

Wales since 1939

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Martin Johnes is an industrious historian of 20th-century Wales, and has published extensively on topics such as sport, national identity, the 1966 Aberfan disaster and the civic history of Cardiff. [\(1\)](#) *Wales since 1939* is a fusion of several of these endeavours (and more), and one which has produced an integrated and fresh perspective on modern Wales.

This rigorous overview of the post-war decades should appeal to academics, students and the wider public interested in delineating modern Welsh history. It should fill a gap for a core-text on several post-1939 Welsh history undergraduate modules, and provides food for thought for postgraduate researchers as well. In fact, there is a role for this book on courses marketed as 'British' history: not only in terms of providing the 'Welsh' perspective, but as a contribution to the debate on the nature of 'Britishness'.

Traditionally, historians of 20th-century Wales have turned to Kenneth O. Morgan's excellent tome *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* [\(2\)](#) to provide a foundation for their work. *Wales since 1939* is a particularly valuable addition to the literature as it reflects more recent developments in historiography, historical thought and chronology. Whilst *Rebirth of a Nation* focused solidly (although not exclusively) on political events, Johnes's book elaborates in greater depth on the social and cultural context.

In the 'Introduction' the author stresses the rationale for writing *Wales since 1939*. Firstly, since the history of modern Wales has only been of peripheral interest (if that even) to the British history and historians of the period, there is a need to expand understanding of the Welsh perspective. Secondly (and almost conversely), a narrative on Wales that focuses solely on the Welsh experience is a false one. A rounded projection of

Wales after 1939 entails looking at shared aspects of social and cultural history: ones that had no specifically 'Welsh' origins or intentions. Therefore, the book topically contributes to the discourse on 'Britishness' and its implications for nationhood and identity. Thirdly, the author seeks a greater understanding of both the historical continuum and modernisation in post-1939 Wales. To comprehend 21st-century Wales '... we should appreciate how far the nation has come, both materially and as something that exists as more than an idea' (p. 5). This is reflected in the conclusion, where Johnes argues that, although in the first decade of the new millennium political devolution was in existence in Wales, that didn't necessarily mean that the Welsh nation had been forged anew after 1939. 'The people of Wales ... continued to live their lives, worrying more about their families, social lives, bank balances, bodies and prospects than about their nationality or how they were governed' (p. 447). Whilst the author pinpoints the work as primarily a social history, it is in the amalgamation of the social with the cultural, political and economic that this book's main strength lies.

Wales since 1939 is structured into 14 chapters and adopts a combination of a chronological and a thematic structure. For example, the period 1951–70 is discussed specifically in five different chapters, and, although there could have been the potential for some dissonance and overlapping between sections (–for example, between chapter seven, "A cottonwool fuzz at the back of the mind". Language and nationhoods, 1951–70', and chapter eight, 'Nationalists of many varieties 1951-70'-), this is not the case. The author takes great care in differentiating grassroots nationhood and identity (chapter seven) from more organized forms of nationalist protests (chapter eight), and hence the book's argument flows effectively. As is to be expected from a sports historian, the cultural impact of various sporting events is considered in terms of issues such as class and nationhood, and is interspersed throughout the work.

Each chapter begins with two standalone quotations from sources relevant to that particular chapter: often thought-provoking and contradictory ones. For example, in chapter five, which discusses 'The Tory Remaking of Wales, 1979–1997', Margaret Thatcher is quoted as saying 'It is we who bring the new industries to the Valleys', whilst alongside it a comment from the journal *Radical Wales* is included asking how Wales under the Conservatives could be so 'untalented' as to be 'unable to produce one person capable of performing the function of Principal Minister in the Welsh Office' (p. 311). The latter raises the issues of accountability and representativeness which would increasingly dog the Conservatives and their relationship with Wales up to 1997. This is an effective format, which succinctly encapsulates contentious topics and enhances the book's readability.

As might be expected, the first chapter deals with the Second World War. On the one hand, it utilizes individual anecdotes and reports to bring the impact of the war to life e.g. complaints from Carmarthen that 'English' evacuees and war workers were 'teaching local women to drink' (p. 12). However, this is done alongside an interpretation of the war's 'Britishness', and an application of some of Angus Calder's 'myth of the Blitz' concepts to Wales. This blended approach is adopted throughout much of the book, making it both engaging and informative. The two subsequent chapters deal specifically with 'austerity' and 'affluence' and their manifestation in Wales during the post-war decades. The growth of the welfare state is discussed and is laced with some entertaining observations, such as the quotation from a local resident in the early 1950s that NHS facilities in north Wales were so deficient as to make it 'much safer in Korea than in Rhyl on a Sunday afternoon' (p. 40). Although this book is not strongly historiographical, it does challenge some established historical attitudes – for example:

Historian Kenneth Morgan has argued that the general tone of the decade from 1951 to 1961 was buoyance. But the fragility and limited reach of affluence meant that, although people's expectations were raised and they were aware of how much life had changed, there was never a general sense of security in this period (p. 86).

The implications of economic and social modernisation are considered, and in chapter four the concept of permissiveness is approached. Welsh history is desperately lacking in publications discussing the impact of the cultural changes of the 1950s and 1960s, and so it is constructive to see this chapter laying the

foundations for this. The Anglo-centric youth sub-cultures of these decades and the Americanisation of popular music are conveyed, as are attempts at 'Welshifying' aspects of the liberalising culture e.g. the publication of, and scandal surrounding sexual descriptions in, the 1965 Welsh language novel *Ienctid yw 'Mhechod* ('Youth is my Sin'). The tensions between traditionalist aspects of Welsh society and the fast-paced changes of modern morality are exposed here, and the long-standing effects of this on post-1970 Wales are discussed further in chapter 12.

Johnes is unafraid to tackle the question of social class, and in chapter five rejects the notion that a 'classless' society emerged in Wales during the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, he views the aspiration for progress and materialism of urban Welsh society between 1951 and 1970 as one that meant '... that class became more not less important in affluent Wales' (p. 137). However, he concedes that industrial decline and modernisation did lead to a weakening of the communitarian Welsh way of life; a factor that is duly reflected in his interpretation of post-war rural Wales in chapter six. The pronounced tensions relating to immigration, modernisation, religious decline and the erosion of the Welsh language in rural parts are pursued further, in a post-1970s context, in chapter 13, 'They don't belong here'.

The author treads delicately around issues to do with language, national identity and nationalism, and highlights the nuances of such issues effectively in several chapters. The mostly harmonious co-existence between Britishness and Welshness felt by the majority of Welsh people is enunciated, with the pro-monarchy deference of post-war society clearly projected. The populist nature of the latter is conveyed in examples such as a child's memory of having her Brownie badges publicly shorn from her clothing by the Brown Owl for refusing to pledge allegiance to the Queen in the late 1950s (p. 199). Johnes also ventures to question the 'national mythology' surrounding the drowning of the Tryweryn valley to provide water for Liverpool, by stating 'Nor was opposition in Wales either as widespread or as sustained as is often made out' (p. 215). The perceived dominance of 'Tryweryn' on both the national and nationalist psyche in Wales has yet to receive a rigorous academic assessment, and Johnes certainly provides a tantalising glimpse of the possibilities.

The political impotence of Wales as exposed by Tryweryn and the decline of the Welsh language fed into the narrative on devolution and regionalism, and was central to the post-war Plaid Cymru agenda. Language became increasingly contentious, with Welsh Language Society protests from the 1960s onwards and the fractious devolution referendum campaign of the late 1970s turning it into a political football. Johnes utilizes opinion polls on devolution and national identity to highlight the turnaround in the fortunes of devolution between the 1979 referendum rejection and 1997 wafer-thin majority in favour of an elected assembly. He highlights the fact that Labour voters who identified themselves as 'Welsh' seemed more willing to support devolution after the experiences of the Thatcherite era than in the 1979 referendum. However, as with most of the post-1997 content this will merit more historical contextualisation in future.

Wales since 1939 acknowledges the myth of a monolithic 'Labour Wales' (chapter nine especially), reflecting the groundbreaking work by Duncan Tanner and other Welsh Labour historians over the past decade or so. It is particularly pleasing to see aspects of the history of the Conservative Party in Wales being illuminated. The latter forms a tangible gap in the historiography of 19th- and particularly 20th-century Wales, and has been neglected in the rush to focus on socialism and minority nationalism. The Conservatives are only tentatively explored here, as is to be expected in a book that covers half a century of Welsh history, but this should surely prompt others to move to plug this gap in the historical writing.

Another interesting angle pursued by the author is in regard to the Welsh responses to international events such as the Cold War, decolonization of the British Empire and the Falklands conflict. This is a further emergent strand in Welsh historiography (3), and is certainly one ripe for development. A more critical engagement with issues such as 'banal nationalism' and the 'three-Wales model' could have been conducted, but, (as before), this is not necessarily expected in a general overview.

The author incorporates a good cross-section of sources, giving voice to the diversity of the post-1939 Welsh experience. Extensive use is made of British-wide and Welsh-based newspapers. It is also constructive that

regional newspapers have been consulted: we not only see references to the more widespread *Western Mail*, but also evidence from the *Carmarthen Journal* and the *Wrexham Leader*. Social anthropological studies from the 1940s onwards are presented, such as Alwyn D. Rees's pioneering study of the rural parish of Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa, *Life in a Welsh Countryside*.⁽⁴⁾ The use of the latter (along with others, such as Isabel Emmett's work on Llanfrothen and Ffestiniog) is to be applauded, particularly since they exhibit the challenges confronting many communities in the midst of social and cultural modernisation. Recent publications, such as Rhys Evans's substantial biography of the Plaid Cymru leader Gwynfor Evans are referenced, and audio-visual material (particularly from the National Library of Wales's National Screen and Sound Archive) reinforces the argument in the section on Wales in the 1980s. The use of sources written in both English and Welsh is a clear strength of this book, a factor which enhances the breadth of interpretation and allows a rounded view of some of the controversies in modern Wales to be presented. The literary source content is similarly effective, with reference to Gerallt Lloyd Owen's anti-investiture poetry compilation, *Cerddi'r Cywilydd* (Poems of Humiliation/Shame) (p. 237), contrasting with the inventive use of a misogynistic joke from a 1978 *Welsh Jokes* publication (p. 349). The latter was used to demonstrate the often halting progress of feminism in many patriarchal parts of Wales during the 1970s.

Some archival research is included here, both from The National Archives in London and Welsh archives; for example, correspondence portraying the dialogue between the Welsh Language Society and the government during the 1960s (pp. 226–7). On the whole, however, the book is mostly dependent on published primary and secondary sources. Whilst it would have been good to see more use of individual manuscript collections and the Welsh Political Archive, the chronological breadth of the book again explains these omissions. Similarly, the Mass Observation archive has strengthened the sections on the Second World War and reconstruction in Wales, but some of the later chapters could have benefited from the use of oral history interviews. Overall, considering that this is an overview of a period, a very good cross-section of materials has been integrated, which highlights the largely untapped potential of post-1939 Welsh history and its sources.

Modern Welsh history is not conveniently 'boxed' into categories in *Wales since 1939*, but instead its multifarious shades of grey are articulated. Johnes has succeeded in portraying the diversity of Wales in the second half of the 20th-century and has remedied the long-standing neglect of several topics under the microscope here. In many ways, this book does for Wales what Peter Clarke's *Hope and Glory* or Dominic Sandbrook's post-war histories do for Britain: providing an approachable history that does not forget its academic roots. In the light of this, it would be interesting to know where the author sees post-1939 Welsh history heading in future, and which avenues of research he feels should be prioritised.

Notes

1. The book integrates arguments expanded upon in other recent articles by Johnes e.g. 'A prince, a king and a referendum: rugby, politics and nationhood in Wales, 1969-1979', *Journal of British Studies*, 47 (2008), 129–148; 'For class and nation: dominant trends in the historiography of twentieth-century Wales', *History Compass*, 8, 11 (2010), 1257–74; 'Wales, history and Britishness', *Welsh History Review*, 25, 4 (2011), 596-661.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880–1980* (Oxford, 1981).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Martin Johnes, 'Wales and the Cold War', *Llafur*, 10, 4 (2010), 5–15. This was a special edition of the journal focusing on Welsh responses to the Cold War, from social, political and literary perspectives.
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Alwyn D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh Countryside* (Cardiff, 1950).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/33324>