

## Introduction: The Centre and its Medieval Projects

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The establishment of a Centre for Welsh and Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth, similar to the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, the Institute of Cornish Studies in Cornwall, the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh and the Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique in Brest, was the realisation of the dream of five eminent Welsh scholars, namely Thomas Jones, G. J. Williams, Elwyn Davies, T. H. Parry-Williams and J. E. Caerwyn Williams. This dream gained momentum in the mid-1970s following T. H. Parry-Williams's decision to bequeath his library to such an institution, and the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, provided a room within the Welsh Department in the Old College on the seafront. The Centre was given the grand name 'Y Ganolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd: Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies' and the newly retired Professor of Irish, J. E. Caerwyn Williams, was appointed honorary Director. Professor Williams was an eminent Celtic scholar with an interest in all aspects of the Celtic languages of all periods. His interest in Breton led him to translate a number of modern Breton literary works into Welsh.

I was a first-year Ph.D. student working in the Centre's library in 1984 when Professor Williams returned early from lunch one day and asked whether I was willing to have my photograph taken for a newspaper article: I agreed without realising the significance of the occasion for my own future. The University Grants Committee had just awarded the University of Wales an annual grant of £63,000 to establish a permanent research centre for Celtic Studies, that would employ a team of researchers. Professor R. Geraint Gruffydd was appointed the Centre's first Director, and a team of four researchers were appointed with Nerys Ann Jones, Peredur Lynch and myself as research fellows and Dr Morfydd E. Owen as senior fellow. The College in Aberystwyth provided us with a temporary home in a house on the seafront and on 1 October 1985 we all arrived at the Centre for our very first day – only to find that there wasn't a single item of furniture in the building, no chair, no desk, and no phone – nothing except a nice new carpet on the floor and freshly painted walls! A year later, Dr Elwyn Davies died, and soon afterwards we learnt that he had bequeathed £500,000 to the University of Wales expressly to build a permanent research centre for Celtic Studies, and planning began for the erection of a purpose-built building next to the National Library of Wales. The present building was opened in May 1993 and the additional accommodation has allowed us to host many more projects. In the event the University Grants Committee was persuaded to pay a large portion of the cost of the new building, and the Elwyn Davies Bequest was invested and still provides income to support some of the researchers. By adding another £300,000 the University of Wales ensured that the University of Wales Dictionary (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru / A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*) could also be housed in the same building: a decision which has proved invaluable for the three medieval poetry projects which we have conducted. Later in 1993, with the successful completion of the Poets of the Princes project, Professor R. Geraint Gruffydd retired and Professor Geraint H. Jenkins became the Centre's second Director.

The task which faced us as a research team in 1985 was to edit, within five years, all the poems composed by the Poets of the Princes, the poets who sang in the courts of the Welsh princes from around the middle of the eleventh century until the conquest of 1282/3. This was a mammoth task – but a definable one, in as much as we had a fairly good idea from the outset as to the number of poems which existed, since they were nearly all to be found in just a handful of medieval manuscripts which had been well catalogued (although we had quite a few surprises on the way). There were many reasons why this large corpus of poetry had been sadly neglected. Linguistically it is extremely challenging – no doubt the poets were often deliberately archaic, and their lines are often peppered with grammatical forms and syntactical patterns which had all but disappeared from contemporary prose. But perhaps the greatest stumbling block was the fact that the bulk of the material was heroic poetry, praising princes and lesser lords for their military prowess on the battlefield, their cruelty towards the enemy (the English, more often than not) and on the other side their kindness and generosity towards their own people in court. These were the same themes as those expressed by the sixth-century Welsh poets Taliesin and Aneirin and it is no surprise therefore that the Poetry of the Princes has been described by one critic as ‘old wine in new bottles’. In an age when great emphasis is placed on originality of thought and expression, it is not surprising that this kind of poetry – which presents the reader with a montage of similar images creating an ever fuller picture of the hero subject – is limited in its appeal. Most of the poems which had previously gained attention tended to be those which were not typical of the bulk of the corpus: for example, love poetry. It is especially interesting how the unique and moving elegy written by Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch upon the death of Llywelyn the last prince of Wales, with its apocalyptic themes, appealed to the Welsh nationalistic feelings in the early 1980s at a time when there was a sense of dejection following the massive defeat in the devolution referendum of 1979. By editing the complete works of all the poets, our aim was to provide experts from many fields of interest – historians, linguists, literary critics, to name the most obvious – with dependable primary sources. The work therefore needed to be carried out methodically and meticulously.

Our first big problem was having to decide upon our editorial methods and the format of the edited text. The method of editing the poetry of the earlier *Cynfeirdd*, notably used by Ifor Williams, was well established: the reader is presented with a diplomatic or manuscript text, arranged into metrical lines, but with minimal editorial intervention. Although Williams presents extensive textual notes, giving countless options as regards interpretation, it is largely up to the reader to create his own interpretation. Working out the meaning (or rather ‘a meaning’) is extremely hard work for the reader, and Kenneth Jackson’s translation of *The Gododdin*, based on Ifor Williams’s edition, is still an indispensable companion volume for anyone tackling Ifor Williams’s *Canu Aneirin*. Followers of the diplomatic text method now tend to be more user-friendly: for instance, in her recent masterly edition of some of the legendary poems of Taliesin, Marged Haycock adds punctuation, capital letters for personal and place names, and more importantly offers *her* interpretation by providing a sub-linear translation, while also presenting extensive notes suggesting other possible interpretations.

The usual editorial methods used to edit the poetry of the *Cywyddwyr*, the Poets of the Nobility, who succeeded the Poets of the Princes and flourished well into the sixteenth century, are quite different. Whereas in the case of the poetry of the Poets of the Princes only one early copy tended to be preserved (albeit copied several centuries after the original poem was composed), it is often the case that many manuscript copies of the later poems survive, with a fair degree of variation between them. More often than not, over a century would elapse between the poet's *floruit* and the earliest manuscript evidence for his work. Some copyists would correct or improve lines, there would have been a fair degree of oral transmission, and many copies may also have been lost, all of which complicate matters. The editor's task is to establish a text which he or she believes best represents that which was composed by the poet, or at least a text which is likely to be the source for later copies: and to do this he has to scrutinise all the variant readings and try to work out the relationship between the copies which have survived. The text is usually presented in modern Welsh orthography – and, more often than not, without a translation, as it was assumed that the meaning was largely self-evident. Some believe that this composite-text method is too subjective, too dependent on choices made by individual editors, and presents the reader with phantom texts, which do not occur in any manuscripts. Time does not permit me to discuss the various arguments any further, only to say that the great French Celtic scholar Edouard Bachellery, in his 1951 French-language edition of the poetry of the fifteenth-century poet Gutun Owain, presented the reader with diplomatic texts from manuscripts (without modernising the orthography), and his texts are extremely important to this day.

Returning to the Poets of the Princes, following extensive discussions we decided upon a method which we thought suited the corpus and which used aspects of both these methods. A punctuated diplomatic text, including capital letters for proper names, was provided, usually based on the earliest manuscript copy, and preserving the original orthography. Secondly, the same text was presented in modern Welsh orthography, but retaining the original phonology (that is, we aimed to convey the sound of the original rather than to modernise forms as such). Finally, a modern Welsh paraphrase was provided. As some of the poems occur in as many as four medieval copies, it wasn't practical to present manuscript copies of each one; there was also the not-so-small problem of varying orthographical systems and the fact that there were minor variations in readings between the early copies. Although it was possible to identify the 'best' copy, some of the other manuscripts offered better individual readings at times: therefore, when necessary, we would reject a reading from the oldest manuscript and use the better reading, and reproduce the original reading in a footnote. In this way we hoped to present the reader with a meaningful text, but not deceive him or her as regards its validity.

Our edition of the poetry of the Poets of the Princes was published in seven volumes by the University of Wales Press and completed in the early 1990s. In 1993 we stepped forward to the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries with our Poetry of the Nobility Project. Whereas the work of the Poets of the Princes was a definable corpus of poetry, it was obvious from the outset that it would be impossible for us to edit all the poetry produced during this later period – indeed it would be impossible even to identify all of it. We decided therefore to concentrate on previously unedited poetry, or poetry which sorely needed re-

editing, and also on the poets who had a fair number of poems in the manuscripts. Dr Barry J. Lewis's bilingual booklet *Prosiect Beirdd yr Uchelwyr / The Poets of the Nobility Project* provides an excellent introduction to the Poet of the Nobility series, which includes 36 volumes to date, with another two to be published within the next year or so.

In January 2008 we launched a new five-year project, backed by funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the University of Wales, who together support a team of five researchers. This time, instead of working independently on various poets, we decided to collaborate on one major poet, Guto'r Glyn, who flourished in the fifteenth century. His poetry dates from the 'Great Century' of Welsh poetic tradition, so named because of the quality (and sheer volume) of the poetry produced. During his long career Guto'r Glyn received patronage from noble families in virtually all parts of Wales, enjoying the good life in their lavish homes and providing fascinating insights into their lives: feasts, fine wines, costume, houses, animals and domestic relations. Guto took an active and lively interest in political affairs in Wales and beyond; he fought in France during the Hundred Years' War and became an avowed supporter of the Yorkist cause. His poetry for Edward IV, the Herberts and many other patrons offers valuable contemporary comment on political and military affairs during one of the most troubled periods in British history. As well as producing an edition of his poems (firstly on-line, and later in a published volume) we will be looking at various aspects of life in fifteenth-century Wales: politics, attitudes towards historical events, and aspects of material culture, using Guto's poetry as a base for the study. As regards our editorial methods, our guiding principle (as with the two previous projects) is to produce texts of poetry which scholars in various fields of study can use with confidence as primary sources for their own research.

Following the reorganisation of the University of Wales, the Centre assumed responsibility in September 2007 for the University's Board of Celtic Studies, thereby merging all the University's research in Celtic Studies, including the Welsh historical Dictionary (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru / A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*), into one institution. There are now four major research projects in progress with plans in place for further expansion, and with the appointment late last year of Professor Dafydd Johnston as Director, we are all looking forward to the next phase in the Centre's history.



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