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Stories of Solidarity / Wales: England's First and Final Colony

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RITA SINGER

Reviews

Stories of Solidarity

Hywel Francis

Y Lolfa, £9.99

Wales: the First and Final Colony

Adam Price

Y Lolfa, £9.99

They say 'Don't judge a book by its cover,' but the covers of the two volumes recently published by Y Lolfa are perhaps the best summaries of the authors' respective visions of Wales. Hywel Francis's *Stories of Solidarity* shows him as a boy collecting Aneurin Bevan's autograph; behind them we can see Francis's father and an unidentified miner in parade uniform. The group of four are framed by a solid red backdrop. In contrast, Adam Price's *Wales: The First and Final Colony* shows a portrait of the author in close-up, looking directly into the camera while the background is artfully blurred and non-descript. The two covers mirror two visions of Wales: one unapologetically steeped in community and communism, the other, one man and a blurry background.

Both volumes are collections of essays and public speeches, political and personal. Both reach back to their respective author's early years of public speaking: they are both passionate, eloquent and unapologetically optimistic. Francis and Price share an international outlook where Wales's place in the world is concerned, whilst keeping a close eye on the communities at home. With political hindsight, each book also reveals why Francis and Price won their political offices at the times they did and for the parties they represent.

The backbone of Hywel Francis's book is his communist and Nonconformist upbringing in Onllwyn, at the head of Cwm Dulais. The spatial narrowness of the mining valley, however, is nowhere to be found in Francis's writing. Instead, he muses, it has defined his outlook on life: instead of hemming his gaze and causing tunnel vision, the view from Onllwyn was the gift of long-distance vision in more than one way. It is in this vein that he weaves together his stories of solidarity. Francis draws largely on living memory rather than a pre-modern past, particularly as distant historical events have a tendency to edit out swathes of existences and experiences systematically. Making the case for the importance of oral history in an essay from 1980, Francis stresses that:

[f]or the historian of the twentieth century to ignore oral evidence is tantamount to taking a decision to write off whole areas of human experience.[...] [E]ven in such an advanced, reasonably literate, industrial society as the mining valleys of South Wales between the wars, with its range of social and political institution each spawning a multiplicity of primary and secondary historical sources, there is a world beyond this which is not, and cannot be, analysed or even chronicled without the intervention of oral testimony.

Owing to an institutional bias which determines what gets recorded in official chronicles, Francis argues that any attempt at uncovering the past, particularly a past within living memory, will only produce a skewed, narrowed, uncomplete understanding. Particularly where the lives and experiences of women are concerned, unofficial documents, such as '[o]ral testimony can be very often the only corrective. The demise of young women, trapped in a male-oriented, economically depressed society, evades the grasp of the historian, usually because there are no obvious sources.' It is therefore the duty of any historian to

trace the unheard and suppressed voices in order to understand how we ended up in this present.

The overarching theme of Francis' speeches is giving differently silenced voices a platform and to return them to the present memory. In doing so, his speeches hold a few home truths not only for Welsh Labour in 2019, but also for the Welsh independence movement and 'national party', Plaid Cymru: women, immigrants, non-Christians, LGBTQ+ and people with disabilities are not 'fringe issues', but real people with real lives and real concerns – and Wales is ill-advised to ignore them.

But Francis is perhaps too optimistic in his evaluation of Welsh working communities, despite his inclusivity of more than just industrial workers. Their family members and wider communities shared the daily iniquities of systemic exploitation, poverty and poor health. What held these embattled communities together was their strong sense of solidarity, not just with their own cause, but also that of similarly beset groups. This is the point in which Adam Price appears to divert most strongly in his speeches. Granted, he presents a consistently optimistic future in which a Wales, released from the Westminster shackles, is free to fulfil its most daring dreams of a democratic, just and green nation state. Who would not want to live in a country with free health care, free child care and no tuition fees for higher education; a country, dare I say it, with a functional public transport system. All of this will be available in two languages, as Welsh is given parity instead of being treated as an afterthought. It is in the nature of the political speech not to lay out a detailed road atlas on how any of these goals would be achieved, apart from a more just system of taxation and investment into crumbling infrastructures. Such details are best reserved for manifestos. However, one thing which should be expected from a collection of political speeches that are intended to rouse the nation from its slumber is historical accuracy and responsibility.

The title of Price's book is taken from the third and probably most troubling speech in the collection, given originally as the Annual Address for the Institute of Welsh Politics in 2009. On the whole, his book would have been better off if this piece had not been included, as it taints the remaining speeches by association as well as forces a reading on them which otherwise would not have existed. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that Wales has historically suffered the indignities of political, cultural, economic and religious colonialism and continues to reap the consequences to the present day, it is disingenuous of Price to downplay Wales's own participation in and profiteering from British imperialism, ranking it behind England and Scotland.

Where even to begin unpicking Price's question whether 'the sight of Zulu spearing Welshmen at the Battle of Isandlwana, or Welshmen bayonetting Zulu at the Battle of Rorke's Drift in return help[s] or hinder[s] the hypothesis that Britishness was forged by all four nations of these islands'. From a post-colonial perspective the answer has unequivocally to be, yes, Wales did contribute to Britishness in the race to head off France overseas and so consolidate British political, economic and cultural power back in Europe. First, the Welsh had no business in Zulu homeland. Second, it is possible to be victim at home and perpetrator abroad at one and the same time. Hywel Francis's examples of Welsh miners and industrial workers joining the anti-fascists in 1930s Spain forms a striking contrast to Adam Price's Welshmen in Zulu territory.

Price does get it right when he stresses that colonialism 'is an act of violation which results in trauma whose effects are felt for many generations' and that 'formal independence is meaningless unless we have first decolonised our minds'. The first step here, would logically be not simply to continue trying to turn voters from Labour to Plaid, but to reach out to non-voters and those of us in Wales who continue to be overlooked: immigrants and their descendants. Wales may have been the first colony, but writing this review in the week when the UN Court of International Justice ruled that the

UK's seizing of Chagos in the 1960s and the resulting deportation of its indigenous population was unlawful, it turns out, it definitely was not the final one.

Rita Singer is a researcher who specialises in Welsh writing in English. Recently she investigated the history of travel writing about Wales by continental Europeans. She currently researches the presence of German submarines in Welsh waters during the First World War.