

Notes from a small country¹

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1 Introduction

Tuatahi, tēnā koutou mō te tono ki au hei kai-kōrero mō tēnei hui. Rekareka au ki te hoki mai ki Aotearoa, he pū-mahara koakoa hoki āku o tēnei whenua. Anei aku mihi mai Cymru he whenua ataahua, ā, he maha hoki ngā hipi.

Tē nā koutou katoa.

Cyfarchion o Gymru! Mae'n bleser ac yn fraint imi fod nôl yma yn Seland Newydd.

First of all I'd like to thank you for your invitation to come and talk to you today. From Wales to Wellington is about as far as you can travel on earth without starting to come back, but this in one invitation I wouldn't have dreamed of refusing!

I should confess that this isn't my first time in New Zealand. My wife Carys and I visited our elder daughter, who spent a pre-university year in Blenheim six years ago, and in the early 1990s I was lucky enough to be offered a short job exchange with Auckland University Library; as part of that experience I visited almost all the university libraries in the country.

My intention is to say something about some issues of professional interest from Wales. And my hope is to show that the Welsh experience may be of more than incidental interest to a New Zealand audience. (I'm also confident that I'll take back to Wales plenty of New Zealand experience of relevance at home.) I'm not well informed enough about contemporary New Zealand to presume to draw parallels with any exactitude: I leave that to you, and to discussion after the talk. I'm going to be shameless in saying quite a lot about my own institution, and to help sugar the pill I've included three 'digressions' during the talk.

On the screen you'll see mainly pictures – I've kept text to a minimum and banished all bullets – to give you a glimpse of my own institution, the National Library of Wales – and other scenes from around Wales.

Finally, an apology to those of you who know Wales well – there are some of you here, I know – if I tell you nothing little that is new to you.

¹ Keynote address given on Monday 31 October 2011 in the Wellington Convention Centre.

2 Wales in brief

First, then, a thumbnail sketch of Wales the country. Incidentally, the *Encyclopedia of Wales* (2008) asserts that 'because of the obsession with rugby football, New Zealand is one of the few countries where everyone knows of Wales'. I'm not sure how much truth there is in that statement, but you'll be interested to know that I'll have precisely nothing further to say about rugby!

Wales is a small country, in territory – little more than 8,000 square miles – and in population: according to estimates we've just succeeded this year in reaching 3m inhabitants. Most of Wales is either mountainous or hilly, making land transport slow, and helping to insulate the country to some degree historically from outside influences except by sea. It is bordered on three sides by sea and on the fourth by England. Wales was a political entity only spasmodically until well after the Norman invasions of the 12th century, which prefigured an English domination that persisted until the end of last century. Although agriculture dominated the Welsh economy - we have almost as many sheep as you do - Wales was one of the first countries in the world to be industrialised, with coalmining, metalworking and slate quarrying employing large numbers of people in the south and north of the country. These industries and others drew in workers from rural Wales and from England and beyond. It was also one of the first countries to be de-industrialised, notably during the Thatcher years of the 1980s: almost nothing is now left of the coal industry, and only remnants remain of other heavy industries like steel-making. Employment today is dominated by the public sector, and by light industry and service industries. Most of Wales qualifies for special regional development funding from the European Union.

About 20% of people in Wales speak Welsh, a Celtic language derived from ancient Brythonic, and Welsh and English are the two official languages. Welsh is one of the few minority languages of which it can be said that the number of its speakers is increasing rather than declining, at least on paper, thanks in part to a determination to preserve it as a living medium in schools, the media and elsewhere.

Welsh people have a long tradition of reacting to domination and oppression, whether by absentee landlords, political overlords or industrial capitalists, and although the labour movement's greatest days are long gone, Wales still tends to be instinctively hostile to exclusively market-driven politics and policies. This has a particular relevance today, when the colours of the governments in London and Cardiff are very different.

This brings me to the most important single event in Wales during the last few decades, the people's decision in a referendum in 1997 in favour of devolving considerable political power from Westminster to a new National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff. For the first time since 1182 decisions on most areas of public policy could be taken by people directly elected by the people of Wales. Since 2000, when the Assembly began work, Wales has pursued policies that have travelled quite a long way from those in place in London (or, rather, London policies have changed, while Cardiff has retained existing policies). For example, the Assembly has deliberately avoided introducing competition and private enterprise into its health and

education systems. It gained further powers as a result of another referendum in March 2011 and it can now pass its own laws in devolved areas.

It's interesting that public support for the Assembly has risen almost every time it has been measured since 2000, and there are many who look towards it today for protection from, or at least alleviation of, the effects of coalition government austerity policies in London. In the longer term some, especially nationalists, would see a continued process of separation leading to a fully federal UK or even to separation, with Wales eventually following Scotland, which is due to have a referendum on independence within the next few years. But whatever view you take about the future it's undeniable that Wales is going through a period of what can only be described as 'nation building': gaining confidence as a country that is used to guiding its own ways forward rather than depending on the decisions of other people beyond its borders.

3 Libraries and beyond: the policy context

Among the policy fields over which the Assembly Government has jurisdiction are libraries, museums and archives, and indeed culture and education in general.

Not surprisingly Wales has diverged from England in these areas as in others. For example, whereas the coalition government in England has abolished MLA, the public body charged with strategy and policy development for libraries, archives and museums, the Welsh Government established, and continues to maintain, exactly such a body, called CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales. In fact CyMAL is an arm of the Government itself. Since 2003 it has performed three invaluable roles: advising the Minister on policy; providing support and grants for local museums, archives and libraries, and maintaining and developing standards and skills. It also acts as the Government's sponsor division for the National Museum and the National Library.

Most professionals, and the people they serve, would say that they have plenty to thank CyMAL for. Public libraries have been able to construct new buildings or upgrade existing ones. They've been given help with staff training and development and through a national scheme for advertising and marketing library services. CyMAL has encouraged the growth of cross-sectoral regional consortia of libraries, which have done much good work on public access and sharing resources. Whereas public library standards are no longer enforced in England, CyMAL has continued to monitor standards in Wales - something appreciated by professional librarians. It's also funded an all-Wales library catalogue, CatCymru, and, more radically, has financed a national scheme, also administered by the National Library, to give all Welsh citizens free online access to a range of reference works including newspapers and family history sources.

One of the chief limitations of CyMAL is that whereas it has the power to cajole, support and encourage, it has no jurisdiction over the management and core funding of public libraries and archives. These are the province of local authorities. Although they have escaped the severity of cuts suffered by many local libraries in England as part of public sector austerity under the coalition government, public libraries in Wales have seen a steady drain of resources, including professional staff,

over the last decade. It does not help that there as many as 22, rather small, local authorities in Wales, and attempts are now being made to encourage cross-border cooperation and joint operations.

Digression 1: The People's Collection

I mentioned that most of what CyMAL does concerns one of the three areas within its remit. But it also has the function of bringing archives, libraries and museums together in a common endeavour. The best example of this is the programme it funds directly known as the 'People's Collection'.

The 'People's Collection' is an online cultural showcase. It includes over 30,000 digitised or digital items from over 700 archives, libraries, museums and other collections around Wales. It grew out of an earlier, pioneering project, funded by the National Lottery, called 'Gathering the Jewels', which started as long ago as 1999. It is not just an institutional, top-down compendium, although to begin with it was populated by three national institutions, the National Library, the National Museum and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. Anyone can create and log on to their account and upload an object of interest to other people. You can put together your own scrapbook of digitised objects. You can create a geographical trail linking different objects, or follow an existing trail. And you can download an 'app' to help you track your trail on the ground.

The People's Collection is therefore a test-bed for innovation and public engagement as well as a traditional virtual collection. It will be interesting to see where it goes from here.

I shouldn't give the impression that all collaborative activity is the monopoly of CyMAL. Voluntary associations of professionals have also had a big effect on service provision. One group that has been especially successful is WHELP, the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum. It includes the librarians of all the university libraries in the country, and has led the way in such areas as reciprocal access, e-journal deals, institutional repositories, information literacy and digitisation.

4 Philosophies and cultures

I want next to consider some of the principles and cultural assumptions that underlie professional practice in Wales.

Perhaps the most basic principle is that libraries (and archives and museums) are public goods to which free and unhindered access should be guaranteed by the state. (When I wrote that sentence I realised that it would have seemed quite unremarkable 20 years ago: now it seems an almost revolutionary thing to say.) The Assembly Government was quick to abolish entrance charges to the National Museum, a relic of the previous Conservative government, and has consistently supported the idea that no one should be prevented by lack of means from taking advantage of what cultural institutions can offer.

The National Library has operated the same principle in the world of online information. Our default position is that we would prefer to deliver the digital

knowledge we have to our users for free and without restriction. So, we make a wide range of commercial electronic information resources available online to our registered readers. You can register for no charge and with little formality, and become a reader without ever setting foot in the building in Aberystwyth. Of course we can't always negotiate licences that permit the widest desirable access, but we always try to do our best.

The same applies to digital material we create ourselves. Unlike some other national libraries we insist that wherever possible digitised material is available freely on-line, without charge and without the need to register.

Digression 2: Digitisation

Digitisation we and other cultural institutions in Wales see as one of the most powerful ways of sharing our resources with a wider public.

I've already mentioned the People's Collection, an attempt to create a single virtual collection from the shelves of libraries, museums and archives scattered around Wales. The National Library, with the help and support of other bodies, has for over a decade been building its own digitisation programme. We made a conscious decision to use part of our government grant to guarantee a core level of activity and employ a permanent team of staff, and then to seek external funds, mainly but not exclusively public, for particular projects. This strategy has enabled us to build and maintain expertise, to transfer skills and staff from one project to the next, and to develop a coherent group of collections that appeal to a wide variety of people.

In recent years we've opened up a new front in digitisation, inspired by attempts by Google and others to embark on large-scale 'mass' digitisation. We've concentrated on the print publications of Wales, partly because of the massive added value to be gained for the user by the ability to search previously impenetrable texts, and we've developed an overall programme called the 'Theatre of Memory'. The aim of the Theatre of Memory is nothing less than to make available online the digitised texts of the entire corpus of the printed publications of Wales, insofar as the laws of copyright allow. We began with an ambitious project to digitise the contents of fifty 20th century periodicals: ambitious because we set ourselves the task of gaining permission from the copyright holders in each case. Now we're two thirds of the way through a bigger project, also part of the Theatre of Memory, to digitise Welsh newspapers and periodicals up to 1910. And so we hope to proceed in future – attracting new funds where we can, keeping control over what we create and how we create it -but allowing liberal use and reuse of everything for non-commercial purposes. We are determined to build what will be a kind of universal alternative national library, unbound to a building in the centre of Wales that people often regard as (geographically) remote and inaccessible. It's interesting to follow how some other national libraries are pursuing a similar aim; even in the United States there is now a movement to create a Digital Public Library of America.

One of the outcomes of the Theatre of Memory will be the largest online corpus to date of material in the Welsh language. This brings me to another of the key principles of contemporary Wales: that the Welsh language is a precious and unique resource, one that is supported by most people living in Wales, whether they speak it

or not, and one that needs to be protected and developed, by the law, by institutions in their policies and by everyone in their day to day lives.

Libraries, of course, have an important part to play in enabling people to use and develop the language. It was a distinguished public librarian, Alun Edwards, who was in large part responsible for establishing the Welsh Books Council in 1961 to promote interest in Welsh language books, especially through supporting publishers. In the course of their work public libraries encourage the reading of Welsh books, of course. And the National Library, like others, has for long been a paradigm of how to 'normalise' the language, not be privileging it or making it special, but by treating Welsh and English on a completely equal basis, especially in all our public-facing services (Welsh, incidentally, is the main internal language of the Library).

I said that Wales retains a strong commitment to the collective rather than market-driven provision of public services. That commitment parallels a concern with social justice, even though arguably the Government lacks many of the crucial economic tools need to make a big difference to the distribution of social and economic power. Libraries, archives and museums are often reminded of the wider social and economic roles they play, as opposed to the purely cultural or educational roles.

National institutions are maybe in a more difficult position to respond to such calls than those rooted in local communities, but the National Library has a wholly-owned company called Culturenet Cymru which has a remit to help local people and organisations to develop by using digital means of collecting and sharing their memories and histories. One of Culturenet's most interesting projects was Community Archives Wales, working with community groups in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country to create their own digital archives. The National Library and public libraries have played a leading part in the Welsh Government's Digital Inclusion framework and action plan, and indeed in the umbrella strategy, 'Digital Wales'. The fact that internet access is free in all Welsh public libraries is significant for digital inclusion, as is the interest in information and digital literacy, a movement that arose in Welsh higher education libraries but which is now beginning to break out of libraries into educational circles.

The National Library has never been an elitist body, but we have made a determined effort in the last decade to open the building up to everyone, not just researchers and students – especially by developing a large visitor centre – and by putting ever greater emphasis on universal online access and content. If you'd been outside our building on 15 July this year you'd have seen striking visual evidence of the Library's public appeal: a human chain, or 'cwtch', of over 400 people encircling the building in celebration of the building's 100th birthday.

If the market is not going to be relied on to increase efficiency and promote good standards, then cooperation and joint working, according to the Welsh Government, must do the job. Local bodies like local authorities and health boards are coming under serious pressure to join together to share services and reduce operating costs, especially at a time of decline overall resources. Public libraries are not immune, and the existing regional cooperative groups are beginning to harden into more permanent or all-Wales arrangements. Increasingly, professional as well as geographical boundaries are being questioned. I mentioned that CyMAL is

responsible for promoting synergies between the three domains it is responsible for, libraries, archives and museums. Already managerial responsibility of two or all three, and more, is becoming concentrated on a single director.

Digression 3: The hybrid National Library of Wales

In a sense, this is nothing new. Ever since its foundation in 1907 the National Library of Wales has been much more than a library. As well as housing the best collection of Wales in print and being one of the UK's five legal deposit libraries, it acts as the *de facto* national archive of Wales (only official government archives go to the National Archives in London, previously the Public Record Office). It collects graphic works in large numbers, including paintings, and is in effect the nation's second biggest art collection after the National Museum. And it's the home to the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, which collects all kinds of audiovisual material, including broadcast archives.

I don't know of any other national library with so many facets to its work. In a sense this results from poverty: what in most countries would be the responsibility of several separate institutions are in Wales gathered in just two twin bodies, the National Museum and the National Library.

There are big advantages. Administrative divisions between institutions are of little concern to their users, who simply want to find whatever they're interested in irrespective of medium. Someone, say, researching the work of the 20th century poet and artist David Jones is likely to be delighted to find that in the National Library they will be able to find, in a single building, Jones's paintings, drawings and other graphic works, the manuscripts of his poems and essays, his library of books, films and television programmes about him, and much else besides. We have put a lot of effort during the last 12 years into making it easier for our users by breaking down the barriers between books, archives and other media: by introducing a single multi-media catalogue and multi-purpose reading rooms.

There are other advantages. Education, exhibition, digitisation and conservation programmes are all enriched by the variety of mediums they can include. What's more, working in the National Library, alongside people from, we calculate, about 30 different professions and specialisms, can be a very stimulating experience.

5 The future

I'd like to end by identifying some of the major issues that are likely to face us in the future, especially, again, from a Wales perspective.

Along with the British Library and the National Library of Scotland we published a report last year entitled '2020: a long view of the National Library of Wales'. We tried to identify the main factors likely to operate on our environment over the ten years, and suggest how the Library might develop.

Here are some of the issues we found and conclusions we reached:

- Online collections and online use will clearly both increase, bringing both new opportunities and new threats. Digitisation will open up still more of our specialist collections to a global public, and the challenge will be to fund it without restricting access or losing ownership of the material. We'll need to venture into areas little explored so far, like sound and moving image, and tread more boldly in the jungles of in-copyright material, for example with orphan works. (The Westminster Government is at last showing signs of taking a more enlightened attitude to orphan works and copyright in general.)

Much less certain is the role of libraries in the dissemination of current digital publications when intermediaries may not be needed. E-books, now at last taking off, may have little use for libraries. The interactive library is still in its infancy, but will soon grow to maturity. Social networking and crowd-sourcing initiatives, experimental procedures up to now, will develop into new areas that will bring the library and its online users much closer.

- What about the physical library? A dystopian Welsh-language novel published in 2009, *Y Llyfrgell* (not yet published in English translation), painted a picture of the National Library of Wales, also in 2020, as a place where readers were only allowed to read e-books, while the staff relegated the musty yellowing volumes of real books to corners of the building where they literally melted away (meanwhile sex and violence ran riot in other parts of the building). The truth may be less apocalyptic: the book as physical objects – or at least some of them - may perversely become more attractive to the visitor as they become rarer; the library as location has already begun to mutate into different life-forms: academic libraries are becoming noisy centres for group discussion and collaboration, public libraries are becoming local cultural centres, the focus for community groups and artistic events. The National Library of Wales now has a thriving programme of cultural events, exhibitions, conferences and educational activities that account for at least half its physical use.
- One of the great challenges – and here public memory institutions will have a monopoly of interest – will be an old favourite reborn: preservation. Electronic legal deposit, for which we in the UK have been waiting for an unconscionable time, will be added to our duties, and the collection and storing of electronic archives will keep us busy for decades. The National Library has been experimenting with working with living authors to ensure their digital archives are transferred to us and preserved.
- It seems that European countries are likely to face a prolonged period of economic austerity. Life will be tough for libraries and archives, and we'll need to learn to scrounge, beg and borrow to supplement our meagre public income. What we'll also need to do, though, is to keep our heads high and our eyes alert to new developments. In the National Library we've recently, with the aid of external funds, appointed to a Chair in Digital Collections, which we believe to be the first of its kind in the world. Part of its role will be to help us innovate and keep moving forward, rather than simply retrenching and consolidating.

If one of the themes of Welsh Government is cooperation and innovation in public services, a theme reinforced by shrinking budgets, then libraries of all kinds,

including the National Library, will need to extend their existing collaborative initiatives into new, more ambitious areas. Already some public libraries are well advanced towards structural mergers and joint plans, and there is a movement towards developing a single, shared, maybe cloud-based automated library management system for all public and possibly all academic libraries in Wales.

All of us need to think creatively about new ways of remaining relevant and important to people's lives. And speaking of creativity, one of the things we can do is to promote creativity in our users. Something I'm most proud of in my time in the National Library of Wales is the establishment of an artist in residence programme as part of our education service. We're now working with our third artist, with more to follow, and it's exhilarating to watch them and the young children they work with among the collections as they create brand new works and expand their imaginations.

And perhaps that is a suitably uplifting note on which to end. I hope that at least some of what I've reported from our Welsh experiences resonates with you here in New Zealand, and maybe that I'll have sparked some new ideas among you. Thank you for the opportunity to join you this week.