). The builders strive all day to raise the castle ramparts, but to no avail. Each morning, all is set to ruin. A mysterious enigma! To cut a long story short, Gwrtheyrn calls on the wizard boy, Myrddin (Merlin), to solve the riddle. ‘Simple,’ he says, ‘under the rocks live two dragons, one red and one white. Every night they fly into the night sky and engage each other in mortal combat.’ What to do? Well, eventually the white, Saxon dragon is slain by the red dragon and Gwrtheyrn can build his fort on Dinas Emrys undisturbed. Thus is portrayed our on-going struggle with our linguistic and cultural neighbours. In the land of Welsh mists, hope springs eternal.

In this paper, I shall be somewhat parochial. I know little of the linguistic situation on Skye, or in Scotland in general for that matter. However, I do know of Wales and of the old principedom of Ceredigion on the West Wales coast. I will focus my comments on examples of practical projects and developments in Ceredigion in the hope that lessons and parallels can be drawn for Scotland’s own needs.

Ceredigion is a local authority area with a distinct identity that hails back to the ninth century, if not earlier. It has a population of around 72,000, around 12,000 of whom are university students at Aberystwyth and Lampeter. It is considered an integral part of the Welsh heartland, although, as we shall see, it faces certain challenges at present. It is mainly rural, proudly agricultural and naturally conservative. Aberystwyth is as cosmopolitan as it gets,

with the University, the National Library, Welsh Assembly Government regional offices and many HQs of other national institutions situated there. Other market towns are Cardigan, Lampeter, Llandysul, Tregaron and Aberaeron. Of the population as a whole, 52% deemed themselves to be Welsh speakers at the last Census.¹ In contrast, well over 80% of Ceredigion residents born in Wales deemed themselves to be Welsh speakers, which highlights one of the key issues in the area – the challenge of demographic mobility – for it is Ceredigion that has consistently borne the brunt of population change in Wales over recent decades.²

So, empowering local communities – what are we empowering ourselves against? Well, like all minority languages in the UK, we have a history of oppression. In Wales, two key points in history are often mooted to illustrate the fact that it is indeed a miracle that people still speak Welsh at all: the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1542, and, secondly, the Royal Commission on Education in Wales report of 1847. The former outlawed Welsh from all aspects of official and public life – merely as an administrative necessity, it was claimed. The latter attempted to ‘rid Wales of this sinister and evil language’³ through the introduction of an English-medium education system for a mainly monoglot, Welsh-speaking nation – Welsh being ‘the curse of Wales’, as described by a *Times* editorial of the day.⁴

The story of Welsh over the past 50 years or so is a story of how attempts have been made to rescue it from the consequences of such blatant attempts at oppression and deletion. From the first civil rights protests of the 1960s right up to the present day and the call for language rights to be enshrined in Welsh law, the achievements of language activists in Wales have been quite remarkable: new found official recognition and status, S4C, wide access to Welsh education etc. Recent bulwarks include the Welsh Language Act of 1993, the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales and the publication of *Iaith Pawb* (‘everybody’s language’), the national action plan for a bilingual Wales, in 2003.

Our vision is a bold one ... a truly bilingual Wales, by which we mean a country where people can choose to live their lives through the medium of either or both Welsh

and English, and where the presence of the two languages is a source of pride and strength to us all.⁵

So, that’s all right then, job done. I think not. Great things have been achieved, yes, but great things have yet to be done (see, for example, Merion Prys Jones’ paper on Welsh-medium education, this volume). The shadow of history still looms large and we are only just beginning to shake free of the fetters of cultural colonialism.

In the 21st century, Welsh has gained a new status: it has gained some prestige; it is reclaiming social domains, e.g. it is used habitually by the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and Presiding Officer in the Assembly chamber (and would-be Cabinet members have been scrambling over each other to learn the language). Welsh is no longer excluded publically. Nowadays, Welsh speakers are not often ridiculed; they are more often envied.

However, the shadow of the past lies deep, dark and bible-black on the Welsh psyche. It casts itself in traits that I see around me among my Welsh-speaking neighbours and acquaintances in Ceredigion: lack of confidence, lack of self-worth, diffidence, servility, unwillingness to use Welsh in formal or official contexts: ‘My Welsh isn’t good enough, Gareth.’ ‘We mustn’t be rude or uncivil, must we?’ ‘You’re too Welsh, boy *bach!*’

The Welsh psychologist and author, Dr Dilys Davies, has set out these attitudes in a more academic manner in her article in *Speaking the Invisible: culture, identity and psychiatry*.⁶ She writes of the consequences of cultural domination:

These themes, which are consequences of domination and form part of our cultural legacy in Wales, operate at an individual, interpersonal and group or national level:

- fatalism or docility;
- passivity;
- dependency;
- fear of risk taking;
- lack of responsibility or initiative;
- fear and mistrust;
- sense of inferiority.

That is the first, and probably the larger, of our white dragons. There are others though.

Ceredigion has a historically weak economy, heavily dependent on the public sector, agriculture and tourism. Around 30% of the workforce (40% of females, 20% of males) toil in the public sector: public administration, education or health. There has been little inward investment and there is no large-scale industry. There have been some local commercial successes, however, particularly within the food sector. Although it is said that West Walians are not entrepreneurial, 28% of the workforce is self-employed (compared to 17% in Carmarthen and 11% in Cardiff). Menter a Busnes, a Welsh medium enterprise agency based at Aberystwyth, has been fighting that myth for years. Although it is indeed ‘a lovely place to live’, career opportunities are scant. Hence our young people head south and east in search of lucre and ‘life’ – one dragon leading to the next.

As mentioned, demographic mobility, or immigration and out-migration, has been a prominent feature of Ceredigion’s sociology since the 1960s. In the past two Censuses, record net migration figures for the whole of the UK have been recorded for the area:

- between 1991–2001, net migration to Ceredigion was 19% (the total population increasing from 63,000 to 72,000);
- between 1991–2001, the number of Welsh speakers in Ceredigion fell from 59% to 52% of the total population;
- between 1991–2001, the number of communities in Wales, 70% or more of whose populations spoke Welsh, fell from 87% to 59% – there’s only one such community left in Ceredigion;
- by 2001, 20.7% of the 3–14 cohort of 1981 (17.7% of Welsh speakers and 21.4% of non-Welsh speakers) lived in England;
- however, the number of Welsh speakers in Ceredigion that were ‘born in Wales’ remained well over 80% of the total population.

New people bring new perspectives, of course, and old certainties are cast in a new light. Some years ago, I interviewed incomers from various places in England who had moved to Ceredigion and found work as youth workers in various projects within the county. I asked them what they had found to be different in Ceredigion:

‘You seem to know everybody, everywhere!’

‘Every time I pass the village hall, there always seems to be a practice on!’

‘Everybody turns out for funerals around here. At first I thought it must be someone important, then I realised that everyone in the village was important.’

Extensive family and neighbourhood networks, the ever-present performing arts as entertainment, education and expressive medium, along with traditional community cohesiveness are part of the cultural norm for Cardis, young and old. They provide, however, a novel experience to many from other cultures and traditions – if, indeed, they ever stumble across the indigenous networks and their related activities.

This cultural disconnection, however, goes deeper than individual experiences and perceptions. I would argue that there is a deep incongruity between how public services, in the broader sense, are conceived, planned and delivered by our public bodies and the historical and current living reality of Welsh-speaking society in West Wales. A few examples will suffice.

There is a lack of take-up of public services in Welsh. For instance, for Welsh Water, only 9% of customers use the Welsh language service; for BT, only 250 calls per day are made to Welsh directory enquiries; for British Gas, only 1% of customers use the Welsh language service.⁷ Not that I’m overly surprised: 600 years of ‘don’t even think about it!’ leaves its mark. The Welsh don’t do officialdom, not in Welsh at least.

Estyn Llaw (‘helping hand’) is a project that identified a wide gap between formal voluntary organisations that provide care, health and support services and the local indigenous population in Ceredigion and in other parts of West Wales. In short, it seems that such organisations were mainly being set up by incomers on behalf of incomers, while locals tended to depend on family, friends, neighbours and other traditional support networks. In fact, Welsh speakers in Ceredigion in general tend not to engage with the urban notion of volunteering, as it is commonly perceived by mainstream agencies.

Finally, an incongruity from the arts world. The arts have a large presence and even greater role in Welsh language cultural and social

life. Over many centuries, along with the chapels, they have provided the only public platform for Welsh. However, it is hardly ever art for art's sake – at a local level at least. If you offered someone a ticket to an event – a concert, play or *noson lawen* – the initial response would quite often not be ‘Who’s singing?’ but ‘What’s it in aid of?’ ‘What good cause are you raising money for?’ In other words, art with an overtly social objective. In the good old days of the Lottery – before the London Olympics raided the piggy bank – this created a quandary. Lottery money could not be given to support events that gave their monies away to other organisations, be they charities or not. Hence, a substantial part of Welsh cultural activity remained, as ever, unsupported by public funds, whilst new and innovative, unrooted, alien projects thrived.

So, what have we here? Not just a language community that mirrors and mimics its neighbour in all its digitised, technicolour, megabyte, sound-bite glory, but a distinct, historical culture with its own values, customs and practices, still there, still alive, still breathing: an invisible red dragon. So, how do we wake it?

The core values of traditional Ceredigion Welsh-speaking society are well portrayed in the Simon Davies memorial at Theatr Felin-fach. Simon Davies, a local landowner and farmer, provided land for three new developments at Felin-fach in the Aeron Valley: an agricultural college, a dairy factory and a theatre complex. His memorial exhibits tumbling books, the masks of comedy and tragedy, and a cascading milk churn, all set around the flame of truth and reason as befits this Unitarian-influenced area. The memorial symbolises the fact that the arts, education and economic life – and spiritual life at that – are all intertwined. You cannot separate one from the other. Any attempt at a silo approach to social issues is fool-hardy and doomed to failure.

I will now give a few examples of projects currently active in Ceredigion that attempt to meet some of the challenges thrown at us by contemporary white dragons. I will do so using the themes offered to us in Simon Davies’ memorial.

THE ARTS

Theatr Felin-fach

Firstly, I would draw your attention to Theatr Felin-fach itself, a com-

munity development dynamo, youth-work centre, language-planning initiative, radio studio, dance studio, resource centre and instigator of myriad proactive, community-led projects that masquerades as a fully-blown theatre.

The theatre’s roots are as a Theatre in Education. Established in the early 1970s, its community education and community development role has grown and grown. It is without a shadow of a doubt a major powerhouse in the revitalisation of Welsh-language communities and networks in central Ceredigion and its influence reaches further afield. Its secret is that it works alongside local people through a shared language and idiom and on the basis of cultural values that ring true to them, whilst at the same time facilitating processes that ask that particular audience to face up to contemporary social challenges and find creative solutions.

I would also draw your attention to other centres in other areas of Wales that serve in their different ways as local powerhouses for Welsh-language culture. For example, Ysgol y Preseli, Crymych, is a bilingual secondary school in Welsh-speaking North Pembrokeshire, which is home to a multitude of community-focused activities: youth clubs, evening classes, a community theatre, a twinning committee, a swimming pool, leisure centre, arts festival etc. So successful has the school engaged with the local Welsh-speaking population that other public services – police, fire and health – have been falling over each other to get a presence on site. Also, Y Galeri, Caernarfon, is an arts-based business centre that provides performing arts classes, community projects, a mainstream arts venue and a centre of excellence in Welsh music within Canolfan William Mathias (‘the William Mathias centre’).

Here are three different models, then: a community-education centre disguised as a rural theatre; a community-orientated secondary school; and a commercial arts centre in a relatively large market town. They are all run in Welsh, primarily, but not exclusively, for mainly Welsh-speaking audiences with a confident and inclusive ethos. They all have a different and interesting balance of the three main ingredients: arts, education and economy. Each example could sustain a lecture in its own right and I invite you to find out more about them – the respective responsible individuals would, I’m sure, be keen to assist. Bear in mind, however, that not all artistic establishments in

West Wales offer the same empathetic support for the indigenous culture. Some artistic, cultural and theatrical centres still attempt to enlighten the natives with their capitalised 'Arts, Culture and Theatre' – cultural colonialism lives on.

Y Ffwrwm

Again in the arts vein, I would draw attention to Y Ffwrwm (of which I am a founding member); a network of professional and voluntary, community-based arts animateurs that was formed partly in response to patronising parachutists dropping in now and again via public funding to bring art to the rural masses. In response, we started to ask questions of ourselves – What were we doing? Why were we doing it? How were we doing it? – and started to arrive at a common understanding, a methodology and an intellectualisation of our instinctive and emotional need to support the language through our localised, arts-based work. We arrived at this initial conclusion:

We would argue that there are four main underlying principles that we should bear in mind when undertaking work with our communities. That we should:

- respect people, as individuals and groups, recognising their unique experiences;
- instigate and encourage the participation of the whole community in every aspect of the work;
- recognise that our methodology is firmly rooted in educational processes and principles; and
- that we should always ensure that the work is relevant to the life of the community in terms of themes, content, media and expression.⁸

Our aims were artistic, yes, but also social, cultural and economic and should therefore:

- support a network of creative and entrepreneurial participants;
- develop self-aware communities;
- stimulate community engagement;
- facilitate personal and social empowerment;

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- open wider horizons regarding personal and social possibilities;
- open new avenues to release dormant potential;
- seek interesting and entertaining expression of a community's particular and universal experiences; and
- strengthen the Welsh-speaking community.⁹

Y Ffwrwm still operates as an ad hoc think-tank around these issues.

EDUCATION

Formal education

To combat the demographic challenges facing the county, the Ceredigion Education Authority has taken a bold step to bolster the position of Welsh as the main medium of school life and instruction in the area. The new Ceredigion schools language strategy places all schools on a continuum towards 80% Welsh-medium teaching:

The aim of this strategy is to develop our pupils' skills to enable them to use both Welsh and English fluently and with confidence. This will enable them to become full members of the bilingual society in which they live and will nurture pride in the language, heritage and culture of both Wales and Ceredigion.¹⁰

This is a sound base to start from. School reorganisation, however, provides further opportunities for stability and growth. For example, the establishment of Ysgol Bro Siôn Cwilt sees a £4 million investment in a rural, Welsh-speaking area, where, against the perceived wisdom and for the best part of a decade, three local schools have been campaigning to be closed in order to establish a new and significant footing for Welsh-medium community renewal. The energy generated as a result has sparked off other social developments: a local festival, a clogging group, a renewed interest in the youth movement, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, etc. The school is already becoming a hub or powerhouse that can give the Welsh-speaking community in the area a well-earned boost.

Informal education

To quote Euros Lewis, former Lecturer in Charge at Theatr Felin-fach and currently a freelance arts and education-based, language-planning consultant:

Education is about asking questions – as is theatre. For us, community theatre isn't about turning a local difficulty into entertainment. It is our responsibility to use drama as a weapon in the ongoing battle to uphold the community of which we are a part – asking questions of and seeking answers from the community itself.¹¹

This principle plays out in many other activities that form satellites around Theatr Felin-fach: Young Farmers' Clubs, Urdd groups, village drama companies, community councils etc.

This educational ethos of asking sometimes difficult and challenging questions has been the modus operandi of four local micro Pwerdai ('powerhouses'), for which groups of local animateurs – in this instance, leading lights in their own communities – came together in the four localities and started tackling the basic question of how Welsh-speaking communities and networks could develop an inclusive approach to in-migration without undermining the use of the language or local, indigenous cultural practices. The debates resulted in a range of confident and outward-looking responses: a celebration of local, unsung heroes, greater use of simultaneous translation, a story telling festival and a community fair. The Pwerdai project is on-going and well-supported by Ceredigion County Council, with funded posts in the offing.

ECONOMY

Dyffryn Aeron dairy industry

In 1988, in the aftermath of the decade's dairy crisis, workers and locals at Felin-fach protested against the closure of the milk factory in Aeron Valley. The cry was 'Bring us work! Bring it now!' In hindsight, it was the despondent cry of dependency.

When history repeated itself in 2007, the cry was 'Give us the factory, we'll find the work!' Gweithgor Dyffryn Aeron, a co-operative of mainly young, local people, recently acquired the site and currently has sufficient local business initiatives lined up to increase the number of employees at the site when they open for business in the autumn. Much of this new confidence stems from the processes instigated by the informal education and community-arts work of the theatre located next door.

Aberaeron

Down the Aeron valley lies Aberaeron, a picturesque Georgian harbour town that celebrated its bicentenary in 2007. Since the turn of the century, Aberaeron, always a genteel resort for retirees and the well-to-do, has seen something of a revival. This revival has been led by young Welsh-speaking, local entrepreneurs who have revamped the town's former, somewhat lacklustre, conservative image with a dynamic, imaginative, high-end, quality tourism that uses the Welsh language and identity in an upfront and confident manner.

The Harbourmaster Hotel (recently used as a location for an S4C drama serial) led the way, followed by Ji-binc's boutique, coffee shop and gallery. The knock-on effect has influenced other businesses – chip shops, craft shops, butchers and other hostelrys – and using Welsh in Aberaeron is suddenly prestigious, exotic, cool and a sign of affluence.

Aberaeron lies at the heart of Welsh Cob country, and, amongst many other high days and holidays during late summer, the first Sunday in August now sees multitudes drawn to the town's annual Festival of Welsh Ponies and Cobs. A few years ago, a number of local cob enthusiasts had been holidaying in a village in Portugal and were delighted to discover that the Portuguese villagers held a festival in praise and celebration of their own local breed of horse. It was a 'light-bulb moment': 'We can do that – in Aberaeron!' The rest is history, as they say, and the festival is a great success. Not only does it celebrate the roots of the Welsh Pony and Cob breed, but also highlights the Welsh language and culture in its thematic tableaux as well as in simple practical matters such as programmes and announcements. It serves as an example of cultural tourism at its best.

So, what have we learnt in Ceredigion about waking the dragon within? Some pointers are:

- the need to identify opportunities within the local cultural and social dynamic;
- the need to foster local language-planning skills and animateurs at a micro level within local networks;
- the need to empower individuals and groups through facilitating workshop activities and community-education techniques in order to identify needs and solutions;

- the need for basic language-planning training and mentoring at a local level;
- the need to create local powerhouses and dynamos that can undertake significant micro planning;
- the need to adopt a holistic and inclusive approach; and, possibly the most important,
- the need to foster confidence in one's own identity.

I will leave you with some wise words of Joshua Fishman's from his preface to Diarmuid Ó Néill's *Rebuilding the Celtic Languages*:

I have counselled the supporters of threatened languages all over the world not to place their 'trust in Princes', but to primarily undertake efforts that they can implement themselves, by their own sweat, tears and resources.¹²

Moreover,

[m]ost importantly of all I have cautioned that minorities cannot merely be miniaturized versions of the majorities that surround them, but must also be multilingual and multicultural carriers of a life-style that is distinctively and historically their own¹³.

Are the Welsh really fatalistic, docile, passive, dependent, risk-averse, lacking responsibility or initiative, fearful and inferior? I think not. In short, we wake the dragon when we re-learn how to be ourselves.

NOTES

- 1 Welsh Language Board 2005, 3.
- 2 Office of National Statistics 2005, T39.
- 3 *The Royal Commission on Education in Wales 1847*.
- 4 *The Times*, 8 September 1866.
- 5 Welsh Assembly Government 2003, 1.
- 6 Davies 2002, 24–47.
- 7 Dragon's Eye Survey 2008.
- 8 Ioan 2003, 10–14.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 14.

- 10 *Language Strategy* 2008, 1.
- 11 Lewis 2009.
- 12 Fishman 2005, 11.
- 13 *Loc. cit.*

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Harbourmaster Hotel, Aberaeron: <<http://www.harbour-master.com>>.

Galeri, Caernarfon: <<http://www.galericaernarfon.com>>.

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