Nation Building at the Museum of Welsh Life

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Abstract

This article explores the representational problems inherent in one museum's attempt to tell a 'national story'. The museum in question started life as the 'Welsh Folk Museum' but in 1995 became the much broader 'Museum of Welsh Life'. This article examines how and why this change occurred and the challenges produced by this shift in remit. The article also illustrates the processes of selection and revision which occur within museum representations and considers how these relate to competing versions of 'the national story' present within Wales. I argue that such revisions are inevitable in national museums which, by their very nature, aim to tell a universal story and that, as a consequence, these museums function both as a catalyst for discussion and a public forum within which debates over the accepted nature of national identity and history will occur.

'The very notion of a nation with a fixed "given" cultural identity is a sign of the success of a whole array of practices in naturalizing that identity. It is also the sign of the success of a particular construction or version of national culture, for all definitions of the national essence selectively ignore competing definitions.' (Foster, 1991: 238)

'… the question we ought to address is not that of the real "nation" or national identity which lies behind concepts employed in political life, but that of the formation, articulation and propagation of the concepts themselves. Nationalist ideas, myths and definitions have to be deconstructed. This means that we need to treat 'Wales' as it has figured in successive, and rival discourses, and consider the question "How many Wales?" or "How many ways of being Welsh?" (Day and Suggett, 1985: 96)

Introduction

Heritage and the past provide one important way of claiming and securing identity positions. Heritage supplies identities with precedent and legitimacy through the invocation of 'tradition' and, in the case of established cultural institutions like museums or heritage sites, by lending those identity-claims the authority which public institutions command. For cultural nationalists since the 19th century, the act of creating an institution like a national museum has been and continues to be an act of assertion – a gesture designed to claim recognition for that identity and an attempt to translate a set of intangible beliefs about the special quality of a certain cultural group into an identifiable, material and visible presence.[1]

A national museum built along the lines of cultural or ethnic nationalism can be understood as a move of both consolidation and performativity in that the nation's members

are supposedly presented with the national story as celebration and affirmation but also as instruction for how to locate themselves within that national story. Viewed in this light, the relationship between nationalism, heritage, and museums seems straightforward, but the complexity comes when those museums try to define the national identities they will represent, when they endeavour to construct displays and collecting policies to present such identities, and when, as a result of the passing of time, they are obliged to deal with the inevitable changes to the national story and the very real, material legacies – in terms of buildings, collections, displays – which earlier generations have bequeathed to them.

The Museum of Welsh Life, which is the subject of this article, clearly illustrates all of these difficulties and offers a chance to examine some of the processes involved in the representation of national identities within museums. This museum started life as the 'Welsh Folk Museum' but in 1995 became the much broader 'Museum of Welsh Life'. This article examines how and why this change occurred and the challenges this shift in remit and redrawing of representational parameters has brought to the museum and its curators. What emerges from this case study is not only the extent to which museums are palimpsests of their earlier incarnations but also the way that any subsequent changes are circumscribed by, and sometimes at odds with, those earlier legacies. The paper also examines the claim that folk museums are inherently conservative in their politics and that they suffer from a form of amnesia over divisions within national stories.

Finally, the case study offers two museological insights. Firstly, it illustrates the need to consider not only the historical, macrocosmic reasons for why a museum representation has come to be as it is, but also the effects of practical current factors like marketing, audience development, visitor profiles and visitor surveys. Most studies on national museums tend to privilege the historical and ideological context at the expense of the more diffuse, but equally important, day-to-day practical elements of museum work. Secondly, I argue that while it is certainly possible to identify dominant discourses at work in museum representations, there is a danger of reading museums as too internally coherent, too unitary in their meanings. By contrast, my analysis of the Museum of Welsh Life leads me to concur with Andreas Huyssen's comment that: 'No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory' (1995: 15). Tony Bennett makes a similar point when he observes that museums which make universalising statements – that is to say those which claim to represent a whole way of life or a whole people – always open themselves up for criticism and accusations of misrepresentation; they are always already internally flawed because of the inevitable inadequacy of their over-reaching representational claims (1995: 102-3). As a consequence, museums function as both a catalyst for debate and a public forum within which debates over the accepted nature of identity and history can occur. In this paper, I argue that the Museum of Welsh Life enables us to see the above in action because it accommodates competing discourses of Welsh identity and because it makes visible the processes by which dominant representations are created but equally challenged and revised.

Background

The first National Museum of Wales was granted its charter in 1907 and opened in 1927 in the centre of what is now the Welsh capital city, Cardiff.2 This first site is today known as the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, (NMGC) and is one of eight branches of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales network (NMGW). In addition to the National Museum and Gallery, the network comprises Big Pit: National Mining Museum, the National Woollen Museum, the Welsh Slate Museum, the Roman Legionary Museum, the National Waterfront Museum, the National Collections Centre, and the Museum of Welsh Life. The national museums are concentrated in the south of Wales but there are also branches in the west and the north of Wales.3 This article is concerned solely with the last of these: the Museum of Welsh Life or Amgueddfa Werin Cymru to give it its Welsh name.

If the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, (NMGC) is reminiscent of the archetypal nineteenth-century museum, with its classical architecture and European 'high art' collections,

the Museum of Welsh Life is its antithesis.4 The first National Museum of Wales (now NMGC) was originally intended to show that Wales was a fully-fledged nation with the requisite institutions: a national museum, a national library and a national university. By contrast, the Museum of Welsh Life – or the Welsh Folk Museum as it was first called – was, and still remains, about valuing the vernacular culture of Wales. Its current guidebook states that, '[t]he Museum shows how the people of Wales lived, worked and spent their leisure time over the last five hundred years' (2001: 3). The emphasis at what is now called the Museum of Welsh Life is thus intended to be on the 'ordinary people' of Wales and their lives. The complex questions of who these 'ordinary people' might be, what concept of 'Wales' such a mission statement invokes, and how all this comes to be represented is considered below. Irrespective of their differences, both museums functioned as part of what Lofgren calls:

> an *international cultural grammar of nationhood*, with a thesaurus of general ideas about the cultural ingredients needed to form a nation … This includes a symbolic estate (flag, anthem, national landscape, sacred texts, etc), ideas about a national heritage (a national history and literature, a national folk culture, etc) as well as notions of national character, values, and tastes. (1989: 22)

The Museum of Welsh Life today is based in the village of St Fagans situated on the periphery of the city of Cardiff. The museum grew out of a 'Bygones' collection of folk material exhibited at the National Museum in Cardiff first in 1913 and then 1926 and the subsequent establishment of a Department of Folk Culture and Industries there in 1936 (National Museum of Wales, 1938: 71).5 The collections were relocated into the Welsh Folk Museum at its current St Fagans site following the Earl of Plymouth's 1946 donation of St Fagans castle with its twenty acre grounds and the collection of funds from a public appeal. The museum was the first of its type to be built in Britain, although smaller folk museums did exist in the Isle of Man and the Highlands of Scotland. It was the first national open-air museum in the UK and museum documentation from the time of its creation states that: '[t]he aim will be to form in the Folk Museum as complete a picture of the Welsh past as is possible, to create a "Wales in miniature"' (National Museum of Wales, 1946: 6).

Since its official opening in 1948, over thirty buildings have been taken from around Wales to be rebuilt in a village setting of an extra forty-five acres surrounded by a woodland area of about forty acres. The buildings include:

· farm houses, cottages, barns, hayshed, pigsty

· bakehouse, pottery, tannery, gorse mill, sawmill, smithy, saddler, woollen mill, cider mill, coach house

· Oakdale Working Men's Institute, Rhyd-y-car ironworkers cottages decorated in the styles of 1805, 1855, 1895, 1925, 1955, and 1985

· tollhouse, chapel, school, local stores, cockpit, post office, a cenotaph, church

· Celtic village, St Fagans castle and gardens, boat house, summer house, a post WWII pre-fab, and a recent ecological experiment: the House for the Future

The museum also includes a visitor centre with a temporary exhibition space, large permanent galleries of material culture, agriculture and costume, restaurants and a shop. Attractions at the site include story-telling, rides in a horse and cart and a photography studio at which visitors can be photographed in period or national costume. The craftsmen – wood turner, cooper, clog maker, tailor, smithy – offer demonstrations of traditional skills and visitors can purchase the finished products. The museum houses an extensive oral testimony archive created in 1958 of folk tales, folk music, folk customs, and the definitive national archive of Welsh language and dialect. It also links to local intangible heritage, for example, by commemorating events like the Battle of St Fagans, the last major battle of the 1648 Civil War (Museum of Welsh Life, 2001: 39). Such events – and other activities like the celebration of St. David's Day – constitute a year round programme of events and are an equally significant part of the museum's representational work.

In the year 2002-2003, the Museum of Welsh Life received 623,529 visits making it the most visited of all the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW, 2003: 26).6 The Museum of Welsh Life has also seen the biggest increase in visitors since the introduction of free admission in 2001. In 2000-2001 it received 321,810 visits while in 2001-2002 visits soared to 694,899 (NMGW, 2003: 26).

Issues in Museums and National Identity

While there is not a vast literature on the Museum of Welsh Life, a small number of critics, mainly historians but also sociologists and curators, have written about it usually as part of a larger commentary on heritage or museums within Wales. The one exception is Douglas Bassett who has written the definitive account of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales to date (1982, 1983, 1984). A former director of NMGW, he presents a painstakingly-detailed, institutional history mined from museum council minutes and annual reports and augmented by his extended professional involvement with the museums and galleries. Regarding the Museum of Welsh Life specifically, Bassett reports the recorded motivations and factors leading up to its creation but does not venture any critique or discussion of the content or museological approach.

Peter Lord's comments (1992) about the Museum of Welsh Life constitute the exact opposite. Lord considered the Museum of Welsh Life as part of a much larger polemic on the treatment of visual culture in Wales and the role he claimed that the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) had played in marginalising indigenous visual culture in favour of an Anglicised, Europeanised aesthetic canon. For Lord, the Welsh Folk Museum (as it still was at the time of writing) was complicit in this process because its self-identification as the supposedly most Welsh of all Wales' museums has abnegated the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff (NMGC) from its rightful responsibility to represent Wales in all its facets and, especially, in the realm of visual culture. Criticism also came from within the Museum itself in the form of one of the curators, Geraint Jenkins, who was appointed in 1987 and argued that the collecting policies had been driven by a romantic and highly selective view of Wales (Dicks, 2000: 91).

This criticism of the Welsh Folk Museum's tendency to prioritise a single aspect – that of rural culture – above all others was voiced by a number of other Welsh academics from at least the 1960s but increasingly during the1980s. In her book, Heritage, Place and Community, Bella Dicks provides a useful summary of this episode in the museum's history and contextualises the critiques in terms of wider movements relating to the development of urban history in museums and community studies (2000: 78-102). Dicks also discusses the accusation made by a number of critics that the folk museum presented a past that was too static, too unified and simplified: 'Dai Smith, for example, whilst welcoming the new direction taken by the museum under Jenkins's curatorship, identifies in it a reluctance to countenance the display of conflict or dissension. Instead, he sees a continuing reliance on visions of "wholeness, and harmony, and community, and distinctiveness and togetherness, and uniqueness"' (1990-1: 5, cited in Dicks 2000: 94). In his 1992 polemic Peter Lord made a similar criticism of the Welsh Folk Museum as devoid of politics and as a static, closed version of history. Writing about the presentation of Wales in the museum, Lord commented: 'Wales has come to an end at some indeterminate point in the nineteenth century, a passive nation existing in a time warp. It is a concluded story' (1992: 40). This criticism is not unique to the Museum of Welsh Life; it is commonly levelled at folk and open-air museums as a genre and is echoed in Tony Bennett's criticism of an 'institutionalised mode of amnesia' directed at Beamish open-air museum in the North of England (1995: 111-112). A similar criticism of political amnesia can also be found in Richard Kirkland's (1996) discussion of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. This museum, founded not long after the Welsh Folk Museum in 1958, is accused by Kirkland of avoiding any discussion of the histories of post-partition Ireland. The extent to which such criticism holds true for the Museum of Welsh Life will be discussed below.

A key point here is that while Dicks' contextualisation is valuable, it – and much of the other literature – does tend to attribute the causes of representational choices and changes

within the museum to predominantly historical, macrocosmic change or to shifts in ideological positions held by curators and academics. By contrast, my investigation suggests that in addition to these factors there were equally important internal, microcosmic reasons why the 'text' of the museum shifted as, and when, it did. Equally contrary to Lord, Bennett, and Kirkland's critique of folk-museums as frozen in time or as presenting history as a 'story concluded', I want to argue that the text of this museum is far more organic, open-ended and internally contradictory. My argument is that it operates as a space in which it is possible to identify competing definitions of Welshness and that close examination reveals evidence of the on-going process of remembering and the remaking of cultural memory in response to the demands of the present. However, in order to appreciate how this process has occurred we must first understand how the museum has arrived at its current state.

Formative Factors

Accounts of the history of the Museum of Welsh Life often attribute the form adopted at the time of its establishment in the 1940s to the personal experiences of the museum's first curator, Dr Iorwerth Peate (Museum of Welsh Life, 1998; Western Mail, 1998: 8) .7 Peate joined the National Museum of Wales in 1927 and was head of the Welsh Folk Museum from 1948 – 1971. Brought up in Montgomeryshire, mid-Wales, he was a well-known Welsh poet and literary figure, a member of Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party) and a conscientious objector in the Second World War. While Peate did clearly exercise a formative influence over the development of the Museum of Welsh Life and its public profile, other individuals were equally instrumental as were wider cultural factors.8

A major influence on the Welsh Folk Museum was the open-air folk-museum tradition pioneered at Skansen, near Stockholm in 1891, and subsequently repeated across Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bennett 1995: 115; Loveluck 2003; Bassett, 1982-83; Lord, 1992: 37). In its own time, this folk museum movement was considered a radical move in museological terms because of its valorisation of ordinary people and their lives and also, according to Dicks, because of its return to spectacle, something which other museums were consciously rejecting as unscientific and outmoded (2000: 86). The debt to Skansen is made explicit by Peate in various early texts about the Welsh Folk Museum.

> A folk museum represents the life and culture of a nation, illustrating the arts
> and the crafts, and in particular the building crafts, of the complete community,
> and including in its illustration the activities of the mind and spirit – ceremonial,
> drama, dance and music – as well as of the land (National Museum of Wales,
> 1958: 5).

As indicated by the language of this passage, writers such as Peate conceived of folk culture as a holistic and authentic representation of the 'true' character of a nation. Bjarne Stoklund writes: 'while the culture of the higher classes was subject to changing foreign fashions, the popular culture, with its deep roots, was supposed to represent the true national culture' (1983: 8).9 This interest in European folk culture was a response to the dramatic socio-economic shifts produced by industrialisation and which were reconfiguring people's physical and psychological relationships with the land (Morgan, 1982: 126; Smith, 1984: 14-15). As elsewhere in Britain, the effects of industrialisation were extremely significant within Wales during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The transition from rural crafts to mechanized industrial and urban life equally prompted a shift in how culture was conceptualised and also supported the romantic idea of folk culture.10 The correlation between support for the growth of folk culture and anxiety over the growth of urban industry underpins both Iorwerth Peate's and Cyril Fox's (director of the National Museum of Wales at this time) writings on the need for a Museum of Folk Life in Wales. Peate similarly expressed alarm over the social impact of the demise in the rural crafts industry and the loss of 'real Wales'.

> Anyone who knows the real Wales well can estimate the importance of these
> craftsmen in the life of their communities, and with the decline of the demand

> for their services comes the disintegration of small societies of folk which are
> of real value in a civilised state. … The mass-production resulting from the
> Industrial Revolution in squeezing the rural craftsman out of existence has also,
> it is more than probable, impoverished the spiritual life of the people. (National
> Museum of Wales 1929: 1-2)

This notion of the craftsman being free from the curse of alienation from the fruits of his labour has a long precedent in Pugin, Marx, Ruskin, Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Indeed, Peate often echoed or directly quoted from Morris in his writings.11 However, as Tony Bennett has observed, support for folk culture contained both progressive and reactionary elements and was bound up with class relations (1995: 115; Williams, 1976: 79).12 The important point here, as far as the current Museum of Welsh Life is concerned, is that while the erstwhile Welsh Folk Museum did not open its gates to the public until 1948, its roots – both in the ideological and material sense – extend back to the nineteenth century and were closely entwined with, and responding to, the first National Museum in Cardiff in 1907.

Repeated calls were made by museum staff and other interested museum professionals from the 1930s onwards for the relocation of the early Bygones collections into a self-contained, Swedish-style open-air, folk-museum.13 However, it was not until after the Second World War that various factors combined to boost and finally realise the museum's cause (Western Mail 1998: 3; Bassett, 1982-83). At the UK level, the Museum was undoubtedly helped by the post-war interest in the 'daily lives, customs, rituals, and traditions of non-elite social strata' which prompted a 'flurry of new museum initiatives' (Bennett, 1995: 109).14 In Wales, the display of folk culture was thought of by museum professionals as a powerful tool for rebuilding cultural pride and a cohesive national identity (Peate 1959: 5). A 1998 Western Mail newspaper supplement, '50 years at St Fagans', noted that: '[i]n 1943, during some of the darkest days of World War II, the museum council reiterated its belief that part of the post-war reconstruction of facilities in Wales should be the establishment of such a museum' (Western Mail, 1998: 3). This concurred with the reopening of museums generally across post-war Europe and the symbolic importance attached to this gesture of post-war restoration. Most importantly, the Earl of Plymouth's 1946 gift of St Fagans Castle and gardens provided a physical home for the project, while a public appeal for £100,000 and a Treasury contribution towards the maintenance cost for the new site gave the necessary financial support (Bassett 1982-3: 47).15

Collecting Wales

From its outset, the Welsh Folk Museum set out to collect predominantly rural rather than modern industrial material culture. Although curators at the Welsh Folk Museum had been actively collecting oral testimony from the industrial areas since the late 1960s – particularly regarding domestic life, coal mining vocabulary and folklore, as well as information about lead mining in mid-Wales, and the tinplate industry, industrial material culture remained seriously under-represented. It was not until the 1980s that curators decided to 'yield to urban and industrial Wales' (Museum of Welsh Life, 1998) and to represent the area where as Loveluck puts it, 'the majority of Welsh people had lived since 1841' (2003: 9). This reorientation entailed taking in firstly a row of ironworkers' cottages (Rhyd-y-car) in 1987, the Gwalia Stores in 1991, the Oakdale Miners' Institute in 1995, and most recently, a post-war pre-fab from a suburb of Cardiff (2001). Ironically, it is the ironworkers' cottages which are reportedly the most popular aspect of the site today possibly because they relate to recent memory and the local knowledge of many visitors who come from the South Wales area.

The museum's initial tendency to privilege the rural as the more authentically Welsh than the supposedly alien and anglicising industrial follows an extremely well-established precedent within Welsh culture and Welsh nationalism (Dicks, 2000: 81). This division is one of a number of other fractures within Welsh national identity which occur along the fault-lines of language, geography, age, class, and more recently ethnicity (Gramich, 1997: Osmond 2002; Williams 2003). The multiple nature of national identities within Wales is encapsulated in historian Dai Smith's comment, 'Wales is a singular noun but a plural experience' (1999:

36) and can equally be seen in Balsom's 1985 attempt to describe this situation in his 'Three Wales model'. This model divided Wales into three distinct zones: Y Fro Gymraeg, Welsh Wales and British Wales each supposedly characterised by different political voting tendencies, patterns of media usage and ratio of Welsh language speakers (cited in Osmond, 2002: 81). According to Dicks it was not until the 1980s that the traditional power balance began to shift away from the predominance of rural, Welsh speaking Wales (Y Fro Gymraeg) towards an increasing recognition of the contribution and legitimacy of industrial, Anglophone Welsh Wales and an acceptance of a more pluralistic understanding of national identities within Wales (2000: 78-102).

While these broader discursive shifts were evidently significant in terms of the context within which the Welsh Folk Museum was operating during the 1980s, the timing of its decision to reorient its collecting policies and representational remit is also bound up with earlier internal museum issues and is indicative of the ways in which it responds to external events. In terms of date for the inclusion of the first industrial exhibits, the Rhyd-y-car cottages, it is crucial to know that the Museum of Welsh Life has a policy of waiting until buildings are offered to it (Thomas, pers. comm. 2004). This is because the museum follows a principle of conservation in-situ and would rather see the properties remain in their original place wherever possible. They will therefore only take those which are threatened with demolition, the Rhyd-y-car cottages being a case in point. Following a heavy flood in the Merthyr area in 1979, the cottages had fallen into serious disrepair and in 1980 the Merthyr Tudfil Borough Council offered some of the houses to the Museum of Welsh Life (Williams, 2003: 2). Although it is hard to pinpoint evidence within the Museum's own records for the exact decision to begin collecting industrial heritage at this time, the wider social context of the 1980s in South Wales, and in particular, Britain's Miners' strike of 1984-5 must have been another significant contributing factor.[16] Between 1984 and 1985 almost 30 mines were closed making 20,000 miners redundant and in South Wales, twelve pits closed in the space of a year.[17]

Another reason for the exclusion of the influence of industries, such as iron and coal, for over a hundred years right up until the 1980s is quite possibly because these industries were perceived to be still so modern and culturally dominant as to not require representation within a museum. It was only when overtaken by newer technological industries that a fear that all traces of them would disappear from the present sphere of work, and from culture in general, prompted the reappraisal and re-evaluation of such industrial history. This kind of rescue-mission mentality is common to museums and especially history museums. As Huyssen puts it the museum is 'the paradigmatic institution that collects, salvages, and preserves that which has fallen to the ravages of modernization' (1995: 15). In this respect, this museum has been engaged not so much in the representation of what constitutes Welsh Life, but more in the representation of what has disappeared from it. There may be one further reason which links specifically to Celtic cultures. Amy Hale, for example, identifies the same reluctance to recognise industrial culture within representations of the Cornish past until the 1980s (2001) and Steven Cooke and Fiona McLean observe a long-standing tendency to align Celtic culture with the 'natural', the 'feminine', and the 'ancient' rather than the industrial and the modern (2002).

Some of the above can only remain at the level of speculation because of the absence of accessible documentation detailing the wider discussions informing collecting policy decisions. However, in the libraries and archives of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales there is evidence for another reason for the realignment of its representational strategies; this comes in the form of marketing and audience development reports.

Markets and Audiences

During the 1980s the predominance of rural culture over and above representations of the industrial in the Welsh Folk Museum became increasingly recognised within the museum itself. This problem was not simply one of representation but was caught up with wider issues of funding, overall visitor trends, and public and media profile. In 1986 the local press reported that the National Museums and Galleries of Wales as a whole organisation was experiencing a number of difficulties (Underwood, 1986: 10). The then director of the National Museums

and Galleries of Wales, Dr David Dykes, was quoted as saying, 'We have problems: problems with our buildings, a shortage of money, and we suffer from staffing problems. I think there has obviously been a loss of morale' (Underwood, 1986: 10). In addition, the organisation's public profile had been damaged by a highly-publicised and unresolved dispute over the authenticity of some Rubens Cartoons purchased by the Keeper of Art at the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, in 1979 (Underwood, 1986: 10).

The Welsh Folk Museum (as it was still called) was equally affected at this time. In response to the funding shortage, the National Museums and Galleries of Wales decided to increase its admission charge at all its sites. A consultancy report by John Brown Tourism Services (1986) observed that in June 1985 admission prices were increased dramatically in line with findings published in a national report into visitor attitudes at thirty-six National Trust and Department of the Environment heritage sites.18 This first report had suggested that 'demand was inelastic and relatively constant and would not diminish to any great extent if prices were increased' (Brown, 1986: 92). Admission charges at the Museum of Welsh Life were thus increased dramatically (according to Brown's calculations by 1,900% in four years).19 However, contrary to expectations visitor figures did fall sharply: 'Prior to 1985, visitor figures decreases were in line with other similar attractions but in 1985 they bucked the general trend and dropped by 19.0% while other attractions in South Wales rose by 9.7% aggregate figure' (Brown 1986: 92). The Brown report attributes this to the excessively dramatic price increase which deterred casual, impulse visitors and local visitors and public perception that the museum had decided to pursue a tourist market at the expense of the local one.

By 1991, the situation had improved for the National Museums and Galleries of Wales. Visitor figures for National Museums and Galleries of Wales overall were improving again as were the numbers for the Welsh Folk Museum (Betts, 1991: 7). This was attributed in some quarters to a 'redirection of the museum's entire policies and the introduction of a marketing strategy' (Betts 1991: 7). As part of this marketing strategy the Welsh Folk Museum was renamed the Museum of Welsh Life in 1995 and all the National Museums and Galleries of Wales were given a standardised corporate image with a shared logo, colour scheme, and single website. Part of this marketing strategy involved responding to findings regarding the Welsh Folk Museum's audience profile. The Brown report of 1986 had indicated that 55% of the museum's visitors at this time were day visitors and that 85% of these day visitors came from within Wales. Furthermore, the report found that a high proportion of the museum's visitors lived within a one half to one hour radius of the site (1986: 78). Consequently, it reported that: 'The main market for the Museum will nevertheless remain people living within South Wales. Policies must at all times recognise the over-riding need for the Museum to maintain, and if possible, increase its appeal within this area' (1986: 78).

Brown's analysis of the audience profile for the Museum of Welsh Life continues to be true according to a 2003 survey by different consultants showing that in 2003, 61% of visitors live within 30 minutes of the museum, 29% within 30-60 minutes radius, 8% at 1-2 hours and only 1% more than 2 hours (Beaufort Research, 2003). In 2003 71% of visitors were from Wales, 23% from Other UK and only 6% from Overseas.20 This means that the majority of the Museum of Welsh Life's potential audience originate precisely from the Anglophone, post-industrial area of South Wales which had for so long been excluded from the museum. Ironically, this means that for reasons of pure geography and visiting behaviour, a tension existed between the representational ideals envisaged by Peate and the other founders to focus on rural, welsh-speaking, 'Y Fro Gymraeg', and the contemporary need for the museum to cater for, and engage with its local audience – South, industrial 'Welsh Wales' (Balsom, 1985). The National Museums and Galleries of Wales have recognised this in the reorientation of its remit since the 1980s to include industrial history and, in particular, with its development of a network-wide Industrial Strategy since 1998.21 What this clearly demonstrates is that the museum's representations of Welsh national identities are not driven solely by changes in academic and curatorial thought but result from the complex interplay of concrete issues of location, marketing, and audience development with theoretical discourses and debates surrounding national identity.

Displaying Wales

As the name change implies the overall collecting remit was explicitly amended in 1995 and hence the increased interest in acquiring further industrial exhibits and more contemporary ventures like the House for the Future and the Second World War pre-fabricated house. The result today is a fantastically interesting and diverse but ultimately quite confusing pastiche of objects and chronologies. Buildings from different time periods appear to be grouped together according to their functions rather than by date. Agricultural buildings, covering the period 1508-1850s, such as farms, barns and a cider mill, are scattered around the periphery of the site in little glades only accessible by individual paths, thus creating the illusion of rural seclusion and isolation.

By contrast, although they differ radically in time period, the more institutional and social buildings such as the tollhouse (1771), the Tailor's workshop (1896), the Bakery (1900), and the post office (1936), are all closely grouped into a kind of village centre connected by roads. The row of Ironworkers Cottages (1805-1980) the School (1880), the Gwalia stores (built in 1880 but displayed in the style of the 1920s), and the Miners' Institute (1916), are similarly clustered in the vicinity. Even the Cockpit which dates from the 1700s is placed relatively close to this apparently urban, social centre, nestling somewhat incongruously behind the Post Office with its Second World War memorabilia. This layout therefore takes as its organizing principle, not the original date of the construction of the building, nor the date of its relocation to the Museum, but rather the exhibit's social purpose. This aspect is foregrounded to create a recognisable pattern albeit with transhistorical continuity. In terms of narrative this arrangement could be read as suggesting that towns and urban areas have always existed in this kind of harmonious proximity.

A practical explanation for this arrangement is that the collection and siting process has been a gradual one carried out over the last fifty years and has been variously influenced by considerations of space and resources. For example, it was self-evident to site the Mill near the river in order to provide it with a water source, while the tollhouse was sited at the crossroads because it was originally situated at the intersection of five roads in Aberystwyth (Jenkins, 1990: 167). The Museum of Welsh Life also includes a protected forested area which cannot be altered and this presents another set of constraints to the possibilities for siting and displaying artefacts.

Another pragmatic reason for the museum's current appearance relates to its open-air quality; the Museum of Welsh Life has been useful to the overall National Museums and Galleries of Wales network because it provides room for parts of the national collection which cannot be accommodated elsewhere. A pertinent example here is the Celtic Village which was originally part of an exhibition at the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, in May 1991. This exhibit is, in one respect, out of place in the Museum of Welsh Life because it is a reconstruction not an actual rebuild like the rest of the buildings. It has been 're-created' from excavated remains of buildings not just from modern-day Wales, but also from Warwickshire. This is a joint Archaeology/Education initiative and both of these departments contribute to its interpretation. The Department of Social and Cultural History which looks after the majority of the rest of the Museum of Welsh Life provides advice and assistance with the maintenance of the buildings (Thomas, pers. comm. 2004).22 What is interesting about this particular exhibit is that it came to be sited at the Museum of Welsh Life because of very practical reasons – namely that there was no long-term space for it at the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff and because it was felt that it would be better developed and interpreted on a permanent basis in an open-air site. However, this is not apparent to the casual visitor to whom it will appear as simply another part of the story of Wales.

In terms of how it fits within the overall narrative of the Museum of Welsh Life, the Celtic Village presents both problems and opportunities. Its addition creates a considerable temporal gap in the museum's timeline which now jumps from the Celts to the medieval period. It also causes a conflict in the Museum of Welsh Life mission statement which is variously described on the current website as: 'A Walk around Wales from Celtic Times to the Present Day' and as: 'its aim is to show how the people of Wales lived, worked and spent their leisure time over the last five hundred years'. At the same time, the Celtic Village is useful to

the Museum of Welsh Life in terms of telling the national story because it offers an historical point of origin for the Welsh, fulfils visitor expectations that a story about Wales will include something about the Celts, and links to the national curriculum.23 As Regis Debray observed: '... this zero point or starting point is what allows ritual repetition, the ritualization of memory, celebration, commemoration….' (1977: 27).

The complexity and idiosyncrasies of the Museum of Welsh Life and its uneven mix of rural and industrial Wales has been recognised by the museum staff and is discussed in various reports commissioned into visitor responses to the site. Indeed in 1986, the John Brown report recommended a return to the earlier remit stating that: 'The National Museum of Wales should reconsider and redefine the objectives of the Welsh Folk Museum. It should be accepted that it is impracticable for it to attempt to cover all aspects of the history of the Welsh people, their way of life and their culture. The aim should perhaps become more limited: to be a museum of traditional Welsh rural life' (1986: 13).

Curators and consultants also identify part of the problem as being linked to a lack of orientation for the visitor upon arrival. At present, most visitors are unaware that the museum began life as a folk museum and there is no room to discuss issues of identity within Wales which would contextualise what they will see outside. John Brown's 1986 survey found that non-Welsh visitors found it especially difficult to gain a sense of what constituted Welsh culture.

> There was an expectation that the Museum would be "Welsh" and this was sometimes followed by a feeling of disappointment that the "Welshness" in a cultural sense did not really come through … it was generally more difficult for overseas visitors to form an impression of Welsh culture and Welsh life (1986: 63).24

These issues of orientation are currently under review with staff and proposals are on the table for an introduction to the site and a 'Histories of Wales' gallery which will provide a forum for such issues, although the challenge of addressing such issues in a limited space will be considerable. It is worth remembering that the (1998) Museum of Scotland deploys six floors to attempt the same exercise.

Another important factor is that the museums may be collectively understood and managed by staff and management but recent research indicates that this internal view was not shared externally by visitors. As mentioned above, the Welsh Folk Museum was renamed the Museum of Welsh Life in 1995 as part of a major rebranding exercise during which all the sites were given a standardised corporate image with a shared logo, colour scheme, and website. However, the 2002 *Site Audit Debrief* report suggested that while individual sites possess strong brand identities of their own, in general visitors were unaware of individual museums' relationships to other sites in the network. It was concluded that the National Museums and Galleries of Wales 'brand' is 'remarkable yet confusing: it's difficult to put your finger on what NMGW is as a group' (Golley Slater, 2002). Indeed, many visitors continue to call the Museum of Welsh Life simply 'St. Fagans' after the village in which it is situated.

Multi-sited Displays of Identity

It is crucial to remember that the Museum of Welsh Life is only one part of the network of National Museums and Galleries of Wales. As Paul Loveluck, President of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, notes, industrial history has been collected by National Museums and Galleries of Wales since the creation of a Department of Industry in the city centre Cathays Park site in 1959 (2003: 9). This collection was transferred in 1977 to the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff Docks until its closure in 1998. Since this time, the collection has been held in the new Collections Centre north of Cardiff and awaits its relocation in the new £30.8m National Waterfront Museum, Swansea which is planned to open in 2005. Industry has also been represented at a number of sites elsewhere in the country including the Welsh Slate Museum in the North of Wales (1972), the Museum of Welsh Woollen Industry (1976) in the West of Wales, and most recently at Big Pit: National Mining Museum (2001) in South Wales.25

Such large scale industry is arguably best displayed in-situ. However, the multi-sited nature of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales network as it has evolved through the 20th and 21st centuries raises representational problems concerning demarcation between sites, disciplines, and collections. While on paper the range of museums might cumulatively represent a national identity, visitors on the ground may only visit one or two branches because of geography, cost, and perhaps habit. For the inhabitants of Cardiff, for example, the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff and the Museum of Welsh Life are probably their most immediately accessible sites. There are practical difficulties too – what happens when one branch is closed for over seven years as has been the case with the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum? Moreover, with certain titles come certain expectations. In the case of a museum like the Museum of Welsh Life which, as we have seen, claims to 'illustrate and interpret the daily life and work of the people of Wales from the Middle Ages to the present day' its very remit sets certain parameters against which it is then measured.

Conclusion

To summarise, the Museum of Welsh Life is currently missing two key things. Firstly, it is missing a history of the museum and the thinking which has informed it and secondly, it is missing a discussion of the nature of Welsh identities – be they based around class, place, gender, generation, ethnicity, language, or work. The two things are interrelated and the second point would explain the first; unless you are aware of the issues surrounding national identities within Wales the actions of the early museum founders do not assume their full resonance. These suggestions echo in part those proposed by the Welsh Assembly, the Welsh Tourist Board, the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, and the staff of the Museum of Welsh Life itself. In the priority action plan section of its 2002 cultural strategy document, *Creative Future*, the Welsh Assembly Government nominated NMGW to 'review the options for providing a one-stop venue for an overview of Welsh history (2004-5)' (WAG 2002: 4). The Wales Tourist Board has similarly identified the need to provide more interpretation for overseas visitors to Wales. These calls converged initially in the proposal for the new 'Gallery of Welsh Histories' but this is still under discussion.

Such changes also fall in line with new museological thinking which argues for a greater self-reflexivity about museums and their practices and with the broader museological trend towards focusing on people and not only artefacts. This is not to imply that the museum should either abandon its duty of care to its objects, nor to seek to didactically tell visitors what their identities should be. As James Braeburne (2000) has argued, peoples' identities are too complex and too various for a museum to simply impose a definition top-down upon their visitors. For Braeburne the answer is to move towards a more participatory, 'bottom-up' form of museum work; he cites the 20th century Gallery in the Museum of Scotland as a good example. However, I am not convinced that this kind of 'people's show' always makes for the most interesting or informative museum display. What is gained in terms of inclusiveness and populism is sometimes at the expense of a coherent framework and broader historical perspectives provided by curators. Instead, I would suggest that the Museum of Welsh Life might function as a jumping-off point to encourage visitors to be more self-reflexive about their identities and their perceptions of Welshness. This could prompt them to examine what exactly they bring to the museum – in the way of assumptions, beliefs, ideas about the past and might begin with a consideration of the nature of national identity itself. 26 Indeed, the museum might pose Day and Suggett's questions: 'How many Wales?' are there or 'How many ways [are there] of being Welsh?' (1985: 96). One way to approach this task might be through a discussion of immigration and emigration and its effects on Welsh culture and identity. Given the considerable cross-border traffic between Wales and England this would have the advantage of deconstructing the conventional binaries between Welsh and English and would encourage recognition of the multicultural nature – historic and contemporary – of Welshness which Charlotte Williams so compellingly describes (2003). This kind of interpretive activity is no small task and placing this amount of emphasis on museum communication can, as Andrea Witcomb has argued, require the rethinking of traditional museum staff responsibilities and remits (2003). However, to play this role would really allow

the Museum of Welsh Life, and by implication the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, to fulfil its current aim to 'tell the world about Wales, and Wales about the world' as well as that of its founders which was quite explicitly to tell the Welsh about themselves.

In conclusion, the above discussion demonstrates that it is not possible to identify one single reading of national identity at the Museum of Welsh Life. There are elements which certainly dominate – for example, rural culture – but there are alternative representations too. Visitor attitudes, the degree of their prior knowledge, and their visiting habits complicate the picture further. I would suggest that it is therefore more accurate to say that the Museum of Welsh Life represents a meeting point for competing ideas about national identities and that this is a result of the ways in which the museum's own working definition of what counts as 'Welsh' has, and will continue to, shift. The shift in collecting policy discussed above is a clear example of this re-visioning process. To respond then to Bennett's and Kirkland's charge that many such museums practice a form of institutional amnesia, I would suggest that there are indeed some problematic gaps in the account of life in Wales which it presents and it is certainly less political and less explicit about social relations than, for example, Big Pit: National Mining Museum. However, I would suggest that close examination of the Museum of Welsh Life reveals evidence of the on-going process of remembering and the remaking of public memory in response to the changing demands of the present. It also demonstrates how museums function as palimpsests upon which public histories and national identities are written and rewritten and how the traces of what has gone before condition what follows in many subtle but significant ways.

Notes

1 This is not the same as a national institution like the British Museum, opened in 1759, which was premised upon a much more restricted notion of public and nation. The national role of the British Museum for a large part of its history was seen in terms of collecting treasures from those far-flung reaches of its extended 'imperial nation' to show to 'the nation' back at home. The British Museum as 'national museum' in this sense was about making visible the distant elements of the extended Great Britain and symbolically mapping the reach of the imperial nation.

2 Cardiff was not designated the capital of Wales until 1955. This was one of the main reasons repeatedly given by Parliament for not agreeing to calls by Welsh MPs for a National Museum of Wales between the 1890s and 1907 (eg. Hansard 1896).

3 The distribution of NMGW sites around Wales can be found at http://www.nmgw.ac.uk/visiting/ [4 July 2004]

4 These are only some of the collections. The museum also contains archaeology, numismatics, ceramics, a contemporary art in Wales gallery, biodiversity and systematic biology, and geology.

5 This itself came from an exhibition of 'old-fashioned things' in 1913 held in the National Museum's temporary quarters at the City Hall, Cardiff. 'The aim of the Exhibition is to illustrate old-fashioned life, and especially that of Wales – the life which is slowly and silently passing away' (Fox, 1929). It is worth noting that the term 'industries' is misleading in that it means rural crafts: 'The department deals, in short, with the life of Man in Wales during the last four hundred years, excluding only modern industrial developments' (National Museum of Wales, 1938: 71).

6 The National Museum and Gallery (NMGC), Cardiff, located in the capital's city centre, received 321,968 visitors for the same period (NMGW, 2003: 26).

7 This parallel was made apparent in the display panels for a 1998 temporary exhibition 'Between two worlds: 50 years of the Museum of Welsh Life 1948-1998': 'In 1948, the Welsh Folk Museum was created to rescue endangered buildings from throughout Wales, and to save the artefacts and language of the lives that filled them. … Dr Iorwerth Peate, most closely linked with the creation of the Museum of Welsh Life, lived between two worlds. One was the disappearing Welsh-speaking rural world of his Montgomeryshire childhood. Its enemy was the world of the barbaric industrialisation, threatening the language, values and traditions of Wales'.

6 National Museum Director Cyril Fox was convinced of the need for St Fagans after visiting open-air museums in Scandinavia in 1930 with two members of Council. Evans Hoyle, a previous director, had also declared support for the idea of a Welsh Folk Museum, (Bassett, 1982-3: 26).

7 Such sentiment is expressed in a 1908 publication by Walter Johnson, entitled *Folk Life or the Continuity of British Archaeology*. 'The peasant, as Mr Grant Allen once remarked, is like the savage in one respect: whilst very incurious about what he deems non-essentials, he is a peculiarly long-headed person in all that concerns his immediate advantage … The wealth of lore in husbandry, the practical beliefs about weather and soil, the secrets of traditional occupations, aid in establishing connections with the past…. The uneducated countryman, being practical, will carefully hand down to his sons the information which he and his fathers have gained empirically…' (15: 20).

8 Folk culture: 'was used to attack was what seen as the "MECHANICAL" (q.v.) character of the new civilization then emerging: both for its abstract rationalism and for the "inhumanity" of current industrial development. It was used to distinguish between "human" and "material" development' (Williams, 1976: 79).

9 Peate in his autobiographical work *Rhwng Dau Fyd* (Between Two Worlds) in 1976 is actually echoing *The Collected Works of William Morris* (Vol XXII, t 317) , which he also quotes in the epilogue to *The Welsh House.*

10 Burke, for example, describes the progressive and subversive elements of the early Scandinavian folk-culture experiments as: 'a movement of revolt against the centre by the cultural periphery of Europe; part of a movement, among intellectuals, towards self-definition and liberation in regional or national terms' (Burke, 1977: 145 cited in Bennett, 1995: 115).

11 See Bassett for support for folk museums in UK as expressed at Museums Association meetings from 1928 onwards (Cyril Fox was president of the Museums Association in 1934) and for a discussion of the proposal to establish a National Folk Museum in London as outlined in a Royal Commission Final Report of 1931 (1982-3: 29).

12 See also T S Eliot (1948) on the importance of distinctiveness between the Welsh, Scots, Irish and English**.**

13 However, Bassett notes that the Treasury did not provide anything towards initial capital development costs of the Welsh Folk Museum. Annual Reports showed that in its first year attendance was 83,903, 100,000 within first 14 months. For the same year, the National Museum in Cardiff city centre received 226,732 visitors (National Museum of Wales, 1949: 11).

14 The difficulty is that the Annual Reports has a ten year gap which effectively spans most of the 1980s. The notes that do exist in Council minutes are minimal and offer only the following in records for Nov 1983-1984: 'Keeper of the Department of Buildings [reported]… That he had prepared plans to use each of the six houses in the terrace from Rhyd-y-car, MT. to depict a different historical period as an experiment' (31 January 1984: 13). It may be that the Welsh Folk Museum was taking account of more interest generally in the UK in industrial history and in the creation of similar cottages at Beamish.

15 Information provided at Big Pit Visitor Centre.

16 Brown's report was entitled 'Increasing the visitor appeal of the Welsh Folk Museum: A Strategy for Presentation, Interpretation, Management and Marketing: Prepared for the NMW and the Welsh Tourist Board by John Brown Tourism Services'.

17 Brown reports that: 'There have been major changes in the admission price to the Museum in the last few years. Until about 1980, the fee was only 10p for adults, 5p for children; after this, it rose, first to 30p and 15p; then from 1 November 1981, to 40p and 20p respectively. Then, with effect from 1 June 1985 there was a substantial change of policy: the basic fee rose to £2 for adults, £1.50 for OAPs and £1 for children, an increase in the adult price of 1,900% in four years; although on Sundays, and after 1 November, this was reduced to £1.00, 75p and 50p respectively. …' (92).

18 The age profile was 16-34 = 25%, 35-54 = 38%, 55+ = 35%.

19 The development of the strategy has involved a considered degree of public consultation and was also prompted by the highly contentious closure of the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff Bay in 1998.

20 This is also true of the House for the Future at the Museum of Welsh Life which is in the remit of the Department of Bio-Diversity and Systematic Biology, based in the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, site.

21 It is worth noting that there is currently an academic debate over the validity of the concept of the 'Celts' (James 1999).

22 A report by an MA student Traude Rogers found marked differences between responses from Welsh-speaking visitors, Anglophone Welsh visitors, Welsh-speaking non-visitors, and Anglophone Welsh non-visitors (1997).

23 These dates indicate the adoption of the sites into the NMGW network. However, in the case of both the Woollen Museum and Big Pit, the NMGW had some degree of involvement before formally taking over full control of the sites.

24 This was the aim of a temporary exhibition held in 2000 at the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff. It was entitled, 'What makes Wales?: A Brainstorming exhibition'.

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