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Marion Löffler, ed., *Welsh Responses to the French Revolution: Press and Public Discourse 1789-1802*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012. xx + 332 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7083-2489-9.

Review by Chris Evans, University of South Wales.

There were few parts of the world that were not affected by the French Revolution. It is a truism to say so. But is the reaction of every last part of the globe to the events in France worth registering? Why, in particular, should the Welsh response be important? Wales, after all, was a poor and politically insignificant place at the end of the eighteenth century. Its rain-soaked mountains sustained a threadbare agriculture and a correspondingly meager population. Its inhabitants were dismissed as uncouth by their English neighbors or derided as simpletons. There was little to mark Wales out. As an administrative unit Wales simply didn't exist. Its twelve counties had been assimilated into England in the sixteenth century. Unlike Scotland, Wales had no distinct institutional presence. Scotland had its own national church, its own legal system and its own universities. Wales had none.

Culturally, on the other hand, Wales was a singular place. The Welsh language was spoken far more extensively than English, literary practices departed sharply from English forms, and growing numbers of Welsh men and women refused to worship in the established Anglican Church, preferring more militant or theologically heterodox forms of Protestantism. These singularities inflected Welsh views of the French Revolution in critical ways and make the Welsh reception of news from Paris of more than local interest.

This volume is a selection of documents from the periodical press that served Wales in the revolutionary era. It is part of an ambitious publishing program on "Wales and the French Revolution," sponsored by the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. Volumes covering Welsh-language poetry and popular ballads have already appeared, and volumes on English-language poetry and on political pamphlets and sermons are still to come. Sampling the Welsh press is problematic, however, since there was effectively no such thing. No newspaper was published in Wales before the nineteenth century. Welsh readers were reliant on weekly news sheets from over the border: the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, the *Hereford Journal* and the *Chester Chronicle*. These English journals circulated widely in Wales, covered Welsh news, and occasionally carried items in the Welsh language. No Welsh-based newspaper was to appear until *The Cambrian* began publication in Swansea in 1804. Welsh periodicals fared little better. The *Cylch-grawen Cymraeg* came and went within a year, and only five issues ever appeared. Another radical magazine, *Y Drysorfa Gymmysgedig*, folded after three numbers. That these pioneering political ventures proved ephemeral did not mean there was no Welsh reading public. Literacy levels had risen sharply in the eighteenth century thanks to the vitality of charity schools, and the volume of printed material (almanacs, devotional works, educational primers, and the like) rose in tandem. But the size of the Welsh population, diminutive and thinly spread, restricted the market for publications that were dedicated to political and social controversy.

The 1790s were years of hunger and social crisis, a situation faithfully reflected in the news reports extracted here. Food riots and popular tumults were endemic, and during the harvest failures of 1794-95 and 1799-1800, they became epidemic. Economic dislocation and rapid industrial change added to the uncertainty of the age. Yet, the landed elite was able to shore up its authority with

remarkable success. In Wales as in England, loyalty to the Hanoverian regime and an embedded sense of constitutional liberty was widespread. Pre-revolutionary France had been reviled for its despotic monarchy and its Catholicism. In changed times, revolutionary France was abhorred for its irreligion and for voiding all proper authority. “Jacobinism,” a correspondent of the *Hereford Journal* explained in 1799, “...must be understood to signify a very complex idea, combined of *Atheism, Immorality, Anarchy, and Rapine*” (p. 102). British liberty, loyalists proclaimed, was to be preferred to French license.

But was “British liberty” Welsh liberty? The established narrative of British constitutional freedom looked to the rejection of papal authority at the Reformation and the overthrow of Stuart absolutism in the seventeenth century as key events. Wales played no prominent part in either of them. Wales had even less of a role in the more libertarian national pedigree urged by eighteenth-century radicals. Oppositional Englishmen saw British liberty as having its roots far deeper in the past. They identified Anglo-Saxon England as a sort of primitive democracy, whose halcyon existence came to a close with the Norman Conquest of 1066 (a “French bastard landing with an armed banditti” in the crisp summary of Tom Paine). From this perspective, British history was not a triumphal tale in which royal power was placed within limits (but monarchy itself preserved). It was rather a long and yet-to-be completed struggle to regain the freedoms once enjoyed by Anglo-Saxon forebears.[1] The Welsh were distanced from this vital oppositional trope (although this is rather glided over by the editor of the volume under review) by virtue of having no Anglo-Saxon heritage. They were the descendants, so it was assumed, of Britain’s aboriginal people, most of whom had been displaced in the Germanic invasions of the post-Roman period. It was in Wales that “our valiant ancestors, the Ancient Britons” (p. 21) had established their last redoubt. This view of Welsh history, much strengthened by antiquarian patriots of the eighteenth century, which identified the Welsh as the last indomitable remnant of an ancient British race, lent itself readily to loyalism in the 1790s. Resistance to foreign aggression was natural to the Welsh, so a writer in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* argued in 1798. That spirit should now be summoned against “the insidious and perfidious Gauls” (p. 122).

Other features of the Welsh cultural landscape pointed in a different direction. The growth of Protestant Dissent nurtured bitter hostility to the established order in Church and State. Dissenters, who were denied political rights and yet taxed to support the Anglican Establishment, clamored for change. *Y Drysorfa Gymmysgedig*, which was edited by the firebrand Unitarian minister Tomos Glyn Cothi (Thomas Evans, 1764-1833) was blunt about the need for freedom of conscience: “The majority of the churches founded by human establishment are the cause of debility, ignorance and hypocrisy in their adherents, and hindrances to the finest faculties of the mind, enslaving them under priestly authority and foolishness” (p. 244). The French Revolution was to be welcomed as a harbinger of reform beyond France’s borders. Some went further and interpreted the overthrow of the French monarchy as a portent of millennial change. Morgan John Rhys (1760-1804), Baptist minister and ardent democrat, went furthest in this regard. The French Revolution was a blow against the Babylonian oppression of the Catholic Church and the prelude to still more dramatic events. Eager to expedite God’s purpose, Rhys landed at Calais in August 1791 to “preach the law of liberty” (p. 29). A tour through northern France and on into Brittany followed. These missions achieved little, but Rhys’s enthusiasm was undimmed. He pored over every fresh news report, seeking to align the political upheavals sweeping Europe with the biblical prophecies contained in the Revelation of St John and the Book of Daniel.

Morgan John Rhys, anxious that the monoglot Welsh should be redeemed from their political ignorance, prepared a program of political education for his benighted compatriots. “The Welsh have not seen many books in the Welsh language in this recent age apart from religious books, therefore the words and books which treat natural sciences and laws are more unfamiliar to them” (p. 199), he announced: hence the publication of the *Cylch-grawon Cymmraeg* (“The Welsh Magazine or Treasury of Knowledge”), which inter alia coined Welsh expressions for “democrat,” “republican,” and “national convention.” The first number appeared in February 1793, the very month in which the French Republic declared war on Britain. It was not an auspicious moment to launch a periodical with such poorly disguised subversive intent, and it lasted little more than a year. Its editor looked

instead to another of his enthusiasms, America. Morgan John Rhys was not alone in this. Radical activists delighted in drawing unflattering comparisons between monarchical Britain and republican America. “*America* is now an example for Britain,” wrote an anonymous correspondent in *Y Geirgrawn* in 1796. “Is it not through the foolishness of our *Governors* that we lost America? And after that a Government was established there through Justice, it was defended by Liberty and all the oppressive thunder of Britain could not shatter it” (p. 272).

Morgan John Rhys immigrated to the United States in August 1794. In part, he was escaping an increasingly oppressive political scene in Britain. He encouraged others to do the same and established a non-sectarian community in Pennsylvania that would, he hoped, serve as a nucleus for a new Welsh homeland. In part too, Rhys was inspired by the then-current notion that the Welsh had been present in North America for many centuries. Cultural nationalists in eighteenth-century Wales were bewitched by the legend of Madoc, the Welsh prince who had reputedly sailed across the Atlantic in the twelfth century.[2] The descendants of Madoc’s expeditionary force were said to live on as the Mandans, a Welsh-speaking Indian tribe that hunted along the headwaters of the Missouri. Morgan John Rhys had hoped that the *Cylch-grawn Cynmraeg* would, among other things, raise money for the conversion of the Mandans. In this, as in so much else, he was to be disappointed. A young Welsh zealot, John Evans, travelled into the wilderness in search of the Mandans in 1795 as part of a Spanish-sponsored anticipation of Lewis and Clark’s ‘Corps of Discovery’ of 1804. The outcome was tragic and inevitable: “there is no such people as the Welsh Indians,” the ailing and demoralized explorer admitted in 1797, on the eve of his death.[3]

These strange political and cultural gyrations (and much else besides) are covered in *Welsh Responses to the French Revolution*. If there is nothing startlingly new here for the Welsh reader, this is nonetheless a volume that can be applauded for reproducing so generous a selection of the periodical literature of the time. Loyalist poetry may not always be entrancing, but having so much of it available in English translation allows for a valid comparative study of Wales alongside other parts of the Hiberno-British Isles in the revolutionary era. Having the scorching polemics of the London-Welsh republican activist Jac Glan-y-gors (John Jones, 1766-1821) rendered into English is an undoubted boon. Indeed, it opens the way for a valuable editorial discussion of translating between different political cultures. The Welsh rendition of the Marseillaise that appeared in *Y Geirgrawn* in 1796 was partly a translation of the abbreviated English version that had already appeared in the radical paper *Pig’s Meat*—a version that had been adapted to comment on domestic grievances like the window tax. *Y Geirgrawn’s* “*Cân Rhyddid*” (Song of Liberty) departed in turn from the *Pig’s Meat* translation and the French original to emphasize the universal values of the Revolution rather than its specifically French coordinates. The *enfants de la patrie* who had become the “sons of France” in English appeared as the “sons of Liberty” in Welsh.

Welsh (and English) writers were conscious, in other words, of the tension between the Revolution as a global event and those revolutionary episodes that were peculiar to France. Perhaps not enough of that comes to the fore in *Welsh Responses to the French Revolution*. Indeed, the Revolution is treated editorially as an off-stage event, a presence to which Welsh actors responded. Yet, that is to treat the Revolution as a single, unitary thing. The reality of the Revolution as a plural phenomenon, varying enormously over time and space, and one that demanded shifting responses, is not acknowledged.

NOTES

[1] Christopher Hill, “The Norman Yoke,” in *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in the Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), pp. 46-111, provides the classic exploration of this belief.

[2] G.A. Williams, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979)

[3] Hywel Meilyr Davies, 'Evans, John Thomas (*bap.* 1770, *d.* 1798)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/41228>, accessed 31 July 2013].

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