From Acid Rain to New Dawn

Wales Since Gwyn A. Williams

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ABSTRACT

In 1985, Gwyn A. Williams concluded 'When Was Wales?' by declaring the Welsh "nothing but a naked people under an acid rain" — a verdict of historical exhaustion from a historian who had spent thirty years documenting Welsh self-renewal. Forty years on, that prophecy of extinction has not come to pass. This paper examines what changed, what remains precarious, and why the question Williams posed remains urgently open. It argues that Wales is currently in something analogous to Ireland's early-1990s moment: a precarious renaissance, not a settled resolution — which is precisely why the work of cultural documentation and memory preservation remains a matter of emergency rather than nostalgia.

I. The Acid Rain Moment

In 1985, when Gwyn A. Williams concluded 'When Was Wales?' with his devastating image of the Welsh as "nothing but a naked people under an acid rain," he gave voice to a crisis that seemed terminal. Writing from his cosmopolitan Cardiff corner, "ringed appropriately by a hospital under threat, a Conservative Club and a funeral parlour," Williams saw a people whose historical mechanism of self-remaking had finally broken down. The industrial Wales that had forged a confident working-class identity was being dismantled. The language was in catastrophic decline. The political structures that might have enabled Welsh self-determination were absent. Most chilling of all, Williams — a historian who had spent thirty years demonstrating how the Welsh "repeatedly employed history to make a usable past" — confessed to succumbing to what Aneurin Bevan called "The Invasion of Doubt."

Williams understood that Wales had always been "an artefact which the Welsh produce. If they want to." He recognised that "the Welsh as a people have lived by making and remaking themselves in generation after generation, usually against the odds." But in the mid-1980s, facing Thatcherism's systematic destruction of the industrial base that had sustained modern Welsh identity, he could see no plausible path forward. The choice to continue as a people seemed "more difficult than ever before," requiring roads "long and hard and demanding sacrifice and at present unthinkable to most of the Welsh."

Williams reached for Yeats to articulate his despair, quoting the Irish poet's bitter renunciation in 'A Coat': having made his song from "old mythologies," only to see "the fools caught it, / Wore it in the world's eyes / As though they'd wrought it," Yeats concluded there was "more enterprise / In walking naked." For Williams, this nakedness was not liberation but exposure — a people stripped of the mythologies and industrial identity that had clothed them, standing defenceless under acid rain.

II. What Changed: The Institutional Answer

Yet forty years on, Williams's prophecy of extinction has not come to pass. Instead, Wales has enacted another of those acts of self-remaking he documented so powerfully. The transformation began barely a decade after his book's publication, with the 1997 devolution referendum. Though passed by the narrowest of margins — 50.3% on a 50% turnout — it represented a decisive moment. In 1979, the Welsh had rejected devolution by four to one. By 1997, despite Williams's pessimism being widely shared, enough had changed to tip the balance.

The establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, becoming the Welsh Senedd in 2020, created what Williams had identified as essential: institutional structures through which Welsh self-determination could be exercised. The progression of powers tells its own story. The initial settlement granted only secondary legislative powers, but the 2006 Government of Wales Act enabled the Assembly to request primary law-making powers in specific areas. The 2011 referendum — this time decisive at 63.5% in favour — granted full primary legislative powers. Wales now makes its own laws in devolved areas: health, education, culture, language, environment.

This institutional framework has enabled something Williams might have considered unthinkable: a genuine renaissance in Welsh language and culture. In the 1980s, the language appeared to be in terminal decline, with the 1981 census recording only 19% of the population as Welsh speakers, down from 54.4% in 1891. Williams saw this trajectory as irreversible. Yet the 2021 census, while showing a slight decline to 17.8%, demonstrates stabilisation rather than collapse — and critically, a different demographic pattern. Welsh-medium education has expanded dramatically. Among children aged 5–15, Welsh speakers increased from 30.6% to 40.0% between 2011 and 2021 in some local authorities. The language is being transmitted to new generations in ways Williams's generation could not have imagined.

The Welsh Language Act 2011 granted Welsh official status alongside English for the first time in five centuries. S4C has matured into a genuine cultural force. BBC Cymru Wales produces Welsh-language content that reaches international audiences. Contemporary Welsh-language literature, music, and film find audiences far beyond Wales. The appointment of a National Poet — Gwyneth Lewis in 2005, followed by Gillian Clarke, Ifor ap Glyn, and Owen Sheers — signals cultural confidence, not the defensive nostalgia Williams feared.

III. Precarious Renaissance, Not Settled Resolution

And yet Williams's deeper question remains urgently open. He was not simply predicting language death or the absence of political institutions. He was arguing that the mechanism itself had broken — that post-industrial Wales faced conditions "without precedent" where the traditional Welsh ability to remake themselves through usable pasts had finally failed. That the economic and social base for Welsh identity had been systematically destroyed with no plausible replacement.

Has that actually been solved? Or has devolution created better-funded management of decline? Wales remains among the poorest regions in Western Europe by GDP per capita. The communities that sustained industrial identity — the Rhondda, Merthyr, Ebbw Vale — have not been economically regenerated by institutional reform. The Welsh language stabilisation among children is real but geographically uneven and socially complex: the distinction between Welsh speakers and Welsh-language-educated credential-seekers is not trivial.

What is visible, though — in Welsh communities, among younger generations, in cultural production — is something closer to Ireland's early-1990s moment than to the managed decline Williams feared. Young people are choosing Welsh. Economic investment is arriving, tentatively. Cultural pride is asserting itself in new registers. The Senedd makes primary laws. S4C reaches international audiences. These are not illusions. But they are precarious — a renaissance that could consolidate or could fragment, depending on choices that have not yet been made.

Ireland did not become the Celtic Tiger by forgetting its past. It leveraged distinctive cultural foundations into economic and social transformation, grounded in knowing who it was before it knew where it was going. That depth of grounding — the cultural infrastructure beneath the institutional architecture — is what makes renaissance sustainable rather than fragile. It is also what Wales currently lacks, and what the loss of direct experiential connection to the industrial extraction communities threatens to make permanently unavailable.

> *"Wales has always been now." The urgency encoded in Williams's formulation is not merely philosophical. It defines a biological window — 10 to 15 years at most — before the last generation with direct experience of what built modern Wales is gone.*

IV. History as Instrument: What Williams Got Right

Most significantly, Wales has proven Williams right about the mechanism even as it has, so far, escaped his prediction of its failure. He feared that in "these days without precedent and without promise," even history could no longer serve as an instrument for building futures. Yet Wales has done precisely what he said the Welsh always do: employed history to make a usable past. The difference is that contemporary Wales does not need to choose between "myth" and "history" as Williams suggested. Instead, it integrates both within a more complex understanding of identity as performative, chosen, continuously remade.

The industrial heritage Williams saw being erased is now recognised as critical cultural infrastructure requiring preservation — not through nostalgic reconstruction, but through documentation, interpretation, and integration into contemporary identity. Projects like the Big Pit National Coal Museum, the Wales Millennium Centre, and countless community heritage initiatives demonstrate that the "making and remaking" Williams documented continues, adapted to post-industrial conditions.

This cultural revival exists within, not against, the "British context" Williams identified as Wales's perpetual framework. Contemporary Welsh identity navigates multiplicity with increasing sophistication: simultaneously Welsh, British, European (despite Brexit), and globally connected through digital culture. The "congenial cosmopolitanism" Williams valued in his Cardiff corner has extended throughout Wales, enriched rather than eroded by devolution.

V. The Window Is Closing

Williams wrote that "Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce. If they want to. It requires an act of choice." Forty years on, the Welsh have made that choice repeatedly: in referendums, in language

education decisions, in cultural production, in political engagement with the Senedd. The roads Williams identified as "long and hard and demanding sacrifice and at present unthinkable" have proven thinkable after all — not easy, but navigable.

But one form of the choice Williams described cannot be deferred indefinitely. The experiential knowledge held by the last generation with direct connection to Welsh industrial extraction — the men and women who worked the coal, the steel, the slate; who understood from the inside what those communities were, how they operated, what sustained them — is not recoverable once it is gone. Documentary evidence, archive photography, oral history: these are partial instruments. What cannot be replaced is the embodied, first-person knowledge that exists only in living people and disappears with them.

This is not memorial sentiment. If Wales is genuinely at its Ireland-in-the-1990s moment — if the precarious renaissance is real — then the cultural depth that makes renaissance sustainable must be built now, from the material that is available now. Williams's formulation that "Wales has always been now" encodes this urgency precisely. The work is not nostalgia. It is foundational infrastructure for the Wales that is being made.

Conclusion: The New Dawn Is Not Guaranteed

The hospital Williams saw "under threat" from his window still stands. The funeral parlour remains, but it has not buried Wales. And if the Conservative Club persists, it now operates in a country with its own parliament, its own laws, and its own future to determine.

R.S. Thomas, Wales's great poetic voice of resistance and endurance, offered a different vision of Welsh history than Yeats's naked enterprise. In 'Welsh History,' he acknowledged the degradation Williams documented — the quarrelling for crumbs, the gnawing of dead culture's bones. But Thomas refused Williams's despair — while refusing also the easy comfort of guaranteed arrival:

> *We were a people, and are so yet.*
> *When we have finished quarrelling for crumbs*
> *Under the table, or gnawing the bones*
> *Of a dead culture, we will arise,*
> *And greet each other in a new dawn.*
>
> R.S. Thomas, 'Welsh History,' An Acre of Land, 1952

Thomas wrote that in the 1950s. Whether the Welsh are arising — or are still quarrelling for crumbs — remains the question Williams posed and that Wales has not yet definitively answered. The evidence from communities, from young people choosing Welsh, from cultural production and political engagement, suggests that something real is happening. But Thomas's poem is not a promise. It is a conditional: "we will arise" — when we have finished the quarrelling. The new dawn requires the work.

NOTES AND SOURCES

Primary source. Gwyn A. Williams, When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh (Black Raven Press, 1985). The 'acid rain' passage and the 'Wales has always been now' formulation are from this text. The author's copy, purchased 1986, is annotated.

R.S. Thomas. 'Welsh History,' An Acre of Land (Montgomeryshire Printing Co., 1952). Reprinted in R.S. Thomas: Collected Poems 1945–1990 (Dent, 1993).

W.B. Yeats. 'A Coat,' Responsibilities (1914). Quoted by Williams as epigraph to his closing argument.

Devolution data. 1997 and 2011 referendum results: Electoral Commission records. Powers progression: Government of Wales Acts 1998, 2006; Wales Act 2017.

Language statistics. 1891 and 1981 census data: Office for National Statistics / National Records of Wales. 2021 census: ONS, Census 2021 Wales (March 2023). Children's Welsh-speaking rates by local authority: Welsh Government statistical release, 2023.

Welsh Language Act. Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. Official bilingual status restored for first time since Acts of Union 1535–1542.

Ireland parallel. The Celtic Tiger's cultural foundations are examined in: Joe Lee, Ireland 1912–1985 (Cambridge, 1989); Fintan O'Toole, The Ex-Isle of Erin (New Island, 1997).

Relationship to Quantum Memory. This essay establishes the theoretical and historical context for Quantum Memory (Liminal Mind, 2025–), a practice-based research project documenting embodied community memory from Welsh industrial extraction communities using RFID technology. See: liminalmind.co.uk/projects/quantum-memory.

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