

Wales and the British Overseas Empire: Interactions and Influences, 1650-1830

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The mid-1980s saw the launch of the 'Studies in Imperialism' series. As outlined by the general editor, John M. MacKenzie, the main concept behind this has been that 'imperialism as a cultural phenomenon has as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies'. The series has embraced a cross-disciplinary approach, covering a wide range of themes, from culture, language and literature, to gender and sex, science and the environment. The study of imperialism continues to flourish, with 'Studies in Imperialism' at the forefront of this field, contributing cutting-edge research to the growing mass of scholarship.

In relation to the study of the British Empire, a recent development has been the 'four-nation' approach, whereby academics have considered Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England separately, in the wider context of imperial expansion. ⁽¹⁾ The latest offering from 'Studies in Imperialism' adopts this approach.

Wales and the British Overseas Empire: Interactions and Influences, 1650 – 1830 is an edited volume of essays presented as papers at a British Academy-funded workshop held in September 2007 at Aberystwyth University. The publication of this monograph is significant, not only to Welsh historiography, but also to studies of the British Empire, and, more generally, imperialism. Crucially, it is the first book to study the place of Wales, and role of the Welsh people, within the British overseas empire.

Traditionally, Wales does not figure very prominently in studies of the British Empire, perhaps through a fleeting reference, often in conjunction with England, or vague comparison with Scotland or Ireland. Bowen explains in the introduction to this volume:

Without much fear of contradiction it can be stated that Wales and the Welsh have always been located at the very outer margins of British imperial historiography; and similarly it can be said that the British Empire has never loomed very large in writing on the domestic history of Wales (p. 1).

However, as Bowen highlights, on closer examination, several Welsh references emerge. For example, some plantations in the West Indies bore Welsh place names, such as Denbigh and Swansea; sailing between Britain and Asia were the East Indiamen *Anglesey*, *Cardigan*, *Carmarthen* and *Monmouth*; and New South Wales in Australia was initially called 'New Wales'. There are also examples of prominent individuals, some Welsh, others with a Welsh connection, playing a role within the Empire. Bowen draws attention to Sir William Jones, Sir Thomas Picton, Elihu Yale, Henry Morgan, but also highlights that there were several lesser-known individuals who had their roots in Wales and managed to forge careers overseas. In relation to the role of the individual, important issues surrounding identity are raised; the very fact these people had been born in Wales (or had Welsh blood pumping through their veins) does not automatically mean they projected a Welsh identity, or even attempted to carve out a separate Welsh identity overseas. Many of the Welshmen prominent in British imperial activity came from the landed elite, and traditionally did not seek to cement a separate identity from their English contemporaries. Throughout the volume, the problems of tracking the Welsh in the empire is emphasized, and the fact that they were often registered as 'English', or even grouped together with the English, makes it very difficult to ascertain exact numbers.

In considering the reasons behind the lack of scholarly work on Wales and the empire, Bowen considers whether it is due to the fact that Wales did not play a prominent part in the empire, or perhaps because it is a topic historians have not yet fully explored. Whatever the answer is, it has significant implications for the study of Welsh history and the role of Wales within the empire. One of the principal aims of this volume is to generate questions and debates, to encourage further research on the Welsh dimension of the British overseas empire. The Welsh might not have been as numerous or as prominent as the English, Scots or Irish, but nonetheless, the role they played must not be ignored, as has largely been the case. Bowen draws attention to the mass of sources relating to empire housed at the National Library of Wales, highlighting that there is great potential for considerable further research in order to shed light on the topic. He also acknowledges the potential wealth of primary sources held in archives and local record offices across Wales, which are slowly being uncovered, with many fascinating discoveries emerging in the publications of local history societies. By scouring the archival material new sources will come to light and help formulate a more detailed and rounded picture of the Welsh influence on empire, and of the influence of empire upon Wales.

The scope of this study is considerable, spanning the period between 1650 and 1830. Surveying the existing historiography on Wales and empire, the focus appears to be on the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This volume aims to redress the balance, by looking at an earlier period, beginning in the mid-17th century (a time when private companies were being established to administer the growing empire); and ending in 1830, a period that saw the end of the East India Company and the slave system, but also rapid industrialisation in Wales, which had implications for her place within the wider world.

In recent years, historians have been paying more attention to the way Scotland and Ireland interacted with the British overseas empire.⁽²⁾ In contrast, the Welsh dimension has received far less scholarly attention. Bowen himself has made several valuable contributions to the historiography of 18th-century British imperialism, with a particular focus on economic and political history, giving due attention to the Welsh context in his more general works on Britain.⁽³⁾ Nonetheless, there remained a need for a specialised study

of Wales, one which presented a more general overview of the Welsh interaction with the wider British overseas empire – this volume does just that. As MacKenzie highlights in the general editor's foreword:

... the relative absence of Wales in the historiography is particularly true of the period covered by the chapters in this volume, spanning as they do the years 1650 – 1830. Thus this book is genuinely pioneering, both in terms of the recognition that there is indeed a significant story of imperial Wales to be told and in respect of its chronological focus (p. x).

The first chapter explores the way empire figures in the Welsh historiography. In 'Writing Wales into the empire: rhetoric, fragments – and beyond?' Neil Evans charts the emergence of the study of history as a professional subject in Wales alongside the developments in imperial historiography to see whether patterns or links emerge. This overview is divided into three chronological sections; the first, 1890 – 1950, focuses on the establishment of Welsh history in academia, and how the medieval period figured largely. The second period, from roughly 1950 until the mid - 1980s, saw more scholarly attention paid to the modern history of Wales, with class becoming an important theme; but apart from studying Welsh migrants and the Atlantic connection, there was little in the way of placing Wales in a broader imperial context. Evans explains:

What has gone before is really rather a depressing chronicle for anyone concerned to analyse the place the empire held in Welsh affections and the role that Welsh people played in its development (p. 29).

However, the third period, from the mid-1980s onwards, offers more optimism. Trends in the study of British history began influencing the way Welsh historians viewed Wales and her interaction with the empire; for example, Welsh historians began to look at migration, not only to America, but also to the furthest reaches of the empire.⁽⁴⁾

Building on the firm foundations set out by Evans's historiographical overview, the next two chapters consider the impact of imperialism on Wales in relation to Scotland, Ireland and England. In 'Wales, Munster and the English South West: contrasting articulations with the Atlantic world' Chris Evans highlights the importance of the Atlantic during the 17th century and a considerable part of the 18th century:

Large volumes of capital and much political energy were expended in Asia, but in terms of territorial acquisition, the settlement of migrant populations or the volume of commercial traffic, the Atlantic was the principal imperial theatre for the English and (after 1707) the British (p. 40).

Evans draws attention to the London-centric approach, 'gentlemanly capitalism', and acknowledges that although attempts have been made to consider the impact of imperialism beyond the metropolis, work in this area has been slow in emerging: 'For all their efforts to "de-centre" the empire, the centre obstinately reimposes itself' (p. 40). His chapter focuses on comparing the experiences of a region he defines as the south-west, and the links with empire. In relation to Wales, cloth manufactured in Wales was used to clothe slaves in the Atlantic world, and the Welsh copper industry supplied the Atlantic markets, reinforcing the argument that the Welsh were far from disengaged with the commercial activities linked with the empire.

Focusing on the Celtic dimension, Martyn J. Powell, in the chapter 'Celtic rivalries: Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the British Empire, 1707 – 1801', uses Linday Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation* ⁽⁵⁾ as a starting point to emphasize the need for more studies of inter-Celtic relations. In Colley's book, England is the central factor, with comparisons made between England and Wales, England and Scotland, but, as Powell highlights, no mention is made of England and Ireland. In his chapter, Powell takes Ireland as his

focus, and considers the relationship between the Celtic nations in the wider imperial context.

In the ensuing two chapters, the focus shifts from the four nations to consider Wales and the Atlantic World. David Ceri Jones builds on his previous study of early Welsh Methodism by examining the way some Welsh evangelicals during the 18th century utilised their imperial links in their work and the impact this had on the spread of evangelicalism in Wales. ‘Welsh evangelicals, the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world and the creation of a “Christian Republic”’ explores the networks forged across the Atlantic, charting the exchange of ideas that crossed the ocean and bridged the linguistic and cultural divides.

The chapter by Trevor Burnard, ‘From periphery to periphery: the Pennants’ Jamaican plantations and industrialisation in North Wales, 1771 – 1812’ again considers the Atlantic dimension. As Burnard highlights, the number of Welsh who travelled to the British West Indies was indeed small, in Jamaica making up less than two per cent of migrants from Europe during the late 17th century, and later, during the 1750s and 1760s, comprising just over one per cent. Nonetheless, there are examples of individuals who made an impact. The focus of the chapter revolves around the influence of the West Indies on Wales, in particular industry in Wales, during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The case study under focus is that of the Pennant family and how the profit from the slave-trade stimulated the development of the slate industry in north Wales, but also, how the Pennants helped with the transfer of ideas from the West Indies to Wales. Burnard explains that:

The Pennant experience in Jamaica and North Wales tells two stories. First, it shows how wealth could be made in the colonies through a combination of hard work, luck and demographic fortune. Second, it illustrates the contributions that colonial money made to British economic development, especially the peripheries (p. 118).

The last two chapters are similarly linked, but here the focus is on Asia. Andrew Mackillop looks at the experiences of the Welsh in the East Indies in ‘A “reticent” people? The Welsh in Asia, c.1700 – 1815’, explaining:

Few areas of Welsh involvement in the pre-1815 empire have been quite as neglected as the Asian hemisphere of expansion. With the exception of one or two conspicuous individuals like Elihu Yale, governor of Madras from 1687 to 1699 or the Anglo-Welsh “orientalist” scholar, Sir William Jones, founder of the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1784, Welsh sojourners in India have attracted remarkably little interest (p. 145).

Scholarly studies of the Welsh experience in India have been few and far between due to the perception that the Welsh presence was too small to be of significance. However, the Welsh were more than capable of finding their way to India, and Mackillop explores the way they made their connections with the East India Company based in London, and the opportunities afforded to them in India. Mackillop draws evidence from the AHRC-funded database ‘The Scots, Irish and Welsh in British Asia, 1695 – 1813’, which provides valuable statistical evidence. The fact that the Welsh were not as numerous as the Scots and Irish proves an interesting point in itself, about the Welsh experience, but also about the situation at home. That is, perhaps the need to leave Wales was not as great as in the cases of Scotland and Ireland, and the economic, social or political factors driving migration across the empire themselves warrant further research and assessment.

Whilst Mackillop’s chapter focuses on the Welsh experience in the East Indies, in the final chapter Bowen considers the impact of activities in India on the Welsh economy. In ‘Asiatic interactions: India, the East India Company and the Welsh economy, c.1750 – 1830’ Bowen emphasises that the small number of Welsh in India does not signify the failure of Wales to take advantage of imperial expansion overseas. Bowen draws attention to certain Welshmen who succeeded in amassing quite substantial fortunes during their time in India, and how this wealth found its way back to Wales. Bowen’s argument can be linked with Burnard’s,

that money generated overseas did find its way to Wales, and that imperial riches were subsequently invested into the Welsh economy. Although the scale was never extensive, and it far from transformed the economy, Bowen argues nonetheless that we should not discount the influx of imperial wealth, as it helped stimulate further improvements and developments. Through stocks, industrial enterprises, the building of country houses, charitable work or the forging of political careers, East Indian fortunes left their mark on the society, economy and landscape of Wales.

The central aim of this volume is to analyse how Wales interacted with the wider world:

The authors have measured participation in imperial activity, mapped overseas connections, marked out similarities and differences by comparing Wales with other parts of the British and Irish Isles, and assessed the impact of empire on Wales itself (p. 193).

However, one neglected aspect remains the attitude of the Welsh to the empire and the people of the empire; did the people of Wales have strong feelings about the empire, or were they largely indifferent to events and people located so far away from their day-to-day lives? These questions need to be addressed:

And herein lies perhaps the greatest challenge ahead if the foundations laid out in this volume are to be built upon in future studies of Wales and the empire during the long eighteenth century (p. 193).

It has been suggested that the empire was not a major concern in Wales, but this in itself is an interesting fact that warrants further study and analysis. As Bowen explains in the introduction, this volume does not present a comprehensive account of the history of Wales and the British Empire between 1650 and 1830; this is a considerable task outside the scope of this volume. Further research needs to be conducted and more material gathered before we can fully understand the position of Wales in the wider imperial context, and this is exactly what this book aims to encourage. Going back to MacKenzie's foreword:

One of the purposes of this book is to stimulate further research. It will certainly do that. Moreover, this volume cries out to be succeeded by one considering Wales and the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Work on this is already proceeding and will surely be published in the not-too-distant future (p. xi).

The promise of future publications on Wales and the British Empire is encouraging, and will hopefully be a positive step in furthering this neglected area of the historiography.

Notes

1. John M. MacKenzie, 'Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English worlds? A four-nation approach to the history of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 6 (2008), 1244 – 63; John M. MacKenzie, 'Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English worlds? The historiography of a four nations approach to the history of the British Empire', in *Race, Nation and Empire: Making Histories, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland (Manchester, 2010), 133 – 53.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for example Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (East Linton and Edinburgh, 2001); T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire, 1600 – 1815* (London, 2003); *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Keith Jeffery (Manchester, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Specifically H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756 – 1833* (Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Aled Jones and Bill Jones, 'The Welsh world and the British Empire, c.1851 – 1939: an exploration', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31 (2003), 57 – 81.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992).[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review as it stands.

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