

Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (eds), *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 854pp. £100.00. ISBN 978-1-107-106-76-5

As the Introduction to this reassuringly large book states, the last work published with a similar title was in 1955, and was a translation of a Welsh work. The focus in the earlier work was on ‘the medieval centuries, on religious writing, and on the eisteddfod tradition’. Given the publication date, it also stopped at the nineteenth century. While this new publication also discusses all of those topics, its size indicates that it is intended as a thorough and full introduction to all aspects of Welsh literature, and indeed, it does that and does it well. That it is a hefty tome shows clearly that as well as being comprehensive, Welsh literature is not a minor topic, an aside, but is (to quote the closing words), ‘multilingual, many-voiced, and constantly shapeshifting’.

This work is divided into six parts, with the title for each section leaving it broad, without giving dates: Part I, ‘Britain, Wales, England’ takes in the medieval period, up to the sixteenth century where Part II takes over, ‘After the Acts of Union’. ‘Revolution and Industry’ leads to ‘The Transition to Modernity’, and Parts V and VI can be said to deal with the modern era, with the three chapters in Part VI, ‘After Devolution’, closing the work. There are similar books offering guides to Welsh literature in Welsh, notably the 1990s series published by the University of Wales Press, which allocates one book to each period, but the current work offers a different approach, with all the material available in one place, and with several authors discussing different topics within the same part.

The decision to divide the book into broad periods with many sections is very successful, allowing for more control over content and greater flexibility in topics than the traditional “medieval, early modern, modern” approach. Another useful factor is the decision to avoid rigidity

between the parts in terms of the dates covered by particular chapters, which helps the book to flow. Each part has an introductory chapter dealing with the history of each period, sometimes (as with chapters 1 and 8 by Euryrn Rhys Roberts and Kate Olson respectively) looking at the historical events in the context of the literature discussed. Some of these chapters also cross the historical boundaries, but others are confined to their own period. There is an element of redundancy however, in that whenever a topic is discussed the historical context is usually explained, which means that the first chapter in each Part is interesting and useful for the structure, but not necessarily crucial to the work as a whole.

The first part of the book, as the editors state in the Introduction, covers the largest period of time, taking us up to the end of the fifteenth century. The historical introduction to the period focuses on the Age of the Princes, up to the conquest of Wales in 1282, with less attention given to the latter part of the period examined by this section. This chapter gives a good general introduction to the history, but with reference to the literature, making it therefore relevant to the work in which it has been included, although the link between the history and the literature is covered more fully and examined in a more cohesive manner by Fulton in the final chapter in the section.

There are then several chapters on various aspects of the literature of the period, both poetry and prose. Helen Fulton's Chapter 2 on the early poetry is an excellent discussion of the topic, giving a full overview of the poetry, its contexts, and the way it has been evaluated in the historiography on the subject. Diana Luft's Chapter 4 examines the prose tales, collectively known as the Mabinogion, in full, in another superb overview of the subject area; Luft goes further, however, and introduces her own theory regarding the way the texts were viewed as a whole, based on manuscript evidence. All of the chapters are scholarly and comprehensive, and Dafydd Johnston's Chapter 6 on Dafydd ap Gwilym

contextualises the poet's work, examining poetry in general in the period as well as Dafydd ap Gwilym's place in the tradition. Johnston's essay is extremely well thought-out since it also considers the tradition as a whole, linking in with issues discussed in other chapters, and this is precisely what would be expected of a volume such as this. This is not always the case, however, since in some sections there is considerable overlap between the contents of each chapter. Part II gives many examples of this – William Salesbury's work is discussed in considerable detail in Angharad Price's chapter on 'Welsh Humanism After 1536', again by Geraint Evans, on 'Tudor London and the Origins of Welsh Writing in English', and again by Gruffudd Aled Williams in his discussion on 'Bibles and Bards in Tudor and Early Stuart Wales'. In the same way, Part IV devotes a whole chapter to Dylan Thomas: William Christie, 'Dylan Thomas and his Circle' (which is limited in its discussion of the circle but is a full study of Dylan Thomas), but there is further discussion of the writer in Michelle Deininger's chapter 'The Short Story in the Twentieth Century'. T. Gwynn Jones and R. Williams Parry are also discussed in two chapters in Part IV. William Salesbury was undoubtedly an important figure in his time, and made a substantial contribution to several fields of literature, and the same is true of Dylan Thomas, and indeed of T. Gwynn Jones and R. Williams Parry, but more cross-references across the chapters in each section would have avoided the repetition found here. Of course, the aim of the work may have been to provide individual, stand-alone chapters on specific subjects, with every aspect discussed without the need to turn to other works, even those in the same book, for a complete view. However, a student setting out to examine, for example, Welsh language poetry in the early twentieth century would need to have a grounding in other Welsh language literature being produced, and also the wider context, including Welsh writing in English, and it may be assumed that the book will often be read section-

by-section for a full picture of the period in question rather than as individual chapters.

The approach taken to the literature varies in the different parts, no doubt out of necessity and due to the literature available to study. In many ways, the first part, on the middle ages, divides neatly into different topics on recognisable and well-defined genres – early poetry, prose, court poetry, functional prose; the study of medieval Welsh poetry is already organised, traditionally, into period-led sections. For the modern literature in Part IV, however, the focus is on different genres and indeed there is a language division: Welsh writing in English, and Welsh-language literature. Often, however, there is a heavy emphasis in some of the more general chapters on the Welsh writing in English, with little attention given to the Welsh-language counterparts. This may of course highlight the differences in the traditions and development of the subject areas in the different languages, but more of a crossover and comparison would have been interesting and indeed enlightening on this aspect. ‘Industrial Fiction’ is discussed by Stephen Knight – although a definition of what is meant by industrial fiction would have been useful at the outset – and Michelle Deininger deals with ‘The Short Story in the Twentieth Century’, for example. Equally, the chapters in Part V, on the late twentieth century, cover topics such as fantasy literature, Welsh writing outside Wales, and the idea of a bilingual culture. However, the boundaries between the genres selected are loose, and this naturally leads to (perhaps necessary) overlap. Part II, the period after 1536, is heavily religious and this is a theme that runs – unavoidably – through each of the chapters. This is more of an indication of the nature of history and politics in the period, of course.

Having less prescriptive boundaries between the areas discussed also means that there are some surprising subjects given full treatment. For example, Mark Williams’ chapter in Part I is entitled ‘Magic and Marvels’ and as such is the only chapter where the subject area, or at least

the period covered, is not immediately apparent. Williams examines a theme, that of magic, spells and the otherworld, and does so across the medieval period. However, the main focus here is on the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, with scant reference to poetry and other literature. The chapter itself is scholarly, full, and interesting, but it is, to my view, an awkward fit in the section as a whole. The reader might be left wondering why this particular topic should have such prominence in this period, when in general topics are discussed in the volume in the context of periods or genres of writing. The Four Branches of the Mabinogi receive a fuller coverage in Luft's following chapter, whereas Williams refers to an aspect of them, and also compares with other examples outside the Four Branches, but this is done by each author writing on their own topic. This is one chapter which seemed extraneous to the section, and did not add a great deal to the general introduction which was presumably required. Indeed, while it discusses an interesting topic, it moved the work away from its original purpose and would be better as a chapter in a more specialist work on magic, or indeed, as a journal article by itself. Other chapters show a similar approach, perhaps presenting individual theses rather than a general guide to the period – Tudur Hallam, 'The Legacy of Saunders Lewis' is one such, although it focuses on a key figure in the period which is relevant to other matters. Stephen Knight on 'Industrial Fiction' may be another example, and it was interesting that the study of industrial fiction did not mention other fiction, non-industrial, but again, this is the study of a specific genre within the period, not witnessed in earlier periods. M. Wynn Thomas' chapter, 'From Nonconformist Nation to Proletarian Nation: Writing Wales, 1885-1930' stands out as being in a different format to the others. It is a full and detailed discussion but it only has a surprising four footnotes which offer further commentary or explanation rather than acting as scholarly references.

In terms of the subjects covered and the way the volume approached this issue, there are naturally some omissions. Again, this is apparent in Part I on the middle ages. For example, Chapter 6 by Catherine McKenna discusses an important period for medieval literature, that of the *gogynfeirdd*, perfectly translated by McKenna as the ‘somewhat early poets’, the famous court poets of the age of the princes in Wales. However, the chapter is divided into a discussion on ‘Court Poetry and Historiography Before 1282’, although historiographical writing – mainly chronicles, but other largely prose material – is discussed in the first part of the chapter, and the court poetry in the second part. While the chapter puts the subject firmly in context, it would benefit from a stronger link between the two topics. However, both topics are important aspects of the period and of the literature of the time, and both would be fully appropriate topics for individual chapters in themselves, giving the space for a fuller discussion of each, rather than this combined chapter. Other than the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, the prose of the period is not really discussed in any detail, although there is surely enough material to warrant an entire chapter. There is therefore a notable omission in this part of the work: functional prose. In his chapter Johnston states that ‘The other type of text which accounts for a substantial portion of the contents of Welsh manuscripts in this period is the law of Hywel Dda...these texts would have had some practical purpose, but they also seem to have been valued by patrons as an expression of cultural identity.’ (p. 115). This is not explored further by Johnston – rightly so, since his chapter is on the poetry – but neither is the topic explored elsewhere. Fulton, in the final chapter, notes that the same scribes writing the Welsh laws also wrote literary manuscripts. It is acknowledged in passing that the laws make up a substantial part of the corpus of literature from the period, and that the manuscripts of the laws are linked to the literary texts, but nothing is made of this. It is a subject worthy of its own chapter, and one which would

complete the section; it would also work well within a chapter on the historical texts, leaving the court poetry to its own, full chapter. This omission, given that a chapter is devoted to magic as a subject, is surprising in some ways but also sadly expected, given that the laws (and indeed non-Mabinogion prose) are generally overlooked in studies of literature of the period.

Fulton's chapter which closes the first part is thorough, scholarly and very effective indeed in placing the other chapters in context. On the whole the section is well thought-out, and carefully designed; most of the chapters cover their topics in full, and they fit well with other chapters. Apart from the lack of discussion of legal texts, the chapter provides a complete and accessible introduction to the literature of Wales in the middle ages, and it should be the starting point for anybody wishing to consider any aspect of medieval Welsh literature, and indeed, for established scholars in the field as well.

The other sections are equally valuable as a summary of broad phases of Welsh literature. Part II, 'After the Acts of Union', considers the Tudor period and beyond, and is divided into five chapters. This part is heavily religious in nature, a general theme in the literature and in the history of the period. The five chapters, however, share many similarities and there is considerable overlap between them, but Part II works differently to Part I in that the scope of the chapters are less clearly defined (although Geraint Evans' and David Klausner's chapters are thematic and focus on specific genres). Gruffudd Aled Williams' chapter, entitled 'Bibles and Bards in Tudor and Early Stuart Wales' combines a study of the religious works, and an excellent survey of the state of Welsh poetry in the period. The latter section of this essay is very important in a collective volume such as this one, and in a way it would have been better to focus on that aspect alone, since the religious writing is also given full coverage in Angharad Price's thorough chapter on humanism. Part III is a short

section, like the previous, with five chapters, but this is a relatively short period in terms of dates, and it precedes a major change in the nature of Welsh literature. It is very well themed, and the chapters are given to specific genres or the milieu of writing. Mary Ann Constantine's chapter on 'Antiquarianism and Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century' is broad ranging, but a superb examination of the kind of literature being produced. It was also a joy to read, with the author giving a real sense of the loveliness in some of the literature she discussed, while remaining grounded in scholarship. The enjoyment of literature is often overlooked in academic studies but Constantine offered an important reminder that much of the literature produced is intended to be read and enjoyed rather than studied in an abstract way. Parts III and IV are much longer, but this reflects the increase in Welsh literature and the growth of new areas and the development of particular forms and new genres. Lisa Sheppard's thorough and fascinating chapter, 'Literary Periodicals and the Publishing Industry' was a true highlight here, combining as it did a study of the mechanics of publishing – the presses, their status, and basic economics – and the very important link this practical aspect had (and has) on the literature being produced; without the ability to publish, literature becomes a private venture. Sheppard's article was extremely interesting in the discussion of the problems of where to publish Welsh writing in English, and this consideration contributed a great deal to the subject area and tied in well with Diana Wallace's chapter on 'Inventing Welsh Writing in English'. Again, more cross references across the section would have been useful here but that was clearly not part of the intention for the volume.

The full bibliography at the end is useful, as is the glossary at the start of the book. Glossaries are often given at the end, but having the glossary first is thoroughly sensible and a far better approach. There are also eight maps in the first part, all relevant to the work, although again a



bit more cohesion in the volume would have been useful – none of the articles referred to the maps, and having that reference may have been more beneficial rather than putting the eight maps at the start without showing how they fit in with the volume. The reader is left guessing on that front. In addition, the maps are all very similar – an obvious point, perhaps, since they are all maps of Wales! – but as they are not tied in with any of the chapters, some of the maps seem a bit unnecessary. Perhaps placing the maps at the start of the part closest to them would have been more useful, but as it is they show how the landscape and divisions of Wales changed over time. But I was left wondering why the map of the Welsh coalfields was presented, for example, and one striking point with regard to the maps was that Welsh literature is not confined to country boundaries or to regions.

Apart from the contents, this is an attractive and well-produced book, although the print quality is dubious at times: the right hand edge of the right hand pages of the openings appear grainy and a little blurred, although they are still legible. This is surprising, and disappointing given that this is an expensive volume, and is unexpected from a major publisher such as CUP. Otherwise, it is a well-written and generally well-organised volume, which certainly does what it set out to do – it offers a comprehensive guide to the literature of Wales from the earliest time to fairly recent years. As well as showing what was available, the context of the writing is always kept in mind, and the historical introductions to each part are an important aspect to set the scene. The authors are leaders in their field, and the editors are to be congratulated on having skilfully brought together a complex and multifaceted subject area in a practical and valuable work, which sets a new standard for such treatment.

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